

After racial slur against women athletes

US talk show host Don Imus taken off the air

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CBS Radio cancelled the “Imus in the Morning” syndicated radio program Thursday after a week of controversy over racist comments by talk-show host Don Imus directed against members of the Rutgers University (state university of New Jersey) women’s basketball team. The move followed the cancellation of the program on the MSNBC cable television network, which had been simulcasting the show since 1996.

In the week since Imus called the mostly black players “nappy-headed hos” there has been a great deal of posturing and hypocrisy by various media executives, corporate sponsors, politicians and civil rights officials. What they have all failed to explain, however, is how someone who has long been associated with such gutter-level remarks managed to enjoy a 30-year career, a \$10 million annual salary and the friendship, until now, of scores of prominent politicians, presidential hopefuls and media personalities who lined up to be guests on his show.

Broad layers of the population, including the young women athletes themselves, responded with disgust to the incident. Here was a multi-millionaire loud mouth attacking a group of hard-working and dedicated young women, members of an underdog team that had made it to the national college championship game. While reactionaries such as Republican presidential candidates Rudolph Giuliani and John McCain ran to his defense, the public overwhelmingly sympathized with the players who spoke with dignity about the pain they felt being degraded before a national radio and television audience.

It is another story entirely when it comes to the official reaction of the media, corporate and political establishments. The shock and indignation of CBS Radio and MSNBC officials—who waited a week before deciding to take Imus off the air—was less than sincere.

After all, they have paid the radio host tens of millions of dollars to pollute the airwaves with his celebration of backwardness and his particular brand of misanthropy. He is, moreover, just one in a long line (Howard Stern, Rush Limbaugh, Jerry Springer, etc.) who has been used to drag public discourse to the lowest possible level.

Nor could it come as a great surprise to the media executives and corporate backers of the “Imus in the Morning” show—which was syndicated to 70 stations around the country by CBS Radio and simulcast by MSNBC cable television network—that the talk show host and his on-air colleagues regularly use the show to make vile statements about minorities, women and immigrants. For years he has been making comments even worse than those he aimed at the young women basketball players from Rutgers.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations, for example, has mounted several campaigns against the show for its repeated references to Arabs as “rag-heads” or “goat-humping weasels.” On November 12, 2004, over live shots of a sea of grieving Palestinians mourning the death of Yassir Arafat, Imus and his cohorts denounced Palestinians as “stinking animals” who “eat dirt” and suggested that the US bomb the funeral to “kill ‘em all right now.”

A week later Imus, doing a voice-over parody of General George Patton, denounced an NBC television crew for video taping the murder of an unarmed and wounded Iraqi prisoner by US Marines. The tape, he said, would provide “the sons of bitches we are fighting ... with another cozy ‘al Jazeera moment’ for the Muslim masses to respond to with their routine pack-of-rabid-sheep mentality.” Imus then defending the cold-blooded murder, saying the Marine had lost a comrade to a “booby-trapped rag head cadaver” the day before.

Significantly these statements—which legitimize anti-Arab and anti-Muslim bigotry in the US—did not provoke any action by CBS or MSNBC, apart from a perfunctory apology. As far as the corporate and media establishment were concerned, these vile remarks may have lacked decorum, but they didn't “cross the line”—no doubt because they served the overriding media aim of conditioning the public for ever greater crimes by US military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

This racist and chauvinist track record did not halt the parade of politicians who considered the Imus show a useful means of promoting their campaigns. The show's many guests included former Massachusetts governor and Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, Democratic senator and 2004 presidential candidate John Kerry, Vice President Dick Cheney, Senator Joe Lieberman and former Tennessee Democratic Congressman Harold Ford. Connecticut Senator Christopher Dodd announced his candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination on the show January 11 and was a phone-in guest on the April 4 program—the very day Imus made his remarks about the Rutgers team.

In addition, scores of reporters, including NBC's Tim Russert, *Newsweek* senior editor Jonathan Alter and *New York Times* columnists Maureen Dowd and Frank Rich, all appeared regularly on Imus's show. In turn, the latter has been featured on NBC's “Today” show, ABC programs “Prime Time Live” and “20/20”, and on CBS' “48 Hours” and “60 Minutes.” He has also been a guest of Charlie Rose, David Letterman and Larry King. In 1996 he hosted the Radio and Television Correspondents' Association Dinner for Bill Clinton. The following year Imus was named as one of *Time* magazine's “25 most influential people in America”; he was also on the cover of *Newsweek* in 1999.

His talk show is devoid of genuine insight and humor. While distancing himself from the most extreme right elements of the Republican Party, the talk show host adopted a confused populist and libertarian shtick, combining periodic complaints about the war and mistreatment by the rich and powerful with an embrace of political and social reaction. Imus presented himself as a renegade and an outsider—a man always on the verge of a tirade and about to say something rude, even to the powers-that-be. One media critic, Susan Douglas, noted, “For many of his listeners, Imus turns the tables

on money, power, and entitlement”; his show is a place “where polite people in prestigious and influential jobs have to ‘suck up’ as Imus puts it, to a man who breaks all the rules of bourgeois, upper-middle-class decorum.”

This is largely imaginary, Imus is no rebel. He is a millionaire media figure who, in the case of the Rutgers players, was deriding a group of hard-working young people, underdogs in every sense of the term. Mean-spirited, undemocratic and racist, Imus is a product of the vast social divide in America. When push comes to shove, he thoroughly identifies with the rich and powerful. And it was no accident that every right-wing pundit and commentator took to the airwaves to denounce his firing.

The response of the Jesse Jackson-Al Sharpton “civil rights” industry to this controversy was predictable. These petty-bourgeois leaders have nothing penetrating to contribute to the debate. They can't explain the phenomenon or trace Imus's reactionary comments to their source, the shift to the right of the media establishment, its vast enrichment and its efforts to whip up social backwardness. The intervention of Sharpton and Jackson is entirely self-serving. They use this episode, as nearly every other one, to advance their own status within the American establishment, to use their role as “spokesmen” for the black community as a leverage to draw them closer to the corporate sponsors who were pressured to pull their ads from the Imus program.

After first proposing a two-week suspension, both MSNBC and CBS Radio—in the interests of preserving their own brand names and placating their corporate sponsors—pulled the plug on Imus. All the accompanying rhetoric about racial unity, values and respect are so much hot air.



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