

National Public Radio fires Juan Williams

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National Public Radio fired long-time analyst and Fox News commentator Juan Williams Thursday, declaring that his remarks on the Fox program “The O’Reilly Factor” had “crossed the line” into anti-Muslim bigotry.

The incident has become a *cause celebre* in right-wing circles and something of a political black eye for the non-profit radio network, which is sustained by contributors, including many large corporations, as well as a small amount of direct federal financing.

Numerous Republican congressmen and right-wing pundits demanded a cutoff of federal funding, claiming that the firing of Williams was a demonstration of “left-wing bias” on the part of NPR.

Fox boss Roger Ailes promptly showered network owner Rupert Murdoch’s money on Williams, signing him to a \$2 million contract to provide more extensive commentary, both televised and on the web. He claimed that NPR had violated Williams’s freedom of speech.

Williams himself denounced his former employer in reactionary and anti-communist terms, calling his dismissal “evidence of one-party rule and one-sided thinking at NPR that leads to enforced ideology, speech and writing.” He added, “It leads to people, especially journalists, being sent to the gulag for raising the wrong questions and displaying independence of thought.”

NPR CEO Vivian Schiller responded, “Juan has a First Amendment right to say whatever he wants. He does not have a First Amendment right to be paid by NPR for saying whatever he wants.”

Examination of the transcript of the discussion with right-wing ranter Bill O’Reilly shows that Williams was following his usual playbook, providing legitimacy for the politics and rhetoric of the ultra-right, while politely and half-heartedly expressing his disagreement.

O’Reilly brought Williams on his program Monday after carrying out a much-publicized political

provocation on the ABC television interview program “The View” last week. O’Reilly flatly declared on that program that “Muslims” had carried out the 9/11 terrorist attacks, leading the program’s co-hosts, Whoopi Goldberg and Joy Behar, to walk off the set until he agreed to qualify the statement, limiting it to “Muslim extremists.”

O’Reilly took up the same theme with Williams, claiming that the United States faced a “Muslim dilemma” because of the presence of a large population of Muslim immigrants. “The cold truth is that in the world today jihad, aided and abetted by some Muslim nations, is the biggest threat on the planet,” he said.

Williams responded with his characteristic “yes, but” approach, telling O’Reilly: “I’m not a bigot. You know the kind of books I’ve written about the civil rights movement in this country. But when I get on the plane, I got to tell you, if I see people who are in Muslim garb and I think, you know, they are identifying themselves first and foremost as Muslims, I get worried. I get nervous.”

In its statement explaining the decision to fire Williams, NPR officials said that the remarks “were inconsistent with our editorial standards and practices, and undermined his credibility as a news analyst with NPR.” The network has been trying to distance itself from Williams at least since the Obama administration took office, asking him in February 2009 to stop identifying himself as an NPR analyst when appearing on the O’Reilly program because of insulting comments he made there about Michelle Obama.

In the current affair, there is more than enough cynicism and hypocrisy to go around. The right-wing screaming about “freedom of the press” has zero credibility, coming from politicians and commentators who regularly engage in McCarthyite smears against even mildly liberal critics, let alone genuine opponents of corporate America.

Fox News, and O'Reilly in particular, took the lead in the witch-hunting of Shirley Sherrod, the Department of Agriculture official shamefully fired by the Obama administration after her comments at an NAACP meeting were released by a right-wing activist and doctored to make her appear to harbor racist feelings against whites.

It was also Fox which spearheaded the campaign against longtime White House correspondent Helen Thomas, who was forced to resign her position at Hearst Newspapers this summer after making comments critical of the state of Israel.

For more than a decade there has been a steady purging of more liberal and critical voices in what passes for the "mainstream" media in the United States. Figures such as Eason Jordan, Octavia Nasr and Peter Arnett of CNN, Helen Thomas and Phil Donahue have been silenced in favor of an ever more conformist and reactionary official consensus.

National Public Radio, despite its stable of liberal commentators and its pretense of an objective and independent approach, has been part of this general shift to the right. That was behind its decision to hire Juan Williams in the first place. He was a known quantity, having moved from the *Washington Post* in 1997 to a position as a well-paid commentator on Fox News, when he joined NPR as an "analyst" in 2000.

The rightward shift at NPR accelerated after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, when American liberalism as a whole embraced first the war in Afghanistan, then the invasion and conquest of Iraq. NPR gave short shrift to the mass movement against the Bush administration in the months leading up to the unprovoked and illegal attack on Iraq.

Now the network is hoist on its own petard. Williams's openly anti-Muslim comments have caused it embarrassment, and it has decided to fire him. But, as the reaction by the right wing shows, the payback for its spineless attempts to ingratiate itself with the Murdoch press and the Republican Party is more blows from these quarters.



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