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TALKERS[®]

magazine



AUTUMN ISSUE

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THE GREAT ONE

That's the nickname given Citadel Media syndicated talk star Mark Levin by Sean Hannity...and he has been living up to it. Read the *TALKERS* interview with Mark Levin inside!

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The Bible of Talk Radio and the New Talk Media

Issue 202

PROGRAMMING • MANAGEMENT • MARKETING • TECHNICAL • LEGAL

October 2009

The TALKERS magazine interview

Citadel Media syndicated star

Mark Levin

NEW YORK — Mark Levin is one of the hottest properties in talk radio today. His highly rated show on WABC, New York is syndicated nationally by Citadel Media (formerly ABC Radio Networks). He is also one of the leading authors in the conservative political arena. After hosting a Sunday afternoon program, Mark moved to the daily 6:00 pm to 8:00 pm time slot where it skyrocketed to #1 on the AM dial in his first 18 months on the air. His 2005 book *Men in Black* climbed to #3 in the nation on *The New York Times* best-seller list. His most recent book, *Liberty & Tyranny: A Conservative Manifesto*, spent its first several weeks of release atop *The New York Times* best-seller list and was the top seller for Amazon.com as well. Mark has been a frequent guest and substitute host on The Sean Hannity Show, and has also been an advisor to Rush Limbaugh. Earlier this year, a third hour was added to Mark's broadcast to satisfy the request from many of his affiliates and fans for even more Levin content. Mark Levin is one of America's preeminent constitutional lawyers. He's in great demand as a political and legal commentator and has appeared on hundreds of television and radio programs. Levin is also a contributing editor for National Review Online, and writes frequently for other publications. Levin has served as a top advisor to several members of President Ronald Reagan's Cabinet — including as chief of staff to the Attorney General of the United States. In 2001, the American Conservative Union named Levin

the recipient of the prestigious Ronald Reagan Award. He currently practices law in the private sector, heading up the prestigious Landmark Legal Foundation in Washington, DC. The *TALKERS* magazine interview with Mark Levin was conducted by Michael Harrison.

TALKERS: How did you get into talk radio to begin with? All of a sudden it seems like you were here.

Levin: I'd been a professional talk radio listener since I was a kid in Philadelphia. I used to listen to folks like Dominic Quinn and Bernie Herman and Joel A. Spivak. Maybe people haven't heard of them but they were big time when I was a teenager. I used to listen to Bob Grant, Jean Shepherd and so forth. I loved it. I never really intended to pursue it, and so here I am 40 years later. I would say really it was Rush and Sean. First of all, I subbed once for Rush, not knowing anything I was doing and he said just go with it, do the very best you can. And Sean had me sub for him fairly frequently during the Christmas holidays. I remember telling him, you know, I get the substance part of this, but I'm not sure about the breaks — how to get in and get out. He sat me down at his house one day and we did our little blue cards. Forty-eight of them. Just to remind me of who I am... "Hi, I'm Mark Levin." That sort of thing. I think they called them formatics cards. And he trained me on that. But I'm very lucky. I learned about radio not just from lis-



tening to the greats, but from getting advice from the greats: Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity. So subbing for Hannity led to a Sunday show from 12:00 noon to 2:00 pm because Phil Boyce felt that I would be a good radio host. And that led to a weekday show eventually, about a year later.

TALKERS: It's interesting that you mention the formatics playing a role in projecting professionalism. I find one of the things that separates the professional broadcasters from nonprofessionals — who come to this medium from other walks of life or from other areas of accomplishment — are how they handle those transitions. Coming in, coming out, knowing how to hit the break, knowing how to identify the show, knowing how to introduce a guest. It's funny how it comes down to that. And you're one of the first people I've talked to who came into talk radio that way, who was immediately hit with this information and I think Sean Hannity obviously did you a very great service by teaching you these basic skills.

Levin: Well he did, because this is a profession. You can't just shoot from the hip. It's also a business and you have to sound professional and you have to attract an audience, and when you attract an audience you also need to attract advertisers or you might as well just get a soap box and stand on the cor-

ner and yell at the top of your lungs. I learned a lot from Sean who walked me through the process, and I learned a lot from Rush, who advised me, "Don't accept weekend clearances. Don't accept clearances at three in the morning. If you do, you will be shelved. And your competition will put you there, lock you up, you won't have an audience and no one will hear you. You can say you're in some great market but it won't matter." So I got a lot of great advice from these guys.

TALKERS: Were you able to effectuate that advice within the company at which you were working? Were you able to tell ABC and Citadel, "Don't put me here; put me there," and they listened?

Levin: Absolutely. You know, I worked on the syndication, with one of the greatest program directors really ever — in my view — Phil Boyce. And one of the great things about Boyce is he not only can, in my opinion, judge really great radio personalities, even putting me aside, he allows those personalities to actually flourish. When we began the syndication he could tell immediately, I've got a guy here who has really studied this, who's really on top of it, who's competitive, who wants to succeed, and I'm going to give him plenty of room to do it. So when we had our first affiliate meeting, I said, "Look, I don't need to be on 500 suburban stations. I mean, that's nice. We need to have an audience. So we need to have the top 50 stations. So we're going to work our way from the top down and we're already on several of the biggest stations, the old ABC 50,000 watters. We have a very good start, now let's build on it. Let's not spend all our time on market number 913. Now that's not to say we ignored in any way small markets. Absolutely not. But a lot of the sale syndicators are based on this, in my opinion, flawed view that if you can show how many stations you're on, you'll create a perception that you're attracting a large audience. I'm not interested in a perception. I'm interested in reality. I'm interested in content. You know, I'm not doing this to say that I'm on a certain number of stations; I'm doing this to have an audience.

TALKERS: Why? What motivates you? What's driving you? Why do you want to have what you describe as a real audience?

Levin: Well, first of all, if I'm going to make the effort to work hard every day to do the very best show I can, it would be kind of foolish to do it in my basement and talk to myself. Every talk show host has an element of entertainer in him or her; otherwise, they wouldn't be doing this. I also have a very deep belief system and I want to get my message across.

Yet if I'm just a college professor lecturing or dictating, I'm not going to have an audience. So I've come to learn that the best hosts are people who are very entertaining, very interesting, have a strong personality that comes through over the microphone that allows people to use their imaginations, to participate in the program and to identify with the host, and also has something intelligent to say content-wise. Because content is crucial in every respect. So that's the combination that I've been striving for and that I work at every single day.

TALKERS: I have found that there are basically two categories of on-air broadcasters: Those who are doing it because they love it and simply want to be part of the process... to play in the game. They want to be on the radio and it doesn't matter so much to them what they bring to the table. They simply get off on being at the table. Others bring something to the table that they want to share, that they want to impart. They're two very different things and yet we don't often think about it. So I appreciate your answer because I think the only ones who are going to succeed in the 21st century, in this environment where there are so many channels out there and anybody can do a show from their basement as you described before, are those who bring something to the table that people want to hear, need to hear, or should hear. Make sense?

Levin: Yes. You know, Michael, I think the best hosts — again stepping back and observing — are a hybrid of what you just said. If you can't attract an audience, I don't care if you're the smartest guy on the face of the earth, you're going to be a boring host and nobody gives a damn. But if you can attract the audience and walk that line between entertainer and intellectual or entertainer and news junkie, you have as good a shot at succeeding as anybody does. That's the point. You don't want to be a circus clown and you don't want to be a Yale professor. You want to be a serious commentator who entertains the audience, attracts it and keeps it.

TALKERS: Where do you think the industry in general, news/talk specifically, is in terms of that balance between the circus clown and the college professor? Because this has always been an area of debate, a target of criticism, and certainly just for discussion within the field: How far can you go, should you go, before the credibility erodes? And right now one of the hot topics in the industry is certain hosts who are really out there. The term is "over the top." How do you feel about that, in terms of the industry at large, how it impacts us, and where you stand on that spectrum?

Levin: (Laughs)...You know, this debate has been going on for 40 years, and certainly as long as I've been in talk radio — discussion about hosts who have been over the top. And you know, this is a very vibrant medium. It's the most vibrant medium of all. And the reason is there's enormous competition. There's competition on the AM band. There's competition between the AM and the FM band. There's competition with the internet. There's competition among and between satellite and the internet and terrestrial. It's a very, very exciting and vibrant medium where despite what Washington says, there are all kinds of choices and competition and hosts and so forth. So when you have literally thousands of stations and tens of thousands of people broadcasting professionally (or otherwise), in all these formats, you're going to get all kinds of people doing all kinds of things. So I don't think as a rule that talk radio is over the line. There may be some hosts that get close, some that don't.

I've heard it said that if violence occurs, it's going to be because of some of these talkers. I mean, I don't listen to every talk radio program, but I don't know of any major talk show host who proposes or urges violence in any respect. As a matter of fact, they encourage people to participate in the political system, to do so in a very activist way, but they do not promote violence.

I think some of the people who criticize talk radio, particularly conservative talk radio, want to project this impression, and want to project other impressions of racism and so forth, but I think this is a constant effort to tear down the medium. The problem is, it won't work. This is really the best town hall format of any, period. Political, broadcasting or any other form. And so yes, you'll get people who express their views in more controversial ways than others. I have people who try to pigeon-hole me this way. I have a very passionate personality. I'm very passionate about certain issues. I also have a very deep sense of humor and sometimes that can be very sarcastic, sometimes that could be toilet humor, whatever it is. What I am with my audience is extremely honest and straightforward. And if I'm thinking something and I want to express it, nine times out of 10 I'll express it. And so that may be considered controversial, but to me that's just honest. I have a very special relationship with my audience and I think that's why it has gotten so big so fast.

TALKERS: I've heard people who know you say that the Mark Levin on the air is quite a different guy than off the air. And I've heard you on the air and I've talked to you off the air and I've been around this business long enough to know there are many different facets of a person's personality. What is the

difference in your head when you're on the air or off the air?

Levin: Well you know, I get this question a lot and I've thought about it a lot. When I'm off the air, more often than not I'm with my family or my dogs or I'm with my co-workers at Landmark Legal Foundation. I'm not geared up to do a radio program. So I suppose I'm more subdued, a little quieter. But if I'm on the radio and I'm subdued or quieter, we might as well run public service commercials. Because when you're on the radio you need to come through that microphone. You need to express yourself. You need to tell the audience why they need to listen to you. You need to offer something to people because they have so many choices. It's not the family sitting at the dinner table because your family is there regardless. And I don't think that's so unusual in any communications form. I dare say if I were a news anchor that the way I would do things in those 22 minutes would not exactly be the way I would do things at home, either.

Now, in terms of my viewpoints, they are exactly the same on and off the air. My passion about particular issues, exactly the same on and off the air, because remember: I worked in the Reagan administration, I campaigned for Reagan in '76 and '80, I've written extensively about conservatism and non-conservatism, on a wide variety of issues long before I ever got into radio. That Mark Levin has never changed and never will change. But I don't do a radio show for my family at the dinner table every night.

TALKERS: You mentioned television. For those who don't know, you broke in to talk radio, basically as a guest on the cable stations, on the news/talk cable stations, as a talking head, as a guest. Am I correct?

Levin: Yeah, I think that's where I came to Hannity's attention, as a matter of fact. I was on "Crossfire" a couple of times and John Gibson had a show on MSNBC and my recollection is Sean reached out and contacted me. He had just started out on Fox, pretty much, this is like the late 1990s, mid to late 1990s as I recall. And I would get non-stop requests to go on these programs because of my debating style and the ratings they would get by having me as a guest. So yes, I think that's how I got into the media environment. Because I was never a media person before.

TALKERS: So it led to that initial filling in for Rush Limbaugh and filling in for Sean Hannity.

Levin: You know, in Rush's case, I've been friendly with Rush now for 15 or 16 years because as president of the Landmark Legal

Foundation, every now and then when constitutional issues would come up, I would send him a thought of mine. He didn't solicit them. I would send them unsolicited. And we just hit it off. We became friendly and so my time with Rush really predates any cable TV. Shortly thereafter I came to Sean's attention, I think, through cable TV. And these guys are my absolute best friends now.

TALKERS: Have you been, over the years that you were evolving as a friend to them, an advisor to them in terms of points of views, angles, issues, sort of as a think tank?

Levin: No, I'm not an advisor to them. We're friends, so we share viewpoints from time to time. Rush really can't hear anymore so we'll communicate via email or instant message. Sean and I talk every day. But it's not all talk radio, not all business, not all issues. Certainly we discuss that, too. But these are two extremely intelligent men from whom I learn a lot. They don't learn a lot from me.

TALKERS: Where did you get the title, "The Great One"?

Levin: That was Hannity. He calls me "The Great One" and some of my biggest liberal friends call me "The Great Big One."

TALKERS: (Laughs.)

Levin: Now Rush still sometimes calls me F. Lee Levin, referring to F. Lee Bailey...and you know you're his friend when he gives you a name like that when he appointed me "the director" of his legal division. Obviously there is no legal division. But I always got a kick out of that, too.

TALKERS: How do you, Sean and Rush remain friends, supporters and allies, and uncompetitive with each other in a field marked by egos, jealousies and I find from my vantage point, quite often the top conservatives and the top liberals really find themselves competing with each other to be the top. How do the three of you deal with that?

Levin: First of all, you know Sean jumped onto the national radio scene as a sub for Rush. I, to a lesser extent, jumped onto the national radio scene as being known as F. Lee Levin on the Rush Limbaugh radio show and later as a sub now and then for Hannity. I personally would get out of radio and drop my show if I was ever directed in some way to compete against my friends. First of all, they'd kick my ass. But besides, loyalty is number one to me, so I'd never do anything to in any way diminish my relationship with them. So that's number one. Number two, as

a factual matter, we're not competing against each other. We're in different dayparts. You know, Rush kicks it off, then Sean and then in a lot of markets I follow on. So both personally and as a practical matter there is no competition, at least between me and them.

TALKERS: It's refreshing to hear that. Of course in this industry, with all of the complex relationships between companies that are in business together in some situations and competing against each other in others — depending upon the market or whether it is in their O&O or syndicated divisions — there are some pretty delicate and nuanced relationship dances taking place. Two hosts can be part of the same lineup in one market and head-to-head competitors in another due to delayed broadcasting and the network a la carte system.

Levin: That's the proof to those who say there are all these monopolies or oligopolies in the communications industry.

TALKERS: Congratulations on the success you have not only in radio but also as an author. Your latest book is a longtime number one on *The New York Times* bestseller list. You cracked a million copies...a tremendous accomplishment. Let's talk a bit about the role of writing and publishing, since you are one of the most successful if not the most successful radio talkers in this arena. Very few have gone to that level. Almost everybody on the air either has a book or wants to write a book. The two go hand in hand today. As someone who has achieved tremendous real success in this arena, what advice and insights can you offer our readers in terms of the book they have inside of them. What to look out for, what to do, where it's at?

Levin: That's a great series of questions. First I would say only write if you have a book in your head. Don't write just to write. Don't write just to make money because you won't succeed. There are some that do because they have huge platforms. But people should keep in mind, I don't have a daily television show. I have a radio show. Now that helps, but it's not a TV show. And also at some point your book will soar or fail on its own, that is, by word of mouth. If you write a book or have others write a book for you that is not substantive, that is slap-dash, a bunch of taking points, in the end you'll sell, for a really big radio or TV host, a couple hundred thousand copies but in the end you won't really make a difference and you won't really make a dent in the publishing world. You'll make a nice little profit but that's about it.

I had *Liberty and Tyranny* in my head for 40

years. It took me 16 months to write because I just decided to go back and challenge every principled thought I ever had and to try to figure out why I had them, who the great philosophers and statesmen and scholars were that I agreed with and disagreed with. Why am I conservative? How do people who are not conservative think? So half the book develops that kind of thinking from philosophy to history to economics, law, some of my own thoughts, some thoughts of great thinkers over time, and the latter half of the book gets into specific issues and tries to apply that thought process up to the end of the book, where there's a conservative manifesto — of sorts. Now, I'm lucky in the fact that I have a big radio show so publishers are more receptive to authors who have radio shows. But on the other hand, you still have to produce. There are radio hosts who have written books that failed. I'm not going to get into who they are or why, but they just have. Again, from my point of view, I never thought I would sell a million copies — more than a million copies — of any book. I just sat down and I worked very long hours. For instance, my show ended at 9:00 pm Eastern...I might go into my office and work until three in the morning. I might get a page written or I might fall asleep at my desk. Most weekends I'd be researching and writing and working on the book and it just took a lot out of me and took a long time. But in the end I thought I had a hell of a good book. But just because I thought I had a hell of a book didn't mean that everybody else would think that way. So that's what's key.

The other thing is don't underestimate the intelligence of the public, and in talk radio, of your audience. They know when you're talking down to them. Therefore I never talk down to them and I never write down to my audience. *Liberty and Tyranny* is an intelligent book for intelligent people who want to think. I think that's why in the end we still have sales and they're still brisk. We've been in the top ten on *The New York Times* list for the past six months and we've sold over a million copies. That's why, I think.

TALKERS: How do you feel about self-publishing? Or to use a better term, independent publishing? You're with an established publishing company and you're part of the traditional arena. With the internet now a major platform and people having their own websites and a changing role for the concept of intellectual property, independent production for books, for products, even for shows — podcasts and all of that — opens up a universe of expanded options. You're a lawyer and obviously have an understanding of this. What's your view of the state of the options talk show hosts now have to sell their stuff?

Levin: I'm all for entrepreneurship — really. I wouldn't say you have to go the traditional

route because often the traditional route is a very difficult one and there are a lot of obstacles for people. On the other hand, if you're going to self-publish, you need to keep a few things in mind. Number one, it's going to take some money. Number two, you're still going to have to market it somehow. How else are people going to hear about it? So those to me are two big obstacles you need to consider because really what you're doing is starting a small business. You're creating something and you're trying to sell it. In this case you're creating a new book and you're trying to sell it. It would be like trying to make a new gadget and trying to sell it. And then I guess the third point I would try to make is, are you really writing something that is compelling, that is interesting, that will attract a readership? And you have to try and look in the mirror and be honest with yourself. Those are the three things you have to consider if you want to self-publish.

TALKERS: These are tough times in radio. Advertising is down. Almost every company that broadcasts on the AM or the FM dial or even on television is having a lot of trouble. There's no secret about some of the financial problems facing Citadel. And yet I understand from the information we've received that your show is doing very well out there in the advertising marketplace. This obviously attracts the interest of our professional industry readership. First of all, is that true? And second, to what do you credit that your program is doing well, aside from being a big show with ratings, although that might be one of the reasons?

Levin: Well, we are doing very well this year. The latest numbers I saw a number of weeks or months ago is that we were up between 50% and 60% over last year, and we did very well last year. I think it's like treating your audience with respect: You need to treat your advertisers with respect. First of all, I don't advertise a product or a service unless I believe in it; unless I try it and I use it. So when you hear me talk about stamps.com or gotomeetings.com or — now I have to list them all, don't I? — or Hillsdale College? I've been to Hillsdale College, I've spoken at Hillsdale College...or all the other products and services we advertise on the show, I think it's because they're very useful, I think my audience will find them useful and I find them personally useful. I try to communicate that with the ads. And because I feel I have a special relationship with my audience, I think that they're able to try these products and services and I think they'll like them, too. I do have a standard when it comes to the advertisers, just as they have standards as to what hosts they will use. So we won't just take anything. For instance, we advertise Gold Line. There are a lot

of companies selling gold out there. I really insisted on researching this company, seeing how far back they went, if they had had any problems in the past and on and on...and they did not. Now they're one of our wonderful advertisers — from whom I buy gold. So I think the key is, first of all, to have a solid relationship with your audience and, second of all, to make sure that when you use your own name — I have my own brand — and put it out there in association with somebody's product or service that you actually mean it. And I do and I surmise that it comes across.

TALKERS: Interestingly, what also comes across is that talk radio has to find what used to be called "non-traditional revenue." And it's a fact that if there's a relationship with the host that the audience finds credible and relates to, this combination is the way hosts and sales departments have to go. That the old ratings-oriented, cost-per-point, uneducated-about-the-industry young agency buyer looking for how many impressions they can get their message for, you know, Coca-Cola, to be heard by ears that are attached to minds that don't really care about the programming, that this model doesn't work anymore. You haven't been in broadcasting all that long to remember personally when it was "each rating point counts for so much" and "it doesn't matter who's listening and it doesn't matter who's buying."

Levin: That is a very perceptive point. And in addition we are now also able to measure exactly, or as exactly as we can, who's in our audience. And it turns out my audience has a huge percentage with a college education or partial college education. And who earn more than \$75,000 a year. In other words, they actually have money to purchase things and they're not only intuitively intelligent, they're also well schooled. We're able to present that information to advertisers as well. But on your bigger point I think you're exactly right. I don't think you can say anymore, "Hey, we're advertising IBM, we're advertising Apple." Enterprises want to be able to link up ads with results and direct sales are the best way to do it. I happen to love that kind of a format myself because we can prove it.

TALKERS: In conclusion, what are your predictions for the immediate future of broadcasting in general.

Levin: I said earlier I think radio — in particular talk radio — is the most vibrant communication vehicle, period. Then when you look at the internet and satellite radio, it is an extremely exciting time. The one big problem is the federal government. The federal government seems hell-bent on using phony rationalizations for killing what is the most open commu-

nication format in the country. It worries me a great deal and it should worry everybody, whether you're on the left, right, middle — or not sure where you are. There really is no public interest in regulating the content of speech, except to influence the content of speech. They can talk about, as they do, the public interest. Well, who determines that? They can talk about diversity. I've never seen so much diversity in any industry as I see in this industry. They talk about local content. You can get local content, national content, regional content, up and down the radio band, on the internet, the satellite. So that's all phony. So my concern is that our federal government not destroy what is a vibrant, competitive, diverse communication alternative to the usual mainstream media outlets, in violation of the First Amendment and in violation of the public interest as determined by the marketplace.

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