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Wednesday the fourth of March, one thousand seven hundred and eighty nine

MUZZLED

**THE ASSAULT
ON HONEST DEBATE**

Frederick Douglass, President of the American Anti-Slavery Society
John Jay, Chief Justice of the United States

**JUAN
WILLIAMS**

Enough

Thurgood Marshall

Eyes on the Prize

This Far by Faith

My Soul Looks Back in Wonder

I'll Find a Way or Make One

JUAN WILLIAMS MUZZLED

THE ASSAULT ON HONEST DEBATE



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~~This book is dedicated to Crown Books, Fox News, [FoxNews.com](https://www.foxnews.com), *The Hill* newspaper, thehill.com, and the American Program Bureau—Guiding Lights in the storm—standing tall in the faith that speaking the truth is the heart of great journalism.~~

“For why should my freedom be judged by another’s conscience?”

—1 CORINTHIANS 10:29

CONTENTS

Cover

Other Books by This Author

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Epigraph

Chapter 1

I Said What I Meant

Chapter 2

Defying the PC Police

Chapter 3

Partisan Politics

Chapter 4

9/11 and Other Man-Caused Disasters

Chapter 5

Tax Cuts, Entitlements, and Health Care

Chapter 6

Immigration, Terror Babies, and Virtual Fences

Chapter 7

The Abortion Wars

Chapter 8

The Provocateurs

Chapter 9

The Limits of Free Speech

Epilogue

Acknowledgments

I SAID WHAT I MEANT

I AM A BIGOT. I hate Muslims. I am a fomenter of hate and intolerance. I am a black guy who makes fun of Muslims for the entertainment of white racists. I am brazen enough to do it on TV before the largest cable news audience in America. And I am such a fraud that while I was spreading hate to a conservative audience at night I delivered a totally different message to a large liberal morning-radio audience. I fooled the radio folks into thinking of me as a veteran Washington correspondent and the author of several acclaimed books celebrating America's battles against racism.

My animus toward Muslims may be connected to my desire for publicity and the fact that I am mentally unstable. And I am also a fundamentally bad person. I repeatedly ignore warnings to stop violating my company's standards for news analysis. And I did this after repeated warnings from my patient employer. Therefore, my former employers made the right decision when they fired me. In fact, they should be praised for doing it, and rewarded with taxpayer money. Their only sin was that they didn't fire me sooner.

This is just a sampling of some of the reaction to National Public Radio's decision to fire me last year after a ten-year career as a national talk show host, senior correspondent, and senior news analyst. They were not taken from the anonymous comments section of a YouTube page or the reams of hate mail that flooded my in-box in the days before the firing. No, this is the response from the NPR management whom I had served with great success for nearly a decade. It is also the reaction from national advocacy groups like the Council for American Islamic Relations (CAIR), whose work I had generally admired and occasionally defended over the years. Joining them was a small, knee-jerk mob of liberal commentators, including a *New York Times* editorial writer, who defended NPR as an important news source deserving federal funding even if it meant defaming me—"he made foolish and hurtful remarks about Muslims." Cable TV star Rachel Maddow, a fervent champion of free speech, agreed that I had a right to say what was on my mind, but in her opinion the comments amounted to bigotry. I had a right to speak but no right to "keep [my] job." NPR also found support among leftist intellectuals who regularly brag about defending the rights of the little guy but had no problem siding with a big institution over an individual journalist when the journalist was me. One writer said I had long ingratiated myself with conservatives and I had gotten what was coming to me. His conclusion about me: "Sleep with dogs, get fleas."

What did I do that warranted the firing and the ad hominem attacks that preceded and followed?

I simply told the truth.

Looking back on the torrential media coverage surrounding my dismissal, I am struck by how little of it tells the full story of what actually happened. Basic facts were distorted, important context was not provided, and personal attacks were treated as truth. The lack of honest reporting about the firing and the events that led up to it was not just unfair—most of it was flat-out lies.

In this first chapter, I will tell you the full story of what happened to me. My purpose

doing this is not to get people to feel sorry for me. The goal of this book is to set the record straight and to use my experience in what amounts to a political and media whacking as the starting point for a much-needed discussion about the current, sad state of political discourse in this country. It is time to end the ongoing assault against honest debate in America.

This story begins with a typical Monday night for me. I went to the Fox News Channel bureau in Washington, DC, to do a satellite interview for Bill O'Reilly's prime-time show, *The O'Reilly Factor*. I have appeared on Bill's show hundreds of times since I joined Fox in 1996. The drama here is watching me, a veteran Washington journalist with centrist liberal credentials, enter the lion's den to debate the fiery, domineering, right-of-center O'Reilly. When I do the show I am almost always paired with a conservative or Republican guest. My usual jousting partner is Mary Katharine Ham, a conservative writer. This strikes some critics as stacking the deck by having two conservatives take me on. In reality the combination offers viewers a range of opinions, because O'Reilly is unpredictable. He listens and admits when he is wrong. Ham is an honest debate partner who is willing to call them as she sees them and to veer off any conservative party line. If the deck is stacked, it's because there can be no doubt that this is Bill's party and he runs the show. The audience tunes in to see him and they keep tuning in because they love his cranky but vulnerable personality. He is a striver and he can be intimidating, but I see no need to back down in a debate and I genuinely respect him. I think he respects me too. Along with Mary Katharine, Bill and I share a sense that we can disagree without the personal attacks and put-downs. I hear from viewers that the segment is a hit because they learn something from watching people with different political convictions and viewpoints—but also with affection for each other—try to make sense of emotional, political issues. We don't play the cheap TV debate trick—often used to stoke TV political debate shows and soap operas—of creating false tensions by shouting over each other and calling each other liars. We treat each other as sincere people with integrity and the courage of our convictions. But make no mistake, we are painfully direct with each other. To survive on the show, you'd better know how to think quickly and counter-punch with a fast, pithy point or you'll be left behind with less time to talk, reduced to what Bill calls a "pinhead."

The intensity and the variety of views and insights that come from such debate is one of the reasons I enjoy my job at Fox. The news channel looks for the conservative slant in the stories it selects to tell, and its leading personalities in prime time are right-wingers. But you can hear all sides of the debate on Fox.

Our segment led the O'Reilly show that Monday night in late October. The topic for debate was the effect of political correctness on the country's ability to talk about the threat posed by radical Muslims.

O'Reilly set up the segment by talking about his recent experience on ABC's daytime program *The View*, where he had discussed the proposal to build an Islamic community center near the site of the September 11 attacks in downtown Manhattan. O'Reilly expressed his disagreement with the millions of Americans who felt it was inappropriate. When asked by cohost Whoopi Goldberg why it was inappropriate, O'Reilly said, "Because Muslims killed us on 9/11." This prompted Goldberg and Joy Behar to walk off the set in protest. Barbara Walters criticized her cohosts, saying they should not have done that—we should be able to have discussions "without washing our hands, screaming and walking off stage." They did

return after O'Reilly apologized for not being clear that he meant the country was attacked not by all Muslims but by extremist radical Muslims.

The episode got national attention as a celebrity TV mash-up between the conservative, brash, male O'Reilly and two furious, liberal women. But a serious analysis of the heart of the exchange—the truth and the lies—never took place. So O'Reilly took it to the very top of his next show, with me as his guest. At the start of the debate, Bill invited me, indeed challenged me, to tell him where he went wrong in stating the fact that “Muslims killed us there,” in the 9/11 attacks. I accepted Bill's challenge and began by crafting my argument with a point of agreement—an approach intended to get Bill and Bill's audience to listen to my concerns about what he had said on *The View*. First, I said he was right on the fact that political correctness can cause people to ignore the facts and become so paralyzed that they don't deal with reality. And the reality, I said, is that the people who attacked us on 9/11 proudly identified themselves as devout Muslims and said that they attacked in the name of Allah.

To illustrate my appreciation of the underlying truth of his statement, I then made an admission about my feelings. I said that I worry when I'm getting on an airplane and see people dressed in garb that identifies them first and foremost as Muslims. This was not a bigoted statement or a policy position. It was not reasoned opinion. It was simply an honest statement of my fears after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 by radical Muslims who profess that killing Americans was part of their religious duty and would earn them the company of virgins in heaven. I don't think that I'm the only American who feels this way. Anyone who has lived through the last few years of attacks and attempted attacks knows that radical Islam continues to pose a threat to the United States and to much of the world. That threat has been expressed in federal court the very week before the O'Reilly show, when the unsuccessful Times Square bomber, Faisal Shahzad, bragged in court that he was just one of the first to come in a Muslim-inspired fight against the United States. “Brace yourselves,” he said defiantly, “because the war with Muslims has just begun.”

So there is no doubt that there's a real war being waged and that people are trying to kill us.

Intelligence agencies worldwide, even in countries with a majority of Muslims, agree that Muslim extremists with a murderous jihadist mind-set are recruiting others to carry out the bloodletting against the United States, Western Europe, and their global allies. I wanted Bill and his audience to know that I was not there to play a game of pretending that everyone in the world is a good soul deserving of a hug and a Coke.

Having established agreement with Bill on the underlying facts, I began the next line of reasoning in my argument. I challenged O'Reilly not to make rash judgments about people of any faith. I took the fight to O'Reilly because I felt that he had done exactly that in his comments about Muslims on *The View*. I urged him to choose his words carefully when he talks about the 9/11 attacks, so as not to provoke bigotry against all Muslims, the vast majority of whom are peaceful people with no connection to terrorism. I pointed out that Timothy McVeigh—along with the Atlanta Olympic Park bomber and the people who protested against gay rights at military funerals—are Christians, but we journalists rarely identify them by their religion. I made it clear that all Americans have to be careful not to let fears—such as my own when I see people in Muslim clothes getting on a plane—color our judgment.

lead to the violation of another person's constitutional rights, whether to fly on a plane, to build a mosque, to carry the Koran, or to drive a New York cab without the fear of having their throat slashed—which had happened earlier in 2010.

Mary Katharine joined the debate to say that it is important for everyone to make the distinction between moderate and extreme Islam. She said conservative support for the war in Afghanistan and Iraq is predicated on the idea that the United States can help build up moderate Islamic elements in those countries and push out the extremists. I agreed with her and later added that we don't want anyone attacked on American streets because "they hear rhetoric from Bill O'Reilly and they act crazy." Bill complained that he was tired of "being careful" in talking about radical Muslim terrorists but agreed that the man who slashed the cabby was a "nut" and said the same about the Florida pastor who wanted to burn the Koran.

My point in recounting the on-air debate blow by blow is to show that it was in keeping with the great American tradition of argument. It was a fair, full-throated, and honest discourse about an important issue facing the country. There was no bigotry expressed, no crude provocation, and no support for anti-Muslim sentiments of any kind. Just the opposite was true. I left the studio thinking I'd helped to dispel some of the prejudice toward Muslims and moved an important national conversation forward in some modest way.

The next day I flew to Chicago to give a speech to the leaders of a Catholic health-care system. It was a 7:00 a.m. flight, so the terminal at Reagan National Airport in DC was fairly empty when I arrived at around 6:00 a.m. It was easy for other travelers to pick me out as I waited at the newsstand and while I was in line to buy coffee. Several said they had seen the segment and told me their stories of being nervous on planes and trains when encountering people in Muslim garb. One young woman, who worked for a liberal senator, also thanked me for "manning up"—a hot political term at the end of the midterm campaign that year—about the danger of letting our fears lead us to become "haters." When I got to Chicago, I heard similar comments from people at the hotel and even during the question-and-answer period following my speech.

While I was waiting to fly out of Chicago's jam-packed O'Hare International Airport that evening, a middle-aged man in a business suit made his way through the crowd to get to me. He looked to be of Arab descent and asked, "Are you Juan Williams?" I told him that I was and we shook hands. He told me that he was a Muslim. He'd apparently watched O'Reilly the previous night. I didn't know where this was going—what he would say next. Speaking with pride, he confided that he had recently decided to get involved with Muslim political organizations in Washington because he could no longer tolerate negative stereotypes of Muslims as violent and unpatriotic. Then he told me a moving story. He said his son had recently seen him put a letter with Arabic writing in his home office's paper shredder. The twelve-year-old asked his dad if he was shredding the letter because he didn't want to put it in the trash and risk having neighbors see it and realize that the family is Muslim. The father explained to his son that he was shredding the letter because it included the name of Allah and it was wrong to throw something sacred in with the garbage.

What struck him, he said, was that his little boy thought it was shameful to be a Muslim. He said his son's embarrassment had made him realize he was making a mistake by thinking that just by being a normal suburban businessman he was creating a positive image of Muslims in America. He said that in light of ongoing controversies, he realized he had

speaking out against people who miscast all Muslims as terrorists and to take a stand against Muslim extremists who feed the negative images of Islam.

The man thanked me for comments made on the O'Reilly show because he feared the kind of anti-Muslim sentiment I was speaking out against.

One of the nicest things about being a television personality is the fans who approach you in airports and restaurants. Even the most strident conservatives who watch Fox will come up to me and say that while they may disagree with almost everything I say, they enjoy listening to me. Sometimes they will ask me to sign an autograph or pose for a picture, and I'm happy to oblige because I appreciate intellectual honesty. But there are also those rare moments—like when that man came up to me at O'Hare—when people compliment a point you made publicly and appreciate the reasoning behind it. This was one of those moments.

Little did I know that as I was talking to this man, a well-organized campaign was being waged against me by CAIR and other organizations that claimed to represent him. They set up a Facebook group and circulated a sample letter to be filled out by their members and sent to NPR. Apparently upset that I had offered O'Reilly support for any part of his comments about Muslims on *The View*, CAIR's letter quoted only the first part of my comments. That was an unfair distortion, with no hint of the full context. The author attacked me for "irresponsible and inflammatory comments [that] would not be tolerated if they targeted another racial, ethnic or religious minority" and went on to say that "they should not pass without action by NPR. I respectfully request that your network take appropriate action in response to Mr. Williams' intolerant comments."

Media Matters, the far-left Web site that purports to show daily, if not hourly, instances of conservative bias on Fox, accused me of bigotry and called for me to be fired. Of course, I had been urging NPR to fire me for years because I appear on Fox. Some of my colleagues on Fox have likened Media Matters to a determined stalker and sarcastically thank it on air for contributing to Fox's high ratings.

I didn't take any of this too seriously. To speak and write about politics, people, and culture on a national platform—at Fox and NPR or in books and the *Washington Post*—is to quickly realize that the blogs, the phones, and the mailbag are going to be filled with criticism. My judgments are constantly questioned, my word choices are scrutinized, and alarms are raised even when things go unsaid. As far as I could tell, the criticism of what I had said on the O'Reilly show had little substance. These attacks amounted to weak, baseless distortions of a fast-paced debate on a difficult subject. Any fair-minded person taking a look at the entire conversation could easily see that my comments had been twisted to serve the political agendas of CAIR and Media Matters. And my conversations with viewers about the show revealed no such confusion, no backlash against my stand in opposition to anti-Muslim bigotry. So I dismissed the whole thing as a minor snit. I'd seen much worse when a powerful politician didn't like some comment I'd made or when I'd actually misstated a fact of substance in offering an opinion. A lot of that comes with the job, and in some ways reassures me that people are listening and believe I have influence.

The next day I took the shuttle to New York. A few minutes after I landed in New York my cell phone rang. A friend at a Washington advocacy group said she wanted to see how I was doing because of the e-mail going around her office calling for me to be fired from NPR for my comments about Muslims on Fox. I thanked her for the support but told her the

people with vested interests in any hot-button debate always take shots at me—Republicans and Democrats, blacks and whites, Israelis and Palestinians, pro-life and pro-choice.

I went about my work at Fox that day, talking politics as the midterm elections heated up. Shortly after 5:00 p.m., I checked my cell phone and saw that I had a missed call from Ellen Weiss, the vice president of the news division at NPR. When I got her on the phone, she told me she had been inundated with complaints about my comments to O'Reilly on Monday night. Ellen said I had crossed the line and essentially accused me of bigotry. She gave me no chance to tell her my side of the story. She focused on the admission of my fear of people dressed in Muslim garb at the airport as prima facie evidence of my bigotry. She said there are people who wear Muslim garb to work at NPR and they were offended by my comment. She never suggested that I had discriminated against anyone. Instead, Ellen continued to ask me what I had really meant. I told her I had meant exactly what I said. She retorted that she did not sense remorse from me. I said I had nothing to apologize for. I had made an honest statement about my feelings. I urged her to go back and look at the full transcript. Had she done that, she would have seen that I was arguing against exactly the kind of prejudicial snap judgments she was now accusing me of making. But Ellen would hear none of it. She claimed she had reviewed the segment. She informed me that I had violated NPR's values for editorial commentary and my contract as a news analyst was being terminated.

I was stunned. I said that this was an outrage, that it made no sense. I appealed to her to reconsider before firing me. I asked if she had some personal animus toward me. I pointed out that I had not made my comments on NPR. When she asked if I would have said the same thing on NPR, I said yes, because I believe in telling people the truth about my feelings and opinions, regardless of the venue. I asked why she would fire me without speaking to me face to face and reviewing the entire episode. At that point she bluntly told me there was nothing I could say or do to change her mind. She added that the decision had been confirmed above her and that there was no point in meeting in person. The decision had already been made and there was nothing I could do about it.

Years earlier, NPR had tried to stop me from appearing on Fox. Some NPR listeners had written to ask why a top NPR personality was showing up on a conservative cable channel. I reminded the management back then that I was working for Fox before NPR signed me to host its afternoon talk show. And I pointed out that other NPR staff appeared on CNN, as well as news discussion shows where they expressed opinions, without any pressure to shut them down. I was told that Fox had grown into the number one cable news network and was a loud, controversial, conservative network at that. My response was that debate on Fox was first rate—that was why the audience was growing—and no one at Fox tried to tell me what to say. I also pointed out that I was advertising the NPR brand with every appearance before Fox's large audience. Then it was suggested that I not express my opinions on Fox. I said I expressed my opinions every day as an NPR host and I did not say anything on Fox or in my books or newspaper columns that was different from what I said on NPR. Different NPR ombudsmen wrote about the issue over the years and concluded that while having my face on Fox bothered a few at NPR who hated Fox's conservative approach to the news, it did not amount to a sin against NPR's standards of journalism.

When Ellen Weiss became NPR's top news executive, she renewed the discussion about my work for Fox, telling me that she didn't like Fox's format. She said its fast-paced debat

provoked pointed expression of opinions. On Fox, she observed, liberals are outnumbered by conservatives. I replied that NPR often edited interviews and even debate segments to make them move faster and sharpen contrasting viewpoints. As for the political imbalance she saw on Fox, I asked if she realized that liberals outnumbered conservatives at NPR. She responded that any controversial stand I took on Fox compromised my role as a journalist at NPR. I disagreed. But she outranked me. She insisted that I not identify myself as an NPR employee when I appeared on O'Reilly or any other Fox prime-time show.

To me this was absurd. I thought she was condescending to NPR listeners by suggesting they could not distinguish between my roles at NPR—as a talk show host, correspondent, and analyst—and my role as an occasional debating partner for conservative TV personalities on Fox.

It was the latest in a troubling history of high-ranking NPR editors and producers expressing concern about my journalistic independence because of my role at Fox. Years before that incident, NPR officials asked me to help them get an interview with President George W. Bush. Bush's top aides felt NPR had been unfair to Bush during the 2000 campaign and they kept NPR at a distance once Bush was in the White House. But some NPR officials noted that I had long-standing relationships with some of the key players in the Bush White House due to my years as a political writer at the *Washington Post*. They asked me to take the lead for NPR in trying to get an interview with the president. Later, when other anchors and political reporters asked why I was leading the effort, I heard that some NPR managers suggested that the Bush White House was more likely to grant the interview because of my appearances on Fox. There was an element of petty jealousy that irritated me, but it was also true that the Bush White House had a good relationship with Fox. Over several years I held meetings and set up dinners to try to ease the tensions, and I got several Bush officials to appear on NPR for interviews with me and with others. When it served their purposes, NPR officials were all too happy to use my connection to Fox.

When the president finally agreed to an NPR interview, the offer was for me to interview him. After I did the interview, NPR played it in its entirety that evening on *All Things Considered*. The next day they devoted an entire segment to it on *Morning Edition*. The political editors and Weiss, who had helped me script the questions for the president, called and sent e-mails telling me they were thrilled with the interview. But the next day, Weiss phoned me to express anger that in the course of the interview I had prefaced a difficult question about the wars by saying to the president that Americans pray for him but don't understand some of his actions or policies. Weiss said some NPR staff felt it was wrong to say that Americans pray for him. I reminded her that in many churches it is customary to pray for the well-being of the president, governors, mayors, ministers, and other leaders. She claimed my words amounted to evidence that I was a bad journalist who was soft on Bush.

More than six months later, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Little Rock crisis, President Bush offered to do an NPR interview with me about race relations in America. NPR management, led by Weiss, refused the interview on the grounds that the White House had offered it to me and not to NPR's other correspondents and hosts. The implication was that I was in the administration's pocket. Had the NPR executives never heard my criticism of President Bush's handling of the war in Iraq or his curtailment of civil liberties in the war on terror? Was Weiss unaware that in looking for someone to discuss race relations with the

president, the White House might have considered my expertise on the civil rights movement? I am the author of a best-selling history of the civil rights movement, *Eyes on the Prize—America's Civil Rights Years*, as well as an acclaimed biography of America's first black Supreme Court justice, *Thurgood Marshall—American Revolutionary*. My latest book, *Enough* was about the state of black leadership in America and had found a place on the *New York Times* best-seller list. Weiss found it was easier to see me as a skill for the Bush administration. So I did the interview for Fox instead. While it made national headlines, it was never mentioned on NPR.

The shunning got worse when I wrote an editorial column for the *New York Times* that included criticism of the nation's teachers' unions for blocking school reform efforts. Weiss called me to her office to ask how NPR listeners could now trust my reporting on education. She reminded her that I was not the education beat reporter but a news analyst. Weiss was not persuaded. She wanted to review anything I wrote for newspapers, magazines, and even book proposals. When I said absolutely not, she insisted that I leave the staff and sign a new contract that limited my role at NPR to that of a news analyst. She said she wanted to insulate NPR against anything I said or wrote outside NPR. With the new contractual arrangement, she argued, management could claim I was not a staff member.

NPR is an important news outlet with a large, influential audience, and I enjoyed working there. And the NPR audience seemed to appreciate me. I was constantly being asked to visit local NPR stations and meet with listeners as well as staff. The volume of my e-mail, phone calls, letters, and requests for pledge week announcements suggested my pieces got a tremendous reaction. The ombudsman said she got more response to my work than to any other voice on the network. I enjoyed my relationship with the audience, so I swallowed hard and accepted Weiss's deal. I thought my willingness to be a team player and the compromise I'd agreed to would be the end of it. But she immediately began to cut my salary and diminish my on-air appearances. Her management team began to treat me like a leper. I was prohibited from joining a panel of journalists questioning GOP presidential primary candidates in a debate. Senior editors, producers, and hosts told me that Weiss and her circle of other longtime NPR personalities—I worked there ten years and was still considered an outsider—hated Fox and hated me for appearing there. One NPR news executive told me directly that having on staff a black man with conservative social views who was personally friendly with conservatives infuriated NPR's old guard. They were unhappy with *Enough*, which I had praised Bill Cosby for his critique of black leaders. It was clear they wanted me out the door, the same executive said, because I did not fit their view of how a black person thinks—my independence of thought, my willingness to listen to a range of views, and my strong journalistic credentials be damned.

This effort to censor, control, and belittle me got so bad I was often ignored even when I gave NPR news tips. Anytime I gave them a scoop, NPR management wanted to know what Bush officials had conversations with me on background—meaning they could not be quoted by name—or with the promise that I would refer to them only generically as senior administration officials. When I replied that this was the way senior officials in Republican and Democratic administrations leaked sensitive information to journalists, Weiss and her team questioned my journalistic standards. The same dismissive attitude came into play when the Obama campaign came into the news. I had better sources among Obama's aides than

anyone else at NPR. When other news organizations broke news of cabinet appointments from the Obama White House, it was often left to me to confirm the news, because no one else at NPR could do it. Yet even then I was treated as a suspect source and asked to reveal the names of sources I used to confirm the nominations. And when I took exclusive stories from NPR, I was told management was not comfortable with my getting exclusive interviews on breaking stories. They preferred that those stories come from other reporters, even if it meant that NPR did not get the stories first.

Yet when Fox let me talk about news from my inside sources, that made NPR leadership boil. After President Obama was elected, there was a lot of conversation in his camp about the upcoming role of his wife, Michelle Obama. Appearing on *The O'Reilly Factor*, I said I had been told by insiders that she would not be a policy adviser to the president but would focus on being an exemplary mom to her daughters. Obama's staff also said she planned to reach out to military families and to call attention to nutrition and obesity issues among children. I explained that this low-key approach had been planned for the First Lady, a high-opinionated Princeton- and Harvard-educated lawyer, because the new administration did not want a reprise of the moment during the campaign when Mrs. Obama had become a polarizing, racially charged figure. That episode had been triggered when she said her husband's success in the primaries made her proud of the United States "for the first time in my adult life."

Mary Katharine Ham, who was on the O'Reilly show with me that night, referring to Mrs. Obama's campaign controversy, said the future First Lady had to avoid dropping "sound bites like she did during the campaign." I added that Mrs. Obama was a potential liability for the president if she stirred racial tensions by getting her "Stokely Carmichael in a designer dress thing going." It was a catchy phrase that first came to me during conversations with Obama officials, who laughed at it. But it was reported all over left-wing blogs as an insult to Mrs. Obama. Weiss jumped on the overreaction and told me it was an inappropriate comment for an NPR journalist to make. I was called to the office of Ken Stern, then the acting president of NPR. He listened as I explained what had taken place and decided against censuring me.

But the chilly treatment persisted. When an Obama White House source mentioned that Vice President Biden was the leading critic of continuing the war in Afghanistan, despite growing calls for a "surge" from the military, I tried repeatedly to get NPR interested in the story. Several weeks later, when the same story became page-one news in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, NPR reported the story but claimed it had no time to air my analysis of this critical debate inside the administration. Similarly, when Elena Kagan was nominated to the Supreme Court by President Obama, my phone started ringing. Kagan had been a clerk on the Supreme Court for liberal icon Justice Thurgood Marshall, and both liberals and conservatives saw political dynamite in that relationship. The Right wanted to paint Kagan as another left-wing activist, while the Obama administration wanted to use her ties to Marshall to reassure its liberal base that Kagan was not a weak moderate about to be steamrolled by conservatives on the court. As a result of my biography of Justice Marshall, requests for interviews poured in to me personally, as well as through the communications department at NPR. Reporters as well as senate staffers, both Democrats and Republicans, wanted to talk to me. But when I pitched NPR's news division on a news analysis of the story based on my knowledge of the relationship, I was turned down. A week later, an NPR editor called to ask

me to do the piece. I was elated. But only hours later she called back to say she had been to there was no room for “a Juan Williams piece.”

At that point I became convinced Weiss and NPR were looking for a reason to fire me. The problem with just getting rid of me was that other NPR staff, including people who worked as straight news reporters, also appeared on opinion and debate TV shows. One news reporter even worked alongside me at Fox—national political correspondent Mara Liasson. Next, NPR management tried to get Liasson to quit Fox and leave me dangling as an aberrant journalist. NPR’s management asked Liasson to spend a month watching Fox to decide whether it was a legitimate news organization worthy of her time and presence. This request from NPR came at the same time as an Obama White House effort to get other news organizations and the public to view Fox as a propaganda machine rather than a news operation. One news reporter described the administration’s campaign as an effort to “delegitimize the [conservative] network” and pull the plug on its constant critiques of the president. Liberal columnist Jacob Weisberg wrote in *Newsweek* that any “respectable journalist—I’m talking to you, Mara Liasson—should stop appearing on [Fox] programs.” A Politico story quoted one NPR executive as saying that “Fox uses Mara and Juan as cover” to counter claims that the network is right-wing and to gain journalistic legitimacy that gives it credibility.

That faulty logic is just a step away from saying that Americans are too stupid to independently judge the slant of news and talk shows and enjoy them for what they are—part of a range of views available in a robust American media. But the most dangerous idea behind the NPR effort to bully Liasson into quitting Fox was that journalists should not talk across the political divide, much less acknowledge that anyone on the other side of the divide might have something interesting or important to say.

Liasson eventually told NPR she saw nothing wrong with Fox and intended to continue working there.

This orthodoxy being applied like a straitjacket to journalists is a chilling attack on the free flow of ideas and debate. No one at Fox has ever told me what to say. The same, sadly, cannot be said of NPR.

As Weiss’s long-standing antagonism toward my appearances on Fox continued to grow, the table was set, waiting for one misguided viewpoint to create a pretext for firing me. When CAIR and Media Matters distorted my comments on the Muslim terror threat, Weiss went to NPR’s new president and CEO, Vivian Schiller, to make the case for getting rid of me.

After her dismissive late-afternoon call informing me that I was fired, Weiss and NPR released a statement announcing my termination that Wednesday night. I was working the same night on the panel for Sean Hannity’s Fox program. I didn’t mention anything about my firing on the show. When I got off the air, an NPR reporter called to ask me for a comment on it. I said I had to talk to my wife first. Sensing I was upset about something, Sean Hannity led me into a studio makeup room and—far away from our political arguments, just two friends talking—asked me what was wrong. I told him NPR had fired me; I feared for my career. NPR had the clout to tell one-sided stories disparaging me as a way to justify its action. I planned to call my agent to figure out how to tell people that I had been fired, but NPR was already putting the story out with its spin. I didn’t know if I could compete with its megaphone and the admiration and loyalty of NPR’s listeners. NPR’s ties to other news organizations meant its attacks on me were going to get a lot of attention. And I didn’t know

if Fox, reacting to NPR's action, might view me as damaged goods, as a bigot who had no credibility. It was close to 11:00 p.m. when Hannity put a hand on my shoulder and told me not to worry. He picked up the wall phone and woke up Bill Shine, Fox's executive vice president for programming, who told him to tell me not to say anything about the firing until I met with Fox executives in the morning.

At 7:00 the next morning I appeared on *Fox and Friends*; I again said nothing about the firing. The hosts protected me by staying away from the controversy. But my face and story appeared all over the Internet, newspapers, and other cable networks. The story had gone viral. I was the center of a national media storm by the end of breakfast. Just after 8:00 a.m. I got a call from Bill Shine. He told me that Fox CEO Roger Ailes wanted to see me in his office at 10:00 a.m. Since I had talked with Hannity the night before, anxiety and pent-up anger and depression had all pulled at my emotions. I had not slept. At times I had cried over what had happened and over the potential destruction of my career—all because I had spoken my mind.

When I walked into Roger Ailes's office, accompanied by Shine and Michael Clemente, the senior vice president for news, Ailes greeted me with a smile and said, "Well, we can't have you working here." As my jaw dropped, he broke into a laugh. He waved his hand and said he was offering me a new three-year contract with an increased role at the network. Ailes asked me how much I made at NPR and said he'd make up every dime so I wouldn't have to go home and tell my wife and family we'd lost money because of NPR's actions. He also said he wanted to see how America's left-wing media and politicians reacted to a serious journalist being silenced this way. Ailes then released a statement that read, "Juan has been a staunch defender of liberal viewpoints since his tenure began at Fox News in 1997.... He's an honest man whose freedom of speech is protected by Fox News on a daily basis." I appeared on *TV O'Reilly Factor* that night and guest-hosted it the following night. Bill really went to bat for me, for which I am grateful. He called for an immediate suspension of all public money to NPR and correctly pointed out that liberal billionaire George Soros had donated \$1.8 million to NPR the week before. Soros had also given money to Media Matters in the past.

Conservatives like Brit Hume and Bill Kristol, whom I had debated ferociously over the years on *Fox News Sunday*, stuck up for me and blasted NPR. Even more heartening was the support I received from fellow Fox commentators whom I had criticized when they were in positions of political power. Sarah Palin, Newt Gingrich, Karl Rove, and Rick Santorum all defended my right to free speech and called out NPR for its hypocrisy.

Sarah Palin surprised me most of all. Ever since she was picked by John McCain to be his vice presidential running mate in the 2008 campaign, I have questioned her qualifications and her command of the issues facing the country. I was especially tough on her for quitting her job as governor of Alaska less than two years into her term. Yet Palin wrote on her Facebook page: "I don't expect Juan Williams to support me (he's said some tough things about me in the past)—but I will always support his right and the right of all Americans to speak honestly about the threats this country faces. And for Juan, speaking honestly about these issues isn't just his right, it's his job. Up until yesterday, he was doing that job at NPR. Firing him is the loss."

A wave of phone calls and e-mails to NPR complained about my firing. The ombudsman Alicia Shepard, said the day after my firing was "a day like none I've experienced since

coming to NPR” three years earlier. I was told the phones “rang like an alarm bell with no button.” NPR got “more than 8,000 e-mails, a record with nothing a close second.” She said most of the callers wanted NPR to hire me back immediately. So many people tried to use the “Contact Us” form on NPR’s Web site that it crashed. One posting on the Web site, described as typical by the *Los Angeles Times*, read: “In one arrogant move the NPR exposed itself for the leftist thought police they really are.”

Apparently NPR did not agree. The day after my firing, NPR CEO Vivian Schiller told an audience at the Atlanta Press Club that I should have kept my feelings about Muslims between me and my “psychiatrist or [my] publicist—take your pick.” The videotape of her comment, complete with the look of pure contempt on her face as she spoke, appeared across the country on news shows throughout the day. She was criticized for her personal attacks on me by NPR’s own ombudsman. Schiller later issued a statement of public apology for her words on the NPR Web site, although she never gave me the courtesy of a personal call. A week later she sent a FedEx envelope to my house with a letter saying she was very busy, she did not know how to reach me, and I needed to contact her secretary to set up a time to talk with her. I wrote back that since she had had no time to talk to me before firing me I saw no need to talk to her now.

In the media, Schiller tried to justify the firing by saying that my defenders failed to appreciate that “news analysts may not take personal public positions on controversial issues; doing so undermines their credibility as analysts, and that is what’s happened in this situation.”

Some leading liberals rallied to Schiller’s side. Andrew Sullivan said my admission of nervousness around people in Muslim garb at airports amounted to a “working definition of bigotry.” Playing on the fact that I am black, Sullivan asked if a white person who feared being mugged by a black man dressed in “classic thug get-up” wouldn’t be guilty of bigotry. Glenn Greenwald at Salon.com wrote that my comments amounted to “giving cover to incendiary right-wing attacks” on Muslims. Keith Olbermann, on MSNBC, claimed I was a bigot and “obtuse” and said NPR’s decision to end my contract was “anything but a First Amendment issue.” He added, with disdain for the people who voiced support for me: “We have to stamp it on people’s foreheads so they can read it backwards in the mirror.” Rachel Maddow at MSNBC said my words reminded her of appeals to white racism by Republicans in the South during the 1960s. And Michael Tomasky, a writer for London’s *The Guardian*, wrote of me, “[He chose] to ingratiate himself with O’Reilly and his viewers with that Fox rhetoric. In a sense, Williams got what was coming to him.” He was the journalist who said, “Sleep with dogs, get fleas.”

To be candid, the attacks from these liberal intellectuals stung me. I grew up as a liberal in New York City. As a black child during the height of the civil rights movement, Republicans seemed to me to be a bunch of Archie Bunkers, the TV character who called his son-in-law a “meathead” for welcoming black people into his neighborhood and protesting the Vietnam War. This all led me to believe the right wing had a monopoly on cruelty, intolerance, and ideological rigidity. Now, at fifty-five, it was painfully clear to me that the left wing represented by NPR and liberal lobbying groups, had become likewise intolerant of people who did not agree with them. In demonizing Fox News and the right wing as a powerful conspiracy of wealthy, militaristic bigots—antiblack, antifeminist, and antigay—they had

their own prejudice against different points of view. They do not believe in tolerance. They do not care about open-minded debate. They care first and foremost about liberal orthodoxy. If you dare to challenge it or deviate from it even slightly, you will be punished.

My point is that what happened to me was not about me alone. It was an assault on journalism and honest debate. We need to protect a free-flowing, respectful national conversation in our country. Today, such honest debate about the issues becomes collateral damage in an undeclared war by those who make accusations of racism and bigotry whenever their political positions are challenged.

I use the emotionally charged word “war” very deliberately. My comments about Muslim on Fox were twisted and deliberately taken out of context by Weiss. She was able to use that distortion, along with a general view of Fox News as bad guys, to engage in a vigilante-style attack on me. NPR’s standards for its journalistic ethics, which I supposedly broke, seemed to apply only to me. When Nina Totenberg, NPR’s reporter on legal issues, famously said that a conservative U.S. senator and his children ought to “get AIDS from a transfusion,” she was not fired. Nor was NPR news analyst Cokie Roberts when she said that Fox’s Glenn Beck was un-American and called him a terrorist.

In their hubris and fury at me, Vivian Schiller and Weiss accepted the wacky idea that they could legitimize Bill O’Reilly and Sean Hannity because I *talk* with them. Did they not notice that I was almost always challenging Bill and trading ideas with Sean? Bill and Sean are major forces in American culture, media, and politics, whether or not I appear on their shows. And I believe it is important that they remain open to having their audiences hear different points of view. I continue to go on their shows and debate their ideas because I believe Americans of all political stripes are better off when they hear an experienced political observer offer an honest appraisal of the issues and the other side’s point of view.

Of course, condoning political polarization goes well beyond just NPR. One-party dominance and one-sided thinking have become the rule rather than the exception in much of the media. We are creating a culture in the newsroom where facts, context, and insight take the backseat to fear of complaints of insensitivity, accusations of racism, and all sorts of phony charges of bigotry. On the Left, the politically correct police are increasingly out in force. This leads people in public life to be sent to the media equivalent of the gulag—fired, shunned, silenced—for raising the wrong questions and displaying independent thought. When I see charlatans and prevaricators sacrificing the standards of journalism and free speech on the altar of political correctness, I am compelled to speak out.

Daniel Schorr, my fellow NPR commentator, who died last year, used to talk about the initial shock of finding himself on President Nixon’s enemies list. I can only imagine Daniel’s disgust if he saw that NPR today has created one of its own.

A lot of people in this country are tired of being afraid to speak out. I think that’s part of why so many came out so strongly in support of me. Whoopi Goldberg, for example, who walked off the set when Bill O’Reilly made his initial comment about Muslims being responsible for 9/11, came to my defense after I was fired. She said NPR sent the “wrong message” about the need for people to speak up about their feelings and have an honest, respectful discussion of tough issues. “NPR, get yourself together,” she said. Jon Stewart dedicated a segment of *The Daily Show* to defending the importance of giving people room to speak their minds. At his rally on the national mall, Stewart offered support for me, saying

“The press is our immune system—if we overreact to everything, we actually get sicker—and perhaps eczema.” James Rainey, writing a column in the *Los Angeles Times*, said Schiller and Weiss “treated a moment of candor like it was a capital crime,” while ignoring the rest of what I had to say in opposition to anti-Muslim rhetoric. “I thought this was the sort of candid conversation about race and ethnicity we were supposed to have,” he wrote. “Didn’t President Obama suggest that only open dialogue would chip away hardened misconceptions?”

The *Washington Post* editorial page made a similar point: “In a democracy the media must foster a free and robust political debate, even if such debate may, at times, offend some people.” The *Post* concluded that in debating O’Reilly I “was attempting to do exactly what a responsible commentator should do: speak honestly without being inflammatory.”

I believe I’ve been vindicated in the months since my firing. Ellen Weiss resigned in January 2011 in the wake of the public’s response to my termination and NPR’s investigation into how it was handled. A few months later, in March 2011, Vivian Schiller resigned following a scandal in which a former NPR executive was recorded on video making disparaging remarks about the conservative and Tea Party movements and constituents. I believe the compounding controversies became too much for the NPR board and alerted it to the fact that the institution needed to be reclaimed and reoriented in a manner that would allow it to live up to its virtues and purpose. I hope it does.

As for me, this episode has proven to be an inspiring reminder of what we cherish most in this country—our ability to freely engage one another in honest debate over the issues and ideas that determine our lives. I am a proud American, a registered Democrat, a Christian, a straight male, a black immigrant, a father of three, and a grandfather. This country is interested in, and built on, the insight, opinion, humor, and racial and ethnic diversity—the wide range of human experience—that I and others bring to our work. Closing ourselves off from one another and one another’s honest opinions—especially at this crucial juncture in the nation’s history—is the last thing we should do, encourage, or accept.

My goal in writing this book is to help advance the national conversation beyond the familiar litany of anecdotes of who got in trouble for saying what. I want to look more deeply at the problems of censorship and political correctness in our society and show how they are undermining our ability to have meaningful discussions about important issues. I cast a critical eye toward the role of money and institutions, and the changing nature of the media, in our society. I want to explain how our national discourse fell into such poor health and what we can do to rehabilitate it. You may agree or disagree with my premise or my conclusions or both. What is important is that we have the debate and speak honestly. If people won’t tell one another what they think, we run the risk that bad ideas will never be refuted and many good ideas will never be expressed. When our biggest concern is not whether our words are true but whether our words will result in punishment, then we are giving away our most precious freedom. It is not just our right under the Constitution. It is our duty as citizens of the greatest country in the world.

DEFYING THE PC POLICE

BARTENDERS ARE TOLD to avoid discussing two subjects with drinkers: religion and politics. The reason is pretty obvious. If the bartender offends a customer's religious or political beliefs, the bartender might lose a tip. Even worse, the customer might stop drinking and walk out. The very worst case is if the customer keeps drinking, stays and begins an argument that drags everyone in the place into a fight and ruins the night for the bar. A bunch of drunks arguing and then punching one another is bad news. It's easy to see how the situation could get out of control. Given the potential for conflict and the incentive of getting money in the tip jar, it's in the interest of the bartender to limit talk to sports and celebrity gossip.

I, however, am not a bartender.

My job is to be better informed than the average citizen and tell you directly what a professional analyst and newsman thinks is really going on behind the headlines. That is what I try to do. The best news analysts describe for their audience the motivations, the desires, the inside baseball behind the basics of a daily news story—the who, what, where, when, and why. My views must be based on good reporting about current events, inside and sometimes off-the-record conversations with sources, and my past experiences. The goal is a strong presentation of all those elements in a logical manner that allows the viewer to understand how I am putting puzzling events together and why I'm thinking that way. To do my job at the highest level, I tell audiences what I know, what I think, and, yes, what I feel about people looking for advantage in power struggles, military engagements, and racial and cultural wars (the very thing NPR's Vivian Schiller and Ellen Weiss criticized me for). The only reason to listen to a professional news analyst is to get into the edgy flow of the political debate about the story—a sense of where the story is going, the insights, the ideas, and the spin, as well as the charges of sham, deceit, and corruption. Audiences dialing up news programs in search of in-depth understanding of the news don't want bartenders.

When Schiller, Weiss, and like-minded news executives claim they are upholding high standards of journalism, they are actually forcing all reporters, commentators, and analysts to tell stories from one approved perspective. It is a perspective that amounts to liberal orthodoxy. They are being politically correct.

It begins with the journalists being forced to act like bartenders. They write and speak in such a way that they avoid having anyone complain—especially powerful people with a constituency. Journalists do this because of weak knees among their bosses, the news executives and managers, who live in fear that some power player will call or write and complain that they didn't like what they read, saw, or heard on the news. So the power players' hypocrisy and lies are allowed to go unchallenged.

The power player might be a big bank or a brokerage house on Wall Street claiming to look out for America while making money by closing down American industry and shipping jobs overseas. The powerful might also be an activist, say, Al Sharpton; a politician, such as Sarah Palin; or the White House press secretary. But there are other examples that can be mo-

difficult to see. For example, what do you do with the story of a big-city summer job program for poor kids in which the young people sit around all day doing nothing and simply collect a check at the end of the week? Do you report on the scam or keep a politically correct silence about how the city keeps young people from stirring up trouble during the hot summer months? Here is another example of stories that go untold while journalists prefer to be bartenders. People stand to applaud the tremendous sacrifice of American soldiers even as polls show an overwhelming majority in opposition to any talk about renewing a universal draft or even a two-year national service commitment for young people. Few point out the inconsistency. No one wants to be the skunk at the garden party. No one wants to say the emperor has no clothes. No one wants to lose a tip. Similarly, our representatives in Congress refuse to deal with immigration reform. Yet it is commonplace for them to hire illegal immigrants as babysitters, contractors, and housecleaners (as well as to allow them to pick lettuce or work in factories in their districts or states). And politicians condemn drug dealers while the nation refuses to discuss why the United States is the top market in the world for consumption of illegal drugs.

The acceptance of hypocrisy and outright fabrication in journalism is a threat to the nation. It marks the end of free expression and the flow of information and ideas that are the basis for the informed debate that is essential to democracy. Much of the media plays along. Like baseball players, their heads as big as pumpkins, pretend not to use steroids, as bankers grow rich even as they wreck the economy by giving mortgages to people who can't afford the monthly payments, as pornographic movies outsell Hollywood movies, without a word about the impact on culture, children, and families. Everyone becomes complicit in the silence.

"Politically correct" is a major theme of our times that extends far beyond journalism. Over the past few decades, the rules of bartender etiquette have been applied to the national conversation in bizarre and dangerous ways. The pernicious rule governing all conversation and debate is that even if the person you are talking to is not directly offended by your opinions, someone else within earshot might be. And if the two people are alone, their comments might be repeated or relayed at some later time in some other place and might offend someone somewhere else. In this PC environment, the preferred course of action is to not voice opinions on any controversial topic unless you know you are in the company of people with similar opinions. Always play the bartender. Americans are constantly walking on eggshells under these rules. Like the bartender, they reasonably conclude that it is better to go along to get along. Honest and constructive discussion is not worth the price they might pay if their opinions are deemed politically incorrect.

So how did we get to this point? What happened to the American ideal of being free to speak truth to the powerful? How did we become so damn politically correct that we stopped having honest conversations and debate?

"Political correctness" is one of the most controversial terms in the lexicon of today's public discourse. As politics have become more bitterly polarized in recent years, even the meaning of the term "politically correct" seems to change depending on who is speaking and who is listening. In recent years, the Right and the Left seem to have their own stable of historians, sociologists, and even linguists that they trot out to deliver expertise that supports their views on who is guilty of being politically incorrect.

Both the left wing and the right wing are heavily invested in the fight over what it means

to be “politically correct.” That is because the winner of that fight earns the right to decide the vocabulary of acceptable terms and labels. It allows one side or the other to own the debate, control the airwaves, and stir a base of funders and grassroots fans. This fight is the backdrop to nearly every debate in America today. As for the middle ground, it is shunned as a kind of no-man’s-land.

Every issue is loaded with a set of “with us or against us” terms. Even within groups of like-minded people, we are told what we can say and can’t say. I sometimes feel out of place saying “happy holidays” to my colleagues at Fox because in conservative circles that term can be taken as evidence that you are part of the effort to undermine Christmas. NPR banned the use of the term “pro-life” because the liberal managers felt it put a happy face on the antiabortion message. They were willing to sacrifice the term “pro-choice,” used by supporters of abortion rights, rather than accept “pro-life” (afterward, they would point out that people who support abortion rights aren’t antilife). This same crazy dynamic applies to political fights. When I point out that Israel is an occupying force with settlements outside its borders, I am called an anti-Semite; and as you know, when I confess to a fear of Islamic extremism, I am called an anti-Muslim bigot.

By definition, political correctness means—and here I am quoting the *Oxford English Dictionary*—“the avoidance, often considered as taken to extremes, of forms of expression or action that are perceived to exclude, marginalize, or insult groups of people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against.” Historians have found instances where the word “politically correct” appeared in print as early as the 1700s. The early meaning was much more literal and referred solely to the accuracy of a statement. Offense, real or perceived, did not figure into the definition. For example, “New York has more votes than Rhode Island in the Electoral College” was once known as a “politically correct” statement.

PC began to take on its new, more familiar meaning in the 1960s and 1970s. At first it was a term of self-criticism used by people on the Left, including civil rights activists and leaders of campus groups organizing against the Vietnam War, but especially in the cultural battles being fought over women’s rights by leading feminists. The idea back then was that it was ironic for feminists committed to breaking down old social barriers to put up new walls by insisting that women all had to grow hair on their legs, burn their bras, and give up lipstick. That extreme attitude was condemned by women sympathetic to the movement with the dismissive use of the term “politically correct.” And the idea was a winner because it brought more people to the movement by allowing women to set their own pace for their liberation from male domination.

What also became apparent during the sixties was the importance of the emerging TV news coverage of left-wing social movements and the strategic importance of controlling the language used by reporters. The general idea, which has some basis in psychology and linguistic theory, is that there is a real connection among language, thought, and action. It was a first glimpse of future culture wars as leaders in liberal movements began insisting on a new language in the name of fairness but with the real goal of changing politics and society by establishing a vocabulary of acceptable terms and language for people who cared about equality and justice. Soon it was not acceptable for the television network correspondent covering the civil rights movement to talk about “Negroes” or “Colored people.” The proper reference was to “blacks” and later “African Americans.” The movement for equal rights for

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