

The ties that bind

Media giant headed by Bush cronies promotes Iraq war

By Joseph Kay
17 April 2003

One of the most striking examples of the integration of the American media into the political and military establishment is the series of pro-war rallies recently organized by radio stations associated with the media conglomerate Clear Channel, a company with close ties to the Bush administration.

Philadelphia talk show host Glenn Beck, whose program is syndicated and broadcast nationwide by Clear Channel, has been the principal organizer of the rallies. They have been co-sponsored and supported by a number of the corporation's 1,200 local radio stations and promoted on the corporate website. The rallies, for the most part attracting far fewer participants than the mass antiwar demonstrations of recent weeks, are a forum for promoting national chauvinism and boosting the Bush administration and its policies.

The stations that have sponsored the rallies claim they have been organized locally, and are not "pro-war," but rather "pro-troops" and "non-political." In fact, the rallies promote a definite, and reactionary, political agenda. Their origins lie not in local initiative, but rather in the agenda of Clear Channel's top executives, who are closely linked to the Bush administration.

The chairman and chief executive officer of Clear Channel is L. Lowry Mays, a Texan and long-time contributor to the Republican Party and the Bush family. The other top executives at Clear Channel—Lowry's sons Randall and Mark Mays—are also prominent financial supporters of the Republican Party and Bush, as is Mays' wife, Peggy. The Mays family has ties both to the Texas oil industry and the investment banking sector, in which all three of the executives were formerly employed.

Both Lowry Mays and the vice chairman of Clear Channel's board of directors, Tom Hicks, helped Bush make millions of dollars while he was governor of Texas

in the 1990s. Hicks is chairman and chief executive of the leveraged buyout firm Hicks, Muse, Tate & Furst, which at one point owned the radio conglomerate AMFM Inc., before AMFM was bought out by Clear Channel.

When Bush assumed the office of Texas governor in 1994, he supported the appointment of Hicks to the University of Texas Board of Regents. Within a year of taking office, Bush established the University of Texas Investment Management Company (UTIMCO), which was given unprecedented powers to use the \$13 billion University of Texas endowment fund for private investment and financial speculation. Hicks was placed at the head of UTIMCO, and Lowry Mays was appointed and still serves on UTIMCO's compensation committee.

It is well documented that many of UTIMCO's early investments went to companies—such as the investment company, Carlyle Group—with close ties to the Bush family and the Republican Party. In 1998, Hicks bought the Texas Rangers from a consortium of investors that included George W. Bush, a sale that netted the then-governor and future president \$15 million. [See "How George W. Bush made his millions"]

Over the past several years, Clear Channel has consistently sought to use its dominance of the radio medium to promote the political ideology of the right wing of the Republican Party. In the midterm congressional elections of 2002, two Clear Channel stations in Jackson, Mississippi attracted attention when they decided to pull advertisements run by Democratic candidates that were critical of Congressman Chip Pickering, a Republican.

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, executives at Clear Channel sent a memo to their local stations consisting of a list of songs deemed "questionable" for future use. Included in the list were John Lennon's

“Imagine,” all songs by the popular band Rage Against the Machine, peace songs by Bruce Springsteen and others. More recently, Clear Channel stations have played a central role in the McCarthyite witch-hunt against the country music group, the Dixie Chicks. The radio chain has removed the group’s songs from its play list because a member of the band made public comments critical of Bush.

That Clear Channel is now able to exert such extraordinary power is a consequence of telecommunications deregulation that began in 1996 under the Clinton administration. Prior to the passage of the Telecommunications Act of that year, a single company could own no more than two radio stations in any one market, and no more than 28 stations nationwide.

The 1996 legislation essentially removed these restrictions, opening the way for a massive and rapid consolidation of the radio airwaves. Now a company can own up to eight stations in any city, with no limit on national ownership. Clear Channel, because of the political and financial connections of its owners, was well positioned to take advantage of the opportunity presented. According to an April 2 article in the *Village Voice*, the company has hired the congressional aide who drafted the Telecommunications Act and is represented by the law firm that once employed the current head of the Justice Department’s antitrust division.

Clear Channel’s first big purchases of radio stations took place in 1999, when it bought up Jacor, a Cincinnati-based radio group that owned 206 stations. The purchase nearly doubled Clear Channel’s size to 454 stations, making it the second largest radio company at the time. Only a few months later, the new company bought AMFM Inc.—run by Tom Hicks—for \$23.5 billion, giving it a total of 830 stations and first place in the national radio market.

In subsequent years Clear Channel not only continued to purchase radio stations, but, through a process of vertical integration, managed to become a dominant force in the music industry. In 2000 it purchased the nation’s largest concert venue owner, SFX Entertainment. Clear Channel also owns a radio research company, 36 television stations, a number of radio trade magazines and over 770,000 outdoor billboards. The company has managed entire concert tours by popular artists such as Madonna, ‘N Sync and U2. In 2001, it sold 27 million concert tickets, more than 6 times its nearest competitor and 70 percent of the national total.

The company owns more than 1,200 local radio stations

in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. It dominates the rock and Top 40 formats in many of the country’s largest markets, including Los Angeles (KISS-FM), New York (WKTU) and Boston (WXKS). Stations owned by the conglomerate control 60 percent of the rock radio market nationally. All told, the company has over \$3 billion in annual revenues, a figure unheard of for a radio company only a decade ago.

It should be no surprise that this corporate consolidation has been bound up with the promotion of a reactionary political perspective. The company syndicates numerous right-wing talk shows, including those of Rush Limbaugh and Dr. Laura Schlessinger. It is associated with a number of the most fascistic of the “shock jocks,” including Todd Clem, also known as Buba the Love Sponge. Clem, in addition to being notorious for his sadistic programming (he once castrated a boar live on his program), was crucial in whipping up the slander campaign against Palestinian activist Dr. Sami Al-Arian.

Also associated with Clear Channel was Randy Michaels, who ran Jacor before the company was bought up, and then served for a number of years as the chief of Clear Channel’s radio division. During his time as a shock-jock, Michaels was notorious for his anti-gay, male chauvinist and sexually explicit programming.

Its rapidly expanding monopoly has allowed Clear Channel to determine to a large extent which artists are heard by the public. It can pressure performers to sign up with its concert division since it has the power to remove from its radio play lists those artists who refuse to go along.

Songs of a politically critical character are proscribed. Indeed, in recent weeks rock artists such as the Beastie Boys, Lenny Kravits and REM have turned to the Internet as the only medium where it is possible to circulate antiwar songs to a mass audience.

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