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*From the Los Angeles Times*

## **Rush Limbaugh has his grip on the GOP microphone**

**As Republicans grapple with their fall from power, not all are comfortable with the talk radio king's suggestion that he, by default, has become the politically wounded party's unofficial leader.**

By Faye Fiore and Mark Z. Barabak

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Reporting from San Francisco and Washington — In 1994, Rush Limbaugh was a field marshal in the Republican revolution, rallying troops fervid in their passion, armed with a change agenda and determined to shake Washington upside down.

Fifteen years later, Republicans are politically hobbled and Democrats are fervid in their passion, armed with a change agenda and determined, along with their new president, to shake Washington upside down.

And again there is Limbaugh, master of the talk radio universe, unchanged and unbowed. If anything, his prominence and political import have increased.

Obama is "obviously more frightened of me than he is Mitch McConnell. He's more frightened of me, than he is of, say, John Boehner, which doesn't say much about our party," Limbaugh said on the air, referring to the GOP leaders in the Senate and House, respectively.

That may be cause for personal congratulation (not to mention a bigger audience). But as Republicans grapple with their fall from power and undertake some inevitable soul-searching, not all are comfortable with Limbaugh's suggestion that he has become the party's unofficial leader by default.

"He motivates a core Republican, who is a very important part of the Republican coalition, and we need those guys to be interested and active," said Jan van Lohuizen, a GOP strategist in Washington. "But it's not enough. The Republican Party has shrunk and it needs to be expanding."

While the GOP's star has fallen, Limbaugh's has soared. As party leaders struggle to find their voice, Limbaugh's baritone booms loud and clear three hours a day, five days a week on 600 radio stations across America. If a \$400-million contract and the title of most influential talk radio personality -- as voted by industry pros -- aren't sufficient proof, consider President Obama's decision to pick a fight with him three days into his presidency.

Hosting Republican lawmakers at the White House, Obama called out his nemesis by name. "You can't just listen to Rush Limbaugh and get things done," Obama said, pitching his economic stimulus plan and offering a priceless advertisement of Limbaugh's influence.

The radio host happily responded on his next program. "I am Rush Limbaugh, the man President Obama has instructed you not to listen to!" he crowed, adding to a long list of self-appellations that includes America's Truth Detector; Doctor of Democracy; Most Dangerous Man in America; and All-Knowing, All-Sensing, All-Everything Maha Rushie.

By his own account, he is the most prominent voice of conservative thinking -- "the last man standing" -- now that Republican lawmakers have decided to, in his judgment, bow before the president. Indeed, Limbaugh seems

more energized than ever. "Things just keep flying out of my fertile mind," he said during a recent reckoning of how "Obama the Unifier" had sprinted to the liberal left.

Limbaugh's listening audience is relatively narrow -- it is predominantly white, male and politically conservative -- but highly motivated. Many of the 20 million or so who tune in each week are willing, even eager, to pummel their opponents with letters, phone calls and e-mails to make *their* voices heard.

They can make a difference. Among their achievements, talk radio listeners helped kill President George W. Bush's immigration reform effort. Recent polls suggest that, despite Obama's high approval ratings, public support has declined for his stimulus bill since Limbaugh and his broadcast peers began railing against it.

Limbaugh has plenty of critics, not all of them liberal or Democrats. Some Republicans worry that the 58-year-old AM radio icon, highly effective at rallying disenchanted conservatives, may be turning off the less ideological voters whom Republicans need if they hope to again become a majority party.

"The question is: Are we going to have an all-white-man litmus test under the Republican Party? Or is there room for diverse opinion on environmental issues, on the issue of right to life, the issue of taxes and spending?" said Rich Bond, a GOP strategist and former chairman of the Republican National Committee. "There must be room for dissent in the Republican Party. It must be sincere. It must have comity."

To some, Limbaugh crossed a line when he recently rooted for Obama's downfall. Asked along with other prominent political types to write 400 words on his hopes for the president, Limbaugh said: "I don't need 400 words. I need four: I hope he fails."

"That sort of thing is going to turn off moderate voters. It's going to repulse some people," said David Barker, a political scientist at the University of Pittsburgh and author of "Rushed to Judgment: Talk Radio, Persuasion, and American Political Behavior." "There are a whole lot of people right now who just want to go ahead and give [Obama] his shot, hold back the arrows for a minute. And by immediately pulling out the partisan card, which is what Rush is doing, I think that repels more people than it attracts."

However, Limbaugh is accountable to no one but his faithful fans, his words arcing like spears flung from the Palm Beach, Fla., studio he calls his Southern Command. Enemies rooting for his comeuppance have been disappointed more than once.

Limbaugh acknowledged an addiction to painkillers in 2003 and was arrested three years later. (Prosecutors agreed to drop a charge of prescription fraud if he underwent treatment.) He has been married and divorced three times. Still, nothing seems to shake his standing with core conservatives. (Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas hosted Limbaugh's third wedding in his own home and performed the ceremony.)

Few Republicans dare cross him. "I don't need him crawling up my [backside] any more than the president does," said one GOP strategist and Limbaugh critic, who would speak candidly only if granted anonymity.

Rep. Phil Gingrey (R-Ga.) recently learned the perils when he defended McConnell and Boehner in an interview with Politico, a Washington publication. It's easy for Limbaugh to criticize Democrats, Gingrey said, because he doesn't have to work with them every day. After he spoke, Gingrey's office was flooded with calls and e-mails from angry conservatives. He spent the next day apologizing all over cable television and on Limbaugh's show for making "those stupid comments."

These days, the radio host is so front and center that even his absence gets noticed. (He was on vacation last week and unavailable to comment for this article.) The liberal Huffington Post took note of Limbaugh's absence -- "Just as Rush Limbaugh ascends as the top leader of the Republican Party, it appears he has disappeared" --

and suggested sarcastically that he may have been forcefully removed.

Not likely, though Limbaugh may eventually recede.

Though there is a place for his contentious commentary, "eventually, he will pale in importance next to the collective efforts of Mitch McConnell and John Boehner," Bond said. "He'll pale in comparison to the goods work of the new Republican national chairman, Michael Steele. He'll pale in comparison to the Republicans when they find new talent and new voices ahead of 2012."

Until then, the microphone is his.

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