Bill O’Reilly’s Civil War

The Fox News host thinks America is in dire straits—and what it needs is a history lesson. In this week's Newsweek, he tells Peter J. Boyer about his new book and why he likes Obama.

by Peter Boyer (contributors/peter-boyer.html) | September 18, 2011 10:0 AM EDT

When Bill O’Reilly went to Fox News looking for work in 1996, Roger Ailes, chief of the startup cable network, asked him whether he could avoid getting into fistfights in the hallway. O’Reilly was known in the business as a born broadcaster but one whose career had been defined by pique. As an anchor at a Boston station, he’d once grabbed a disagreeable management consultant by the necktie and dragged him across the newsroom.

At Fox, O’Reilly channeled his rage into the self-designated role of national sentry, with the nightly mission, as he puts it, of “protecting the people” against an assortment of malefactors (who tend to be representatives of the bicoastal “liberal elite”).

Fifteen years into the role, O’Reilly’s success—his primetime cable competitors don’t come close to his ratings—has brought wealth and, as he is happy to assert, the power of influence. “I have more power than anybody other than the president, in the sense that I can get things changed, quickly,” he says. “I don’t have to go through the legislative process; I don’t have to do any of that. I can just bring it to the people, and say, look, this has gotta be dealt with.”

Even so, O’Reilly lately found the nation in such dire straits (“It is chaos ... chaos”) that he believed something more was required of him: he would write a book of history.

He already had a string of books to his credit, mostly derived from his broadcast, The O’Reilly Factor. The most recent, the memoir A Bold Fresh Piece of Humanity, made it to the top of the national bestseller lists. These books, typical of the genre, intend to tax neither author nor reader; if you watch the show, you’ve pretty much read the book.

But his new book, Killing Lincoln (http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0805093079/thedaibea-20/), co-written by the historian Martin Dugard, marks a bold, even fresh, literary turn, signified principally by the fact that Bill O’Reilly is not in it. “In this time when we’re struggling for leadership—and whether you’re a Republican or a Democrat, you know that we are struggling with leadership in
America—we need to go back to a guy like Abraham Lincoln and understand what made him great,” O’Reilly says.

After the taping of his broadcast one recent evening, O’Reilly opined on the current uses of historical narrative. His large corner office on the 17th floor of the News Corp. building in New York, with a broad Sixth Avenue view, is itself a kind of history lesson, its walls filled with rare, signed presidential letters, photographs, and lithographs, hung alongside a homemade Viet Cong banner and the last flag of the Republic of South Vietnam to fly at the American Embassy in Saigon.

Bill O’Reilly, Andrew Hetherington for Newsweek

O’Reilly, now 62, says Americans are ill equipped to make wise decisions (“History in the public-school system now? Forget it”) in choosing their leaders, and that a dose of Lincoln—“the gold standard of leadership”—may help. But he has not gone suddenly egghead. Killing Lincoln (http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0805093079/thedaiba-20/) is not a work of original scholarship or of breakthrough insight; it is meant to be a page-turner, modeled after the thrillers of John Grisham. “That’s the kind of books I like,” he says.

He mostly succeeds in that regard, in the sense that if Grisham wrote a novel about April 1865—a tiny span densely packed with history, from Appomattox to the Lincoln assassination and the hunting
down of John Wilkes Booth—it might well read like *Killing Lincoln* (http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0805093079/thedaiba-20). O’Reilly and Dugard collaborated on the project via email and telephone and wrote it in six months. If it sells, O’Reilly says, he plans a series of such books.

“I have one of the best presidential collections, but I don’t like to give it a lot of publicity,” he said. “I don’t want people breaking into my house.” Security is of grave concern to O’Reilly, who told me that he has 24-hour protection “because people want to kill me.” As we left the News Corp. building and stepped onto Sixth Avenue, a large, genial fellow fell in a few paces behind, escorting us to a small Italian restaurant a couple of blocks away.

Our conversation turned to *The Factor* over dinner. (“I’d like the linguine with white clam sauce,” O’Reilly told the waiter, adding, “Take the clams out of the shell, though. The shell frightens me.”) He had spent part of the day on the telephone with Texas Gov. Rick Perry, trying to talk him into coming on the show. O’Reilly didn’t want a quick satellite hit with Perry, but the full, in-studio O’Reilly experience.

Even from the distance of a remote locale, the O’Reilly experience can be an ordeal, as White House spokesman Jay Carney learned when he volunteered to appear on *The Factor* after the president’s recent jobs speech. After lecturing Carney on the futility of Obama’s plan (“Why continue to build the American Jobs Act around higher taxes that the Republicans aren’t going to vote for?”), O’Reilly turned to a recurring theme—the villainy of General Electric chairman Jeffrey Immelt, who first attracted O’Reilly’s ire as the corporate chief of Fox rival MSNBC and is now the president’s jobs czar:

O’REILLY: Who was sitting—who was sitting with the first lady tonight? Do you know who was sitting with her?

CARNEY: Well, there were a variety of folks.

O’REILLY: Jeffrey Immelt, GE CEO. Jeffrey—you know Jeff, right? He’s a big, tall guy. Jeffrey Immelt?

CARNEY: Sure.

O’REILLY: Guess who moved his airline division to China and his med-tech division from Wisconsin to China? That’s Jeffrey Immelt. “Made in America,” Jay? Why—you, Jay, you should walk and throw him out of that box.

Why would Perry, or any guest, subject himself to that line of inquiry? “Because if they do well, they get huge, huge currency,” O’Reilly says. “I mean, the upside is just enormous.”

A guest whom he dearly covets is former vice president Dick Cheney; he tried, and failed, to book Cheney every week during the eight years he was in office, and is trying still. It seems strange that Cheney would avoid O’Reilly, given that Cheney is promoting his memoir and has appeared all over the airwaves, including on Fox.

“There is a fear factor,” O’Reilly explains. “I’ve watched four or five of his interviews—I mean, it’s all cupcakes, you know? I ask ‘em questions, all right? Obama. I mean, when Obama sits with me, he doesn’t know what the hell’s coming, and it’s exciting. It’s exciting.”

Obama is one of O’Reilly’s favorite guests, having appeared (after much aggressive pursuit, on air and off) on The Factor both as a candidate and as president. “A guy like Obama, he’s got reason to be afraid, and he’s not,” he says. “He’s composed; he likes to joust. There are personalities that do, and there are personalities that don’t.”

When O’Reilly visited the White House for a Super Bowl interview with Obama last winter, the president, knowing O’Reilly’s interest, brought his guest to the Lincoln Bedroom to show him a copy of the Gettysburg Address written in Lincoln’s hand. “I agree with the 70 percent of Americans who like him,” O’Reilly says. “I like him.”

That is not to say he sympathizes with the president. He states flatly that Obama will lose his reelection bid next year, and deservedly so. “I think he tried, but it’s not working,” he says. “And he doesn’t seem to be nimble enough to make that pivot to ‘OK, this didn’t work.’”

O’Reilly’s liberal critics tend to cast him as the biggest bogeyman of the Fox News–Republican conspiracy, but he insistently disclaims ideology—asserting an independence that, in a relative sense, has some merit. Where Sean Hannity’s positions on a given partisan issue can be reliably predicted
("He has a Republican show," O’Reilly says, "and Republicans should have a show"), O’Reilly is not strictly doctrinaire except for a slavish adherence to what might be called the Ideology of Bill: a set of certainties derived from his Roman Catholic upbringing in a working-class home in Levittown, on Long Island, where the values of the 1950s and early ’60s were indelibly imprinted upon him. "Truth be told, I liked my country better pre-Vietnam," he wrote in his memoir. "It was more fun. The Aquarius deal was too confusing."

While a firmly fixed Catholic (of the Baltimore Catechism, fish-on-Fridays school), O’Reilly steers clear of the faith-based conservatism that animates his friend, and former Fox colleague, Glenn Beck. When the two men toured together, O’Reilly says, he’d have to warn Beck to avoid evangelizing. "I think he’s a sincere, good guy. I would say to him, ‘Don’t be Elmer Gantry; don’t do that’—because sometimes he would. He really believes that it’s his mission to spread a certain point of view on spirituality. My mission isn’t to convert you, or even to convince you of anything. It’s to protect you."

The O’Reilly certainty occasionally galls some in the Fox News base, as when he supported TARP and the Obama stimulus plan ("I understood that for the government to basically watch the economy slide down the drain is irresponsible"), and when he recently chided the Tea Party faction of Congress for resisting compromise. "Some people got mad and canceled their membership," he says. "But I can’t be taking that into consideration. I mean, what we ask the viewer is very easy. We don’t ask you to agree with us. We just ask you to listen, and consider. And if you think we’re wrong, we want you to email us, or whatever. I don’t want you to think the way I do. I want you to think the way you do. But just keep an open mind. Blind ideology gets nowhere. And we don’t do that. I think it’s boring."

O’Reilly now intends to get the Republican presidential candidates on the record, whether they are willing or not. He has formed a political unit, featuring his star producer-reporter, Jesse Waters, famous for his ambush interviews. (Waters once chased down Al Gore, a Factor avoider, at a speech venue, shouting, "Do you stand to make any money from cap-and-trade?")

"If they won’t come to us, we’ll go to them," O’Reilly says, with a slightly sinister smile. "They’re not gonna hide from us. Everybody’s gonna be asked questions. The easy way is, come in, good lighting, we’ll give you a doughnut, we’ll have a nice conversation. The hard way is, Waters is standing in your driveway at 7 in the morning. You know? It’s your choice."

Some would call that journalistic thuggery. "I don’t care; I couldn’t care less," O’Reilly says. "My job is to bring information to the people. If they wanna think I’m a thug—they’re probably right."

O’Reilly remains intensely driven by ratings, and he pores over the numbers when they arrive each day at 4. The debut of Beck’s premium Internet enterprise, GBTV—a daily two-hour webcast—provides a new data point, with about 250,000 subscribers so far. By comparison, O’Reilly’s show after the president’s speech—which was rebroadcast, as always, later in the night—reached 5 million viewers.

Still, O’Reilly says that he can imagine the end. He does not fancy the slow fade of the man he displaced in primetime cable, CNN’s Larry King, and vows to leave television when the audience begins to leave him.

"I’m interested in history," he says. "There are projects that, if Killing Lincoln (http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0805093079/thedaibea-20/) is successful, we’ll go into. I’m not addicted to the tube."

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