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IS GLENN BECK THE MOST ANNOYING MAN ON TV?

Or does it only seem that way?

“Here’s a comment that will get me fired,” Glenn Beck says from behind the custom-made standing desk (bad back) that dominates his tiny CNN office in New York. In the flesh, he is thinner, less pink, and softer-spoken than the close-talking guy on television. Still wearing radio casual—bleach-spotted jeans, Adidas sneakers—from the morning’s three-hour broadcast, he forks down a take-out salad while going over material with one of his writers for tonight’s TV show, which will be devoted largely to the mass shooting at Virginia Tech. “This guy makes you have respect for suicide bombers,” Beck says, trying out today’s career-immolating zinger. “At least they’re killing themselves because they believe in something larger.”

“I love that,” says the writer, who stands on the other side of the desk. “And it’s true.”

“Whew,” Beck says. “I can’t wait for the letters we’re going to get.”

On the Glenn Beck spectrum, this is actually pretty tame, but post-Imus, the specter of getting canned for ill-chosen words is much on the minds of everyone in the provoking/offending business. And Beck, with his *Headline News* gig, has more to fear than most. In the past week alone, Al Franken has gone on CNN to call for Beck’s firing, and *Media Matters*, the liberal watchdog Web site that led the Imus pile-on, has short-listed Beck for similar treatment.

Beck is less worried about saying the wrong thing, though, than doing the wrong thing. He’s uncomfortable giving the Virginia killer the glory he sought, and he’s been struggling with whether to show the video manifesto on his program. And here’s where he starts to sound distinctly unlike the smug know-it-all he’s often lumped with—the Rush Limbaughs and Ann Coulters. “I don’t really have an answer on this,” Beck says. His convenient, if convoluted, solution is to show the video tonight, announce he won’t show it again, spend airtime exploring the media’s and his own complicity—and then fret about his compromise. “Am I being holier-than-thou?” he asks.

Beck, 42, is one of the fastest-rising talk-radio stars in recent years (he trails only Limbaugh and Hannity among young listeners), but it’s his crossover to TV that has put him on the left’s hit list. On his nightly hour-long show on *Headline News*, Beck peddles a rightward mix of monologue and interviews while lurching between serious and jokey, maudlin and sarcastic. He tackles everything from Big Issues (Islamic extremism and global warming are two favorites) to *American Idol* to the Apocalypse. (Literally: A recent show devoted the full hour to whether the End of Days might be upon us, a possibility Beck doesn’t rule out.)

The anti-Beck movement began the moment CNN announced his hiring early last year and intensified this past January when ABC brought Beck on as a contributor to *Good Morning America*. Much of the flak has had less to do with him personally than with what media critics and liberal bloggers see as the further tarnishing of once venerable straight-news brands, and especially as CNN’s craven repositioning in response to Fox. (CNN *Headline News* chief Ken Jautz denies that Fox was a factor, but as Beck’s TV producer, Conway Cliff, acknowledges: “He’s a polarizing figure. That’s why we hired him.”) Beck has also made himself a target by bringing to TV some of the same shock-jock opinions he has syndicated to more than 250 radio stations. In the past two years, his most criticized radio sound bites have included trash talk about opportunistic September 11 widows, a description of some Katrina survivors as “scumbags,” and calling Cindy Sheehan a “tragedy pimp.” But the one moment he has been repeatedly pressed to explain occurred on CNN HN when he began an interview with Minnesota representative-elect Keith Ellison, the first Muslim voted into the U.S. Congress, by saying, “Sir, prove to me you are not working with our enemies.” In response, Jon Stewart told *Daily Show* viewers: “Finally, a guy who says what

people who aren't thinking are thinking." Keith Olbermann, who has made Beck a regular winner of his nightly Worst Person in the World title, has said that "there's something about [Beck] that suggests that one night he'll say something that will cost him his career in television."

Meanwhile, Beck's show is the fastest-growing in cable news, with an unmatched increase in viewers since its May 2006 launch. His "very desirable" audience, according to Jautz, is the second-youngest of any show on CNN or CNN HN and exceeds U.S. averages for income and education. And TV and radio are just part of Beck's ambition; he is following the multimedia model of Limbaugh and Hannity—and Oprah, for that matter—with a subscription Web site, a magazine called *Fusion*, a comic-inspirational one-man show, and a second book.

Whether on paper, online, or on-air, Beck sounds, at first, like just the newest right-winger to huff his way into public consciousness. He has the familiar lone-voice-in-the-wilderness-telling-it-like-it-is mix of self-pity and self-congratulation. ("Is it *me*?" he'll ask, his voice wheedling into a falsetto. "Am I *wrong*?") He has the weakness for lowest-common-denominator tropes and straw men (the "hit-and-run" media, political correctness run amok, the "weasels in Washington"). His mind can take a primitive and superstitious turn (as when he gets going about whether the Kyoto Protocol and events in the Middle East presage One World Government and Armageddon).

But his success owes more to how he breaks from tradition. In truth, he is less partisan soldier than channeler of regular-guy id (insofar as someone who wears Etro shirts and Vuitton loafers, knows nothing about sports, and describes Yankee scented candles as "quite possibly the greatest invention ever" qualifies as a regular guy). While he is broadly School of Limbaugh, Beck differs in striking ways. Where Limbaugh speaks of his "talent on loan from God," Beck regularly calls himself an "alcoholic rodeo clown." Where Limbaugh was a sanctimonious fall from grace waiting to happen, Beck wears his dysfunction on his sleeve, reveling in his past addictions and his clinically diagnosed ADD. Where Limbaugh is a lockstep Republican, Beck is a former social liberal turned libertarian conservative, a registered independent, and a devout, tithing Mormon. He has done 180s on contentious issues—from pro-choice to not, from being in favor of pulling the plug on Terry Schiavo to siding with her parents against it, from supporting George W. Bush's handling of Iraq to seeing it as another Vietnam—and is almost as quick to fault politics itself as to go after Democrats.

"Conservatives believe that liberals are communists that want to destroy America," Beck says. "And liberals believe that conservatives are hate-mongering racists that are hiding their sheets. Neither of those is true. If we don't stop believing the worst in each other, we're dead." Which hasn't stopped Beck from describing Hillary Clinton's voice as that of "a stereotypical bitch."

And while Beck's views may have evolved, he's also a staunch defender of consistency. "I find myself with a lot of respect for people like Santorum, who's willing to lose [in Iraq] but stands up for what he believes in, and Murtha, who says, 'Get the hell out and I don't care what the consequences are,'" Beck says. "They *stand* for something." He thinks the Republicans who bellyached about Bill Clinton's lies were guilty of a double standard when they blamed politics for Scooter Libby's perjury conviction. He gives Leonardo DiCaprio more credit on global warming than he does George W. Bush on illegal immigration.

This leads Beck into some strange alliances. Having challenged Al Sharpton to hold rappers to the same standard he did Don Imus, Beck linked arms in early May with the Reverend Al in a protest march through Manhattan. (Sharpton is a regular guest on Beck's show; off-air he calls him "Brother Beck.") And following a recent U.N. report that emissions from livestock farms—i.e., cow farts—contribute more greenhouse gases to the atmosphere than all the cars and trucks in the world, Beck joined forces with PETA, on-air, to slam Al Gore for his "meat footprint."

"I'd love to have a conversation with George Clooney," Beck says, "and I bet you we could come up with more we have in common than we disagree on. We're going to disagree vehemently on a few things, but Darfur? I'm with you, George Clooney."

In that same mano a mano spirit, would he like to break bread with Gore?

Short answer: no. Long answer (truncated from really long answer): "I did enough homework to believe that global-climate change is real. But I don't think Al Gore is an honest broker on this issue. Why aren't you a vegan?"

Why aren't you a vegan? That's a pretty big deal."

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When Glenn Beck was 8 years old, his mother gave him a record called *The Golden Years of Radio*, and from that point on he dreamed of working at Rockefeller Center. Thirty-four years later, he broadcasts from Radio City, part of the Rockefeller complex, and his office and set are packed with totems of a lost America: Jetsons-esque model rockets, vintage microphones, photographs of Bakelite radios. On his shows, he returns again and again to how common sense and shame have died. There's something frozen-in-time about Beck, and it's tempting to see his life as one long attempt to re-create the world as it was—or as he fuzzily recollects it before it blew up in his face.

When he was 11, his parents divorced, and two years later his alcoholic mother committed suicide by drowning herself. "When my mother died," Beck says, shaking his head, "I just turned *dark*."

He threw himself not into school but work. That same year, he won a contest on his hometown radio station that allowed him to deejay for an hour. Within two years, he was doing weekend overnights at KUBE, a Top 40 station in Seattle. Every Friday after school, he made the two-hour bus trip to the station, where between shifts he crashed in a sleeping bag in the conference room. "He took very seriously a job that by definition was an unserious job," station manager Michael O'Shea recalls.

The twelve years after high school were a blur of ambition, booze, weighty family responsibilities, pot, expensive cars, coke, workaholicism, and dickish behavior. He married at 18 ("My sister has said I was looking for a mom; there's probably something to that"), wore dress slacks and ties when his coworkers were wearing T-shirts and jeans, and at 24 was driving a Cadillac and dealing with the birth of his first child, Mary, who came into the world with cerebral palsy.

All the while, he was a radio nomad, chasing bigger paychecks as he moved from Utah to Washington, D.C., to Corpus Christi to Phoenix to Houston to Louisville—mostly as a stunts morning man inciting listeners to mail raw eggs to the station, hiring church-secretary-turned-Playmate Jessica Hahn as his show's "prize bunny," and hijacking the sound system at a rival station's music festival. "I was money-hungry and star-driven," he says. He was also pounding whiskey: "I was a very good functioning alcoholic. I didn't start drinking till five. I'd watch the clock with a glass and a bottle in my hands. I lived for five."

By the time he got to Baltimore, in 1990, he was at the height of both his success and his misery. He grew a ponytail, took home a quarter of a million dollars a year, smarmily said "love you, mean it" as he hung up on callers, and drove a De Lorean. A Baltimore producer he fired named Tom Russell—who is not the Baltimore producer Beck fired for bringing him a ballpoint when he had asked for a Sharpie—recalls the time Beck seized him by his collar, hoisted him nearly off the ground, and said he would eat him "for fucking breakfast."

Two years later, Beck burned out and washed up in Connecticut, deejaying in the 102nd-largest market in America. "My egotism was getting to me," Beck says. "I thought I didn't need to try in order to win. And I didn't try. And I didn't win."

Life at home went to pieces, too. Bill Beck, now 80, says that when he visited his son in the early '90s, "the house was a total mess. There was no food, no clothes ironed. He was crying, bawling like a baby when we left.... We weren't aware until many years later that that was when he was hitting the booze and narcotics pretty heavy." Glenn says he was suicidal.

His life, in his telling, has a mystical, self-dramatizing quality, with discrete, identifiable turning points he calls "promptings." In the mid-'90s, several of them occurred in quick succession. When Beck found himself unable to remember a bedtime story he'd started telling his two daughters while drunk, he knew he had to sober up. He began attending AA meetings in a church basement in Cheshire, Connecticut. One night he dreamed he was walking through a desolate winter landscape, afraid of an intense blackness that loomed ahead, and an old bearded hobo led him around to the other side of the blackness. When he woke up, he painted the scene so he could remember it. Soon after, he found himself saying on-air, "I've done a lot of bad things," and then enumerating

them. A door had opened to a new way of doing radio.

“I looked at Stu [Burguiere, his producer],” Beck says. “I shut off the mike, and I said, ‘Write this day down in your calendar: This is the day Glenn Beck ended his career.’ I really thought this was it, because I was honest about the worst part of me. And now, I think that’s part of what people identify with. Too many people on talk radio are beating their chests on ‘I’ve got the answer.’ I don’t have the answer. I have *some* answers, that I have found, for *me*.”

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In a mirrored room at CNN, on the fifth floor of the Time Warner Center in Manhattan, a makeup artist paints cream under Beck’s eyes while her colleague, idle in a nearby chair, tells Beck that she’s moving to Riverdale, in the Bronx. “At least you’re outside the vaporization zone,” Beck says.

“Really?” says makeup lady number two. “I’m still in New York.”

“You could drop a one-kiloton bomb on Lower Manhattan and be safe in Chelsea,” Beck says.

“Good to know,” the woman says.

Beck: “Did you check the blast radius?”

“No,” she says. “I was more interested in the public-school system.”

“Priorities,” Beck says.

He is kind of joking, kind of isn’t. One of the reasons he lives in Fairfield County, Connecticut, is that it’s out of reach of a nuclear explosion in Manhattan. It can be difficult, at times, to separate Beck’s shtick from his beliefs, but when he talks about World War III, he’s not demagoguing. He is earnestly convinced that America is on the brink of another Holocaust, and the choice is clear: Confront radical Islam or repeat 1930s Europe’s sins of apathy and appeasement.

As taping of the evening’s show gets under way, Beck looks into the camera and says, “Can I say something?” He is relatively subdued in dress this afternoon, in a dark suit and only slightly garish tie, not the purple psychedelic number, or one of the patterned shirts he wears that create moiré patterns on the TV screen and drive the camera crew crazy. “This is going to sound absolutely horrible, and I apologize, America, in advance, but I’m just going to be honest with ya.” (This is Beck’s signature move, the softener he deploys right before he makes a statement that is likely to offend. It’s what Karl Frisch, from Media Matters, calls “the television version of the southern put-down: ‘Look at that fat woman; isn’t she precious?’”) Beck continues, debuting the take on Virginia Tech he’d practiced this afternoon: “Watching this guy and listening to his manifesto, it almost makes you look at Al Qaeda and suicide bombers and kind of have a sick sort of respect for them in comparison. They at least die for their sick, twisted version of God. This guy’s dying for nothing.”

Almost? Kind of? Sick sort of? Twisted version of? With all the qualifiers, it’s Beck Lite today; he sounds almost like one of those p.c. language manglers he loves to hate. No danger of this turning into a Media Matters moment.

Beck has repeatedly expressed regret about the mother of all his Media Matters moments, his challenge to Congressman Keith Ellison. Ellison himself seemed to take the question in good humor, but more than six months later it remains the central indictment of Beck. He is still pained by the experience, though not necessarily for altruistic reasons. “That did so much damage to me,” Beck says. “People who are not familiar with me or the show see that and go, ‘Oh, racist—he just hates people like that.’ So shooting from the hip—and just not phrasing it right and not really getting what I was trying to say across—hurts the message, and that message really was: Muslims need to stand up, because the vast majority of them are good and peace-loving and don’t agree with this stuff. But there are too many stupid people out there that, a series of bad stuff starts to happen, they’re going to say”—here, he switches to a redneck drawl—“*Let’s get the razor wire.*’ When I was on right after September 11, I

had people calling, saying, 'We should round these people up.' What are you, nuts? Did you not learn from World War II and the Japanese? So by saying stuff not carefully, you open yourself up for being painted as this, and it hurts you in the long run."

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It was after he quit drinking that Beck the Seeker was born. He decided to steep himself in the most divergent worldviews imaginable—which led to an uncomfortable moment at the cash register in a New Haven bookstore when he paid for twelve books ranging from the *Encyclical Letters* of Pope John Paul II to Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* to Alan Dershowitz's *The Vanishing American Jew* to...*Mein Kampf*. ("I'm of German descent," Beck says. "I really wanted to know if they didn't know. It led me down a road of Who would I be in that situation?")

With a letter of recommendation from Senator Joe Lieberman—who came on Beck's Connecticut radio show several times and whom Beck voted for—Beck enrolled at Yale as part of a special program for older students, studying theology. He took only one class—the night before the semester began, he and his first wife decided to divorce, and suddenly he had two households to support—but when his professor told him, "Glenn, you belong here," it was an experience that gave the high school grad a new sense of intellectual worth.

By the late '90s, it was increasingly clear to Beck and those around him that being a morning-zoo deejay was an unnatural fit. It was hard to reconcile the guy telling listeners to come on down to Hot Wings for a two-for-one drinks special with the divorcing father who in his small New Haven apartment was drinking O'Doul's, cooking gourmet dinners for friends, reading theology books, and listening to Gregorian chants.

It was during this period that Beck became a social conservative. Previously, he says, "I wasn't just pro-choice, I was pro-everything, until I started taking everything off the table and began looking at things and asking if this view was consistent with that view." He was anti-death penalty; how, he began to ask himself, could he square that with being pro-choice? "It had nothing to do with the baby and everything to do with responsibility," he says. "I was beginning to believe we were living in a world free of consequence. Is it so bad, for nine months, that you have to pay a price for a choice you made? Rape and incest aside."

At the end of each show, Beck started doing a spiritually oriented segment called "The Journey." "He'd tell this tear-jerking story about a one-armed boy who only wanted to eat a bowl of cereal without help," recalls his then sidekick, Vinnie Penn. "Then he'd go into 'Oops, I Did It Again.'" Beck added a second show, a full hour called "The Journey," in which he delved into such light topics as his estrangement from his father, his mother's suicide, and his daughter's cerebral palsy. Once, he called his father on-air and wept as he told him he loved him. When his contract was up for renewal, he didn't re-sign. He wanted to do talk, and a Florida station was willing to give him a shot.

Tampa was where Glenn Beck became *Glenn Beck*, but the first six months, as he struggled to find the right mix, his numbers were terrible ("an unmitigated disaster," says Gabe Hobbs, Beck's Clear Channel overlord). It was Election 2000's hanging-chad debacle that first gave him traction. Beck took ownership of the story and milked it for both comedy and debate, finding a groove that fused "entertainment and enlightenment," as he took to calling his style. Having been near the bottom of the local market (in eighteenth place at one point), he shot to number one in the demo in afternoon drive.

The best thing to happen to Beck's career, though, was September 11. With confused Americans flocking to talk radio to discuss what was going on, Premiere Radio Networks handed Beck a national afternoon show (on a limited number of stations at first) in addition to his local talk show. "I felt he was someone who could share the mood of the country," explains Kraig Kitchin, then president and COO of Premiere. "He had had a lifetime of preparation for this." In January 2002, Beck went into full syndication. Two years later, his show was going out to some 150 stations, he had moved his broadcast base to Philadelphia to be closer to his children, he was commuting to work in a Bentley Continental, and CNN was calling.

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On a Thursday evening, Tania Beck, pretty and quiet and shy (as Glenn Beck's wife would have to be), sits beside her husband on a couch in the living room of their \$4.25 million Connecticut home. The foyer contains three soaring Norman Rockwell posters and an American flag. A built-in bookshelf holds works of prophecy by Nostradamus and the Maya, a book called *Spirits in Rebellion*, and a volume of Mormon doctrine.

Tonight, Beck wears a BRIGHAM YOUNG-IDAHO T-shirt and plays with his children—Cheyenne, 1, and Raphe, a giggly 2-and-a-half-year-old—who are trying to fit plastic letters into an alphabet puzzle.

Beck and his wife adopted Raphe after two wrenching years of failed attempts to conceive. Through prayer Beck began to develop the idea that they were meant to adopt. One day he was talking to Tania, on-air, about a tacky Barbara Walters special on adoption. A woman listening in Texas, impressed with Tania, told her unhappily pregnant daughter to write to Beck. "At the time, we were getting a thousand pieces of mail a day," Beck says. "This e-mail said something like, 'Dear Glenn, I think I'm carrying your child.'"

Raphe puts a blue R in his father's hair. Beck removes it.

"We called," Tania says, "and she was such a sweet girl, such a sweet family."

The doorbell rings—pizza guy—and we move into the kitchen. Beck forgoes the pizza in favor of a bowl of leftover kale soup with sausage. He has gained ten pounds since Easter and is on a no-carb diet for next week's photo shoot for his second book, *An Inconvenient Book*. "I don't want to look like the Republican elephant," he says.

Talk turns to Imus, whom Beck says he never listened to much. "There's no way to defend him on that. It was a horrible, despicable comment."

Nonetheless, Beck is bothered by the way Imus was forced off-air. "I think I should be worried. I think Keith Olbermann should be. Rush should be. Jon Stewart should be. I've never seen anything like it. I think there should be more voices, not fewer. Keith Olbermann made a list of people who need to go. I mean, Joseph McCarthy, I thought you were dead!"

Beck's success does seem to rattle the binary, zero-sum framework of America's cultural politics. No one is accusing him of raising the public discourse in America—he recently wondered on-air how much lamp oil and perfume could be made out of Rosie O'Donnell's "blubber"—but he might just be blocking out a new zone within the discourse that we've got. Rhetorical excesses aside, Beck struggles publicly, if theatrically, with what to think, is open about his flaws, and has changed position on divisive issues.

But the current hostility between left and right doesn't leave room for such nuances. When one of Beck's fiercest liberal critics throws Beck even the mildest compliment—that he shows "glimmers" of having "a heart"—the critic insists on going off the record to do so.

Beck just wishes his critics would give him the benefit of the doubt. "If I read all that stuff about me that's out there and didn't know me or listen to my show, I'd hate me," Beck says, standing in his kitchen's doorway. "I'd think I was the most despicable person on the planet. My God, you can't make mistakes in this country. I think my batting average is pretty good for thirty years. Can't we say, 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean it that way'?"