

Channel-Surfing Safari

The exhortations of Regina Dinwiddy and other talk-radio creatures of the night

BY JOHN YEWELL

It's late on a Friday night. Menacing clouds hang low over Russell, Kansas, reflecting an eerie glow from the town that lights up the plains for miles around. Russell is, of course, the home of Bob Dole, the man with a chip on his crippled shoulder, who wants to be president. I'm beat, and sick of feeding myself on beefjerky, doughnuts and Mountain Dew — my diet since hitting the road from California. I decide to pull off Interstate 70 and get a real meal, or whatever passes for real in the nearest truck stop.

I've been on a channel-surfing safari since hitting the Nye County line in Nevada, and as I pull off the highway I'm in about my 40th hour of talk radio. Nye County is the home of the latest Sagebrush Rebellion. It became famous last year when the local sheriff refused to recognize the authority of the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management over the county's huge tracts of federal land. As you enter Tonopah, the Nye County seat, and witness sheriff's deputies flagging down travelers in a clever speed trap, you realize that local officials object only to those levels of government from which they can't profit directly. On an isolated section of Highway 6, deep

into Nye County, radio stations gradually fade into static oblivion. The sole struggling survivor is an AM station out of North Las Vegas. The host seems bored and all too familiar with his callers, who are the usual cranks, conspiracy theorists, Christian zealots, Clinton-haters, and ranchers, all of whom rail against the government and welfare cheats while paying pennies for grazing or mineral rights. "Welfare" is all a matter of lifestyle, I reckon.

Closer to the Utah state line, I pick up a station carrying the Michael Reagan show: 1-800-468-MIKE. It's Son of Ron, the Gipper's kid from his first marriage to Jane Wyman. For years Mike felt ostracized by Nancy, but now he cheerfully profits on the public's airwaves from Pop's reputation. Mike's got some guy on the phone direct from Little Rock, Arkansas, who says Susar McDougal was about to spill the beans on the Clintons over Whitewater until Bill bought her off.

As Mike careens from subject to subject (Hillary had Vince Foster killed because she has the same morals as our failed public schools that are run by corrupt teachers' unions that are out to destroy Christianity, yadda yadda ...), I begin to notice a pattern. Call it Mike's corollary to the big-lie theory:

that many little lies, undistinguished from one another and repeated often enough, ultimately coalesce into one big lie. Just as I begin to realize how talk radio and the Nevada landscape induce the same mesmeric state, I snap out of my trance and realize I've pulled off the road and am standing at a pay phone, dialing 1-800-468....

It's sunset so I decide to step into the small restaurant on the Utah-Nevada border. Mike's voice still ringing in my ears. As I sit at the counter, the voice is as clear as ever, as if the radio were still on. Then I realize: It's not Mike, but a rancher a few stools down the counter who seems to be *channeling* him.

"Damn Forest Service," says the rancher to the man on the next stool. "Don't do a damn thing without gettin' the approval of the Sierra Club first." The friend nods gravely, his eyes glazed. He seems to be listening to Mike's voice, too.

Later that night, and all the next day, cruising through Utah and Colorado, I ransack the dial as stations fade in and out from across the continent. Michael Medved, sitting in for Rush Limbaugh, makes the startling observation that *men and women are different*, and that this is reason enough to keep women barefoot and pregnant. G. Gordon Liddy, the Watergate bur-

glar, castigates Clinton over Whitewater and calls the 43 percent who voted for Clinton in 1992 "suckers." All are clearly frustrated with Clinton's popularity and almost frantic at realizing that Bob Dole is going to get his butt kicked in November. The best is the 15-year-old fundamentalist Christian being interviewed by a Denver station about his attempt to have a video on evolution banned from his public school. His objective in banning the video, he says, was to keep students like him from "having to question what they believe."

Late that night, as I pull into Russell, I'm about to switch off the radio when I discover the anti-Host. He's complaining about working conditions in a nearby turkey processing plant. The work is arduous, dangerous and ill-paid, he says. People make minimum wage with no hope of advancement.

"Is the American Dream just a joke to them?" he asks. "How many of us would do the work these people do?" He sighs as though the weight of the world hung on the choices we each make at the supermarket. In Newt's world, it's survival of the fittest, and thinking back to that kid in Denver, I'm reminded that the most ardent economic Darwinians are usually religious creationists.



KEN AVIDOR

With the lights of Russell glowing in the night sky, my host throws down the gauntlet at the feet of his talk-show brethren.

"Folks, we in the talk-show business thrive on the outrageous," he says. "But sometimes, I've got to tell you, I get calls that scare the hell out of me. There are a lot of kooks out there."

Not far out of Russell, I discover another one of those kooks, floating in on the 1090 AM band out of Kansas City. Regina Dinwiddie doesn't take calls. Her program, *Rescue*, is

more of a rant show, and she is in fine fettle as she delivers up a skein of Clinton sins: If Clinton is re-elected, there will be tyranny and debauchery and treachery. We won't have freedom of press or religion. Christian radio stations will be shut down. Pro-lifers will be jailed. America will be in a moral free fall. Most important of all, exhorts Dinwiddie: Prepare for the coming race war. Hoard at least a month's worth of food, but do it surreptitiously. Hoarding is illegal, and you *will* be arrested

The host seems bored with his callers, who are the usual cranks, conspiracy theorists, and Christian zealots.

if the authorities find out. Get out of debt. Learn a craft. Finally, prepare yourself spiritually — at least, in a way that leaves room for racial hatred.

As I near Minnesota, I think back to how the 1994 election emboldened these psychotics and their embarrassingly conservative right-wing representatives who now hold Congress by the throat. And yet there is hope in a lonely voice in the middle of the Russell night. It's just that that voice doesn't belong to Bob Dole. ♦