

Commentary

Columnist proud member of Slimed by O'Reilly Club

By Mike Leonard
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Audio: Listen to O'Reilly talk about Leonard

PHILADELPHIA — I didn't win the prestigious Ernie Pyle Lifetime Achievement Award last weekend at the 31st annual conference of the National Society of Newspaper Columnists.

That honor went to Clarence Page of the Chicago Tribune.

I didn't win the next-most revered prize, the Will Rogers Humanitarian Award, which recognizes a columnist whose good works extend beyond the printed page.

That went to Mike Harden of the Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch.

I didn't win anything, actually. No prizes in the "general interest," "humor" or "items" categories. Not even the enigmatic "Jeff Kramer Mystic Memorial Tie," which is presented to the columnist who comes up with the most over-the-top example of intentionally bad writing in a competition staged during the conference.

But I can brag that no one at the annual columnists' conference received more pats on the back, hearty handshakes and "Way to go!" congratulations.

I got slimed by Fox News program host Bill O'Reilly. It was a little like having a skunk tell you that you smell bad. Many of my colleagues expressed envy.

Each year, columnists who attend the conference submit one column for inclusion in a booklet distributed to attendees. Knowing that the bombastic host of "The O'Reilly Factor" would be a speaker at the conference, I mischievously offered up a May column I'd written concerning the Fox News host. Basically, the column was about the blowback from O'Reilly and Fox after Indiana University researchers analyzed more than 100 episodes of "The O'Reilly Factor" and concluded that the program host is a propagandist whose techniques are "heavier" and "less nuanced" than the notorious 1930s radio commentator Father Charles Coughlin.

Frankly, I didn't expect O'Reilly to read the columnists' booklet. But I was thrilled to see that he'd ripped my handiwork out of the bound volume and carried it up to the lectern with him. Roughly 13 minutes into his address and after repeated admonitions that people hate us, O'Reilly asked if Mike Leonard of the Hoosier Times was in the audience. (Stories printed off our Web site indicate they are copyrighted by the Hoosier Times, the parent company of the Bloomington, Bedford and Martinsville papers).

"Sorry, Mike, but you're a dishonest guy in this column," O'Reilly charged.

"Right back at you, Bill," I shouted.

O'Reilly went on to deride the IU study, using the same rhetorical tools the study exposed: name-calling, distortion and inferences that lead his viewers to unfair and imbalanced conclusions.

He claimed, for example, that Fox has a "brain room" where researchers meticulously analyze information for and about Fox News. He said they studied the IU research and reported the following:

"The first few times they submitted the study, Mike, it was rejected. Rejected!" O'Reilly said. "The methodology was faulty, all right?"

He claimed that the research classified the words "conservative," "liberal" and "any kind of political description" as being an insult. "Mike didn't mention that," O'Reilly told the audience.

Finally, O'Reilly attacked me for writing that he'd tried to discredit the study by suggesting it was funded by left-leaning billionaire George Soros. He was correct in pointing out that he had never directly said that. What he did was talk about the study and then say that Soros had given money to IU. Classic propaganda technique. He put the two unrelated subjects together to create the impression that some sort of left-wing link existed there. The Soros money went to a project, in which IU is a partner, helping launch a university in Kyrgyzstan. No outside money from Soros or anyone else went to the O'Reilly study.

The truth of the matter?

"It (the study) was never rejected in any form," co-author Mike Conway said on Monday. An assistant professor of journalism, Conway said the study was first submitted to and accepted by the International Communication Association, the largest and most prestigious communications conference in the world. There, the IU study won the best faculty paper award in the journalism studies division.

Then, Conway and co-authors Kevin Grieves in journalism and Betsi Grabe in telecommunications submitted the story to the academic journal Journalism Studies. It was accepted there as well and published earlier this year. Grabe said the study virtually sailed through what is normally a back-and-forth exchange of recommendations in the peer review process. "They asked for very minor changes, but it was never rejected for methodology. Sometimes these things go through several rounds of editing suggestions. Ours went through one," Grabe said.

O'Reilly's claim that words such as "conservative" and "liberal" were considered name-calling? Another distortion of fact, Conway said. "It has to be with another qualifier," he explained. "If he says liberal or left, that is not considered name-calling. But if it's put with another qualifier, such as the 'Kool-Aid left,' then that is considered name-calling."

The journalism professor said O'Reilly's attack on me and the study was not particularly surprising.

"It is a little exasperating, but this is a typical way for him to operate," Conway said.

In other words, the guy who touts his "No Spin Zone" might better be called the Maytag Man. No one spins the truth better — or worse.

Slimed by O'Reilly. It's an honor to be in the club.

Previous column: O'Reilly study gets bile-filled reply from 'windbag' himself