

TELLING IT LIKE IT IS

Sean Hannity has led Fox News to the No. 1 slot on television with his unflinching conservative beliefs

BY MARSHALL FINE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID YELLEN

It's an early November night backstage at Fox News Channel, as Sean Hannity sits in the makeup chair, a playful scowl on his face as pancake is applied to his cheeks and forehead: "I'm not a makeup guy," he says, enduring the attention.

It's a few days after Halloween, a mention of which brings a quick reaction from Hannity: "I hate that holiday," he says. "It teaches kids to be a liberal—going door to door, with their hand out." He pauses; when others seem to take him seriously, he laughs and says, "That's supposed to be a joke."

He banters with Fox commentator Dana Perino, the former White House press secretary to George W. Bush. And then a special guest walks in: country-music star Brad Paisley, who will prerecord an interview about his new book, *Diary of a Player*, that will air on "Hannity" a couple of weeks later.

The two greet each other as old friends: the Country Music Association entertainer of the year for 2010 and the

conservative firebrand who has helped the Fox News Channel gain a stranglehold on the top of the cable ratings since the network went on the air 15 years ago.

"Hey, did I tell you about my idea for a video, with you and Michael Moore fishing together?" Paisley says.

The two laugh about the unlikely pairing of political polar opposites, and then Hannity heads for the studio to tape another segment ahead of his chat with Paisley. As he waits for his guests to be led to their seats, Hannity turns to the floor director and quips, "What if I have nothing to say?"

Fat chance. Sean Hannity has been talking for a living for most of his adult life, spending the past 15 years as the star of an evening political commentary show on FNC. On any given weekday, beside the hour he devotes to being ringmaster of "Hannity," he also spends three hours on the radio, hosting his highly rated, nationally syndicated talk show.

Which raises the question: Does Sean Hannity ever get tired of the sound of his own voice?

The set of Fox News has been Sean Hannity's home at 9 PM for the last 15 years.





Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, right, and Sean Hannity talk before Gingrich is interviewed following a debate between the GOP presidential candidates in Iowa.

Hannity, a boyish 50-year-old with salt-and-pepper hair and dark brown eyes, laughs at the notion.

“No—and it’s a funny thing,” he says. “The mike goes on and it just comes out. You’re just in this other place. And I’m happy being in that place.”

It’s not a place he ever expected to be: as a brand-name for a certain kind of red-meat political commentary, reaching millions of viewers each night on a cable network that is loved and hated, depending on which end of the political spectrum you sit.

“I never had a grand plan,” Hannity says. “I never thought (FNC president) Roger Ailes would take a chance on a local radio host from Atlanta and put him on TV—and then stick with me when I was not very good. But these things happened.”

Hannity was an itinerant radio personality working as a primetime radio personality in Atlanta, when Ailes discovered him. Ailes, the former Republican media consultant hired by News Corporation’s Rupert Murdoch to create an all-news cable network to challenge CNN, teamed the conservative Hannity with the more liberal Alan Colmes for “Hannity & Colmes,” for a dueling-viewpoint evening talk show.

“Hannity & Colmes” went on the air in the 9PM (ET) slot on FNC on the network’s first day in 1996—and, 15 years later, “Hannity,” minus Colmes (who left to do his own projects in early 2009), still holds down that 9 PM timeslot—and regularly beats the competition.

Going solo, Hannity says, only made sense. While he calls Colmes “a dear friend for whom I have a deep respect,” sharing airtime with him could be frustrating—if only because Hannity always felt he had more to say than time to say it.

“I’m more interested in thoughtful conversation,” he says. “But the two-man format didn’t lend itself to that kind of discussion. This format lends itself to less interruption. As a result, I feel I can listen better.”

With Colmes and now without him, Hannity remains the only political commentator on the Fox News Channel whose tenure with the network matches the network’s lifespan.

“I don’t analyze my longevity—and I don’t analyze my success,”

Hannity says. “I was hired to do, not a good job, but a great job—to get ratings and do a good show every night.

“In the back of my mind every night is the thought that I might be doing my last show, that somebody is going to catch on to the fact that I never should have been hired. The first six months I was on TV, I was terrible.”

William Shine, senior vice president for programming at FNC and former producer of “Hannity & Colmes,” says, “Sean didn’t have a lot of experience when he started. Now he’s a seasoned veteran. The key was that he eventually became comfortable being in a big, bright room with large cameras and people walking around. That’s not a natural environment. An office is a natural environment; a TV studio isn’t.”

The key to Hannity’s appeal, Shine says, is that “he’s very honest with himself and he’s very true to his convictions. He means what he says. He’s a rock-solid conservative.”

Which comes naturally to the Long Island-reared Hannity: “My parents were very conservative,” he says. “When I was growing up, they had a picture of JFK on their dresser—but the Democratic Party left the values of JFK

and moved farther to the left. The greatest influence on me was Ronald Reagan. I followed the news everyday and he inspired me. I cast my first vote for Reagan.”

Indeed, listening to conservative talk radio in the 1970s and 1980s showed Hannity his path in life.

“My vice then was that I was a night owl and I would listen to talk radio,” Hannity says, sitting in his office, decorated with pictures of his two kids, Patrick, 13, and Merri Kelly, 10, and photos of Hannity with celebrities (including one with him, Ailes and former President George W. Bush). “And these guys were the pioneers: Barry Farber, Barry Gray, Bob Grant. I used to call in to their shows. This was during the Iran-Contra hearings and I’d watch those all day—then I’d call in to these radio shows. And I would usually take over the show. I was in the middle of finishing my college degree, but I thought that this was what I wanted to pursue. The first time the light went on and the microphone went live, things just poured out of me.”

Growing up blue-collar, he worked steadily from the time he was old enough to handle the rigors of a newspaper route: “I learned from my parents that you worked hard,” he says. “That was the best thing that ever happened in my life—it contributed to my work ethic. I always had my own money and always knew the value of a dollar.”

He also learned the value of a newspaper. Delivering everything from the *Long Island Press* to the *New York Daily News*, Hannity would start his early-morning route by first sitting down and poring over the paper for the news of the day. It’s a habit that dies hard; these days, after he gets his kids off to school in the morning, he settles in to read that day’s newspapers as part of his preparation for his upcoming radio and TV shows.

“I read the *Daily News*, the *New York Post*—I stopped reading the *New York Times*—the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and then my next stop is the *Drudge Report*,” he says. “I still love the feel of a newspaper.”

In high school, Hannity was a three-sport athlete, standing out in hockey and as a pitcher in baseball—and having enough time, as he puts it, to be “a troublemaker.” What sort of trouble?



With a daily schedule that includes an afternoon radio talk show and his 9 PM slot on the Fox News Channel, Sean Hannity doesn't often have time for relaxing with a cigar. But before he hits the first ball when he's playing golf, he lights up a cigar.

Hannity smiles, then demurs: "My kids will read this," he says. Then, thinking about it, he decides there is one thing he'll mention: cigars. He'd sneak cheap ones in the high school bathroom, he says; these days, his tastes are more mature.

"I don't play golf a lot, but before I ever hit a ball it's time to smoke a cigar," he says. "I like strong cigars—I particularly like Ashtons in the maduro wrapper. I enjoy a Davidoff once in a while, or a Cohiba. Someone gave me a number of Padrón 1964s—that's a pretty strong cigar, but I liked it. And I enjoy the end much more than the beginning."

Hannity owns four humidors, including one in his office at Fox. He keeps two at a friend's house "so my kids don't know. That's where I do a lot of my smoking."

Says Elise Sabbeth, Hannity's assistant, "I've been on many a trip to

the cigar store for him, for cigars and for distilled water for his humidor. That's when he decided to keep me."

Adds Hannity, "Really, I don't have a lot of free time—but on a nice summer night, when we have friends over, I'll have one. I do hide it from my kids because I don't want them to say, someday, 'Dad, why can't I smoke? You do.'"

He laughs, then adds, "Actually, that's total hypocrisy. But then, I hide the rest of my youth from my kids, too."

Such as? Hannity smiles—but he's not saying.

"Put it this way: I give myself a pass for every dumb, stupid thing I did until I was 23 and found Jesus," he says.

And if his kids, at some point in the future, got into similar trouble?

"I'd kill 'em," he says with mock severity, adding, "That's why they're not going to see this story."

His children, in fact, occupy most of the time he has when he's not working. He's built his work schedule so that he has the flexibility to spend time with them in the morning before school—and his radio studio is close enough to his Long Island home that he can be home with them in the afternoons, before he heads for Manhattan to do his TV show each night.

"Most of my spare time is spent shagging tennis balls for my kids or doing something else with them," he says.

Observes Shine, "People would be shocked at what a low-key, boring life Sean leads. If he's not on TV or the radio, he's doing something with his family."

Though he's written three best-selling books of political commentary (the most recent being 2010's *Conservative Victory: Defeating Obama's Radical Agenda*), he's got no plans to write another one.

"I swore I wouldn't do that again because that's time that I have to take away from being with my kids," he says. "I'm proud of all my books—but my bread and butter is broadcasting."

Broadcasting is what ultimately lured him away from college. At various points, Hannity was enrolled at Adelphi University, New York University and Rhode Island Tech, finishing three years of school before putting it aside to pursue his broadcasting dream.

Newt created with his Contract With America, the one we followed during the Reagan revolution—well, better days lie ahead."

Gingrich and the rest of the field of Republican presidential candidates are regulars on Hannity's show. Still, there are some guests he simply can't convince to appear—like former President Bill Clinton.

"He's a very interesting man," Hannity says. "For all my criticisms during the Clinton years, he had so much political experience. When 'Hillary-care' (the Clinton healthcare plan) went down, he was smart enough to say, 'The era of big government is over.'"

He also hasn't been able to tempt President Barack Obama on to his show. Though Obama sat for an interview with Hannity's FNC colleague Bill O'Reilly shortly after his election, Hannity so far has been unable to convince the president to take his questions.

"Obama won't come on," he says. "I think I've been proven right—that he's a failure as a president and in over his head. The indications are out there. If the press worked as hard on that as they did on the whole Herman Cain sexual harassment issue, people would understand that."

"Obama called every Republican out, saying that the Republican plan is for dirty air and dirty water. But that's the desperate propaganda campaign of a president who has failed to deliver on his promises. I think the 2012 election won't even be close; he won't be reelected. But I don't underestimate the Republicans' ability to lose it."

Is that because of what has become an almost-two-year-long presidential campaign? The numerous Republican hopefuls for the presidential nomination, after all, spent as much of 2011 savaging each other as they did their eventual opponent, Obama.

"I like the longer process," Hannity says. "I want to see the candidates tested. Whoever the Republican candidate is will have a billion dollars

thrown at them in negative ads by a desperate White House that can't run on its record. So they're getting a sense of how brutal the campaign is going to be. I would argue that all this is healthy. Every candidate has had troubles. But this is T-ball compared to the 100-mph fastballs in the general campaign.

"I've had calls from people, saying that it's time for me to get behind somebody. Right now I'm undecided—but I'm looking for the most conservative candidate out there."

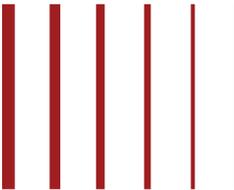
Would Hannity ever consider running for office? FNC's Shine says, "I couldn't imagine Sean within the confines of a House of Representatives or a U.S. Senate."

Hannity, however, says, "I rule nothing out. But, off the top of my head, do I want to run? No. If I can keep doing this and stay energized and happy, I'll be a blessed man."

Hannity pauses, then considers the question of whether he ever gets tired of the sound of his own voice.

"You should see me in private life—I'm a quiet guy," he says. "But no one would believe that." ❖

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"My sister thought I was crazy," Hannity says. "She made me promise to give radio two years and if I didn't make it, then I'd go back to school and become a lawyer. I'm so glad I didn't do that."

"I mean, I made the dean's list; I was studying economics and political science. But I never liked school. I was a good student in college but I never liked it. I study and read more now than I ever did then. I probably compress two years' worth of reading into each year, just with my daily work."

His research convinces him that there's nothing wrong with the economy that a certain brand of free-market capitalism can't cure. He takes his cues about the economy from what he fondly remembers as "the Reagan revolution," and likes the ideas of presidential candidate Newt Gingrich and U.S. Representative Connie Mack (R-Fl).

"The free-market economy works," Hannity says. "Look, I'm a conservative for a reason. Conservatives believe in the simple but deeply profound principle that government is too big and bloated; it's out of control. One path I endorse is the one Connie Mack of Florida proposed: the Mack Penny Plan. We would freeze government spending at 2011 levels and then cut 1 percent per year for six years. And then, if we kept spending at 18 percent of GDP, we would have a balanced budget in eight years. If we tried that—if we followed the model