



Transcript from Politically Incorrect, 1-15-2002

Al Franken Linda Ellerbee William McGowan Cynthia Garret

Bill: Good evening. Welcome to "Politically Incorrect." Let me tell you who is on the panel tonight. Over here, of course, Linda Ellerbee, renowned journalist, now the executive producer of a new original special called "When I was a Girl." It is on the Women's Entertainment Network this March. Welcome back to our show. William McGowan, your book we're going to be talking about in a minute, "Coloring the News: How Crusading for Diversity has Corrupted American Journalism." Anxious to get into that. Okay. Cynthia Garret, lovely to have you here, as always. You're a actress and author and the National Vice President and spokesperson for the muscular dystrophy association. Good for you. And Al Franken, of course, had his own decade in the '80s. But around this show, it's always the Al Franken decade. Please give a hand to this panel.

[Applause]

Let's talk about this book. I've found great resonance in this, because, as someone who said for many years that political correctness is all about elevating sensitivity over truth, I think you have hit a nerve here. You basically say -- I'll let you say it. But, basically, that we don't have truth anymore in journalism because they are so interested in being diverse, multicultural. And, as you say, editors are evaluated by how many minority faces are in photographs, voices from the minorities quoted in the news stories. Far from achieving diversity, it's really constricting diversity of opinions, right?

William: What I say in "Coloring the News" is the good news about diversity -- the diversity effort -- is that it has opened up doors to minority journalists, who, historically, have been excluded from

the news business.

The bad news is that it's encouraged hypersensitivity, political correctness. It's actually narrowed the scope of acceptable opinion and perspective that gets voiced and cited in news coverage. And this has really deprived the debate of controversial diversity issues like race, immigration, gay rights, feminism and affirmative action of the candor and completeness that we need at a really, really important, crux moment in American demographic history.

Bill: Yeah, that was -- the point you mentioned -- gay rights -- I said here one night on the show, because we were talking about, of course, the Muslim situation with the war and everything. And I mentioned that -- you know, President Bush said it's not a war against Islam. But to pretend that terrorism had nothing to do with religion was like when we pretended that AIDS had nothing to do with homosexuality.

William: Interesting parallel.

Bill: It is. And I got a lot of hate mail for it. But --

[Laughter]

But I'm used to that. And I thought it was an apt analogy. Because, again, it's a situation where pretending is only going to make the problem worse. AIDS was never, never in -- in this country, anyway -- yes, in Africa, but not in this country. It never exploded in the heterosexual community the way it did in the homosexuality community. But if you even implied that it wasn't an equal opportunity killer, somehow you were a homophobe. And I think the media fed into that quite a bit.

William: Well, this is a point that I make in "Coloring the News" in the last chapter is that often there are unintended consequences to this diversity agenda that actually hurt liberal causes and liberal constitute

groups. **Bill:** Nice talking to you, Bill. [Laughter] **Cynthia:** Well, you know -- **Bill:** Oh, good, other people that want to speak.

Cynthia: Yeah, I think it's just because, unfortunately, what does happen is, when issues of color and race come up, people get reticent to speak because you're so scrutinized by what comes out of your mouth. I, being a person of color, do happen to think that, you know, it's almost like

affirmative action in the media, basically. Okay, so do we hire people based upon color because we need to promote diversity? Well, I'd like to think that if -- if all things were equal up to the finishing line, then you have a pool of people black, white, red, yellow, green, purple and brown to choose from. And then, you know, our media would sort of reflect this qualified applicant pool. Unfortunately, all things are not equal up to the finish line. So where I --

Bill: Yeah. And that needs to be redressed. But you know what? When it comes to journalism, we're talking about the place where the truth gets to the people.

Cynthia: Oh, I agree. **Bill:** And that is one place where I think affirmative action heroes must be.

Linda: If we're going to talk about truth here, I would like to point out -- because I noticed you used the word "feminism" and other minorities. At 51%, we're not a minority.

Bill: Yeah, but -- [Scattered applause]

That's funny you say that, because when it comes time to be wanting to be treated like one with special favors, then you're a minority.

William: Touche. Good point.

Linda: There's no question that I was hired into this business because I was a woman. I was part of that first group in the early '70s that got in. And there's no question there was political pressure got us in the door. It was not --

it was not that the networks wanted us. It wasn't that the federal government wanted us. It was the civil rights movement and the women's movement. I would like to think that I've stuck around these 30 years because I've learned a verb or two.

Bill: Right. **Linda:** But there's not --

I mean, that is why we got in.

Cynthia: Well, listen, my mother -- my mother is at home to this day. And you can't tell my mom that I was not hired at NBC to host "Later" because Kweisi Mfume was all over NBC. I mean, I started in the week that they had diversity day and was invited to speak with Maria Shriver and Jay

Leno. Arguably, I was in over my head. 'Thank God -- and I'd like to think, like Linda said, I have learned a verb or two, and so I was qualified to be there. But my mom certainly did feel like, "Oh, well, you know, this smacks of them needing somebody of color."

Bill: Did you call him crazy Mfume?

Al: Do you believe that there are -- I know this is about content and the approach to news, do you believe that there are anchor people and reporters that are on who are not qualified and they're hired because of color?

William: I do know that inside newsrooms there's a great deal of strife and division over this issue of whether certain minority journalists are getting hired and promoted who are less qualified than their white colleagues.

Al: Is the answer yes or no?

William: Actually, editors have admitted it. I mean, there've been memos circulated in "The Washington Post,"

William: Touche. Good point.

Linda: There's no question that I was hired into this business because I was a woman. I was part of that first group in the early '70s that got in. And there's no question there was political pressure got us in the door. It was not --

it was not that the networks wanted us. It wasn't that the federal government wanted us. It was the civil rights movement and the women's movement. I would like to think that I've stuck around these 30 years because I've learned a verb or two.

Bill: Right. **Linda:** But there's not --

I mean, that is why we got in.

Cynthia: Well, listen, my mother -- my mother is at home to this day. And you can't tell my mom that I was not hired at NBC to host "Later" because Kweisi Mfume was all over NBC. I mean, I started in the week that they had diversity day and was invited to speak with Maria Shriver and Jay Leno. Arguably, I was in over my head. 'Thank God -- and I'd like to think, like Linda said, I have learned a verb or two, and so I was qualified to be there. But my mom certainly did feel like, "Oh,

well, you know, this smacks of them needing somebody of color."

Bill: Did you call him crazy Mfume?

Al: Do you believe that there are -- I know this is about content and the approach to news, do you believe that there are anchor people and reporters that are on who are not qualified and they're hired because of color?

William: I do know that inside newsrooms there's a great deal of strife and division over this issue of whether certain minority journalists are getting hired and promoted who are less qualified than their white colleagues.

Al: Is the answer yes or no?

William: Actually, editors have admitted it. I mean, there've been memos circulated in "The Washington Post,"

There are a host of other problems. I agree with you.

Linda: I'd just like to go back to the days when it was all white, blue-eyed men running it. And all the truth -- you know, all the reporting was factual and right.

Al: White, brown-eyed men. [Laughter]

Linda: And they never made any mistakes.

William: It's not to say that this effort isn't historically overdue and worthwhile. But what good is it if it creates a whole other set of problems --

Bill: Yeah, I don't think you're saying -- **William:** --

that weren't being covered?

Bill: -- higher minority is women. What you're saying is that when they report the news with a sense of advocacy as opposed to just reporting what happened and the truth. I mean, that is what they're supposed to be -- our conduit to the truth.

Al: When you were talking about, like, counting black faces on -- and white faces on camera and stuff like that, when they're doing this, this stuff is actually -- there's reasons for that, believe it or

not. It used to be that when covering poor -- welfare people, they would show black people. But when they would show poor people who were unemployed, it would be white steel workers. And so there's reasons for -- like keeping an eye on that stuff. I'm not saying they do it perfectly. And I'm not saying that they don't do it wrong. But there is a reason for that. When you raise it, it sounds like they're doing it for the wrong reasons.

William: These are important discussions to have in the context of a newsroom. But when you see instances where, for instance, a picture in "The

Washington Post" gets spiked because of black women dancing, because it suggests some kind of, you know, partying spirit.

Al: Especially when it's a new story on black women dancing. **William:** You know, some of these --
[Laughter] **Al:** It seems kind of stupid.

Bill: All right, I gotta catch up. I'm sorry. We've got a commercial we've got to take. We'll be right back.

[Applause]

Bill: Well, Attorney General John Ashcroft announced today that the American Taliban John Walker has been charged with conspiracy to kill U.S. nationals in Afghanistan. They're asking for life imprisonment for him.

Which is ironic, because now Walker gets to be the virgin for 72 other guys.

[Laughter]

Bill: Congressional investigators announced today an Enron investigator has warned in an e-mail to the CEO, Kenneth Lay, about "funny accounting practices that would implode in a wave of accounting scandals." And she went on to say that, pretty soon, a share of Enron stock will not be worth the piece of paper we're shredding.

[Laughter]

[Applause]

Okay, so there it is. Let's talk about Enron because -- now, I believe the Bush administration when

they say they didn't do what the people who called them from Enron when they asked for help do. So they feel like they're in the clear -- technically.

[Laughter]

If that's the truth, how come the truth seems to be dribbling out little by little, and how come Bush plainly lied about his relationship? If he has nothing to hide, why did he lie about -- "Ken Lay not really a friend of mine.

He supported governor Richards back in -- " I mean, these are easy lies to find out. I don't understand --

Cynthia: Yeah, but as far as lying and American presidents go in recent history, there are big shoes to be filled. So --

[Laughter] I think the lying is just becoming out of control.

Bill: But you'd think they would learn. **Al:** You'd think they would.

Bill: I mean, you know, remember, it wasn't the sex, it was the lying about the sex.

Cynthia: Yeah, right.

[Laughter]

I think --

Bill: It wasn't the sex. We love sex.

Cynthia: I think it's fair to say that somebody's gonna take a fall for this, and it's not gonna be George Bush.

[Light laughter]

Al: What I thought -- This sort of -- I think the reason they're so worried about it, whether or not they did anything illegal in the Bush administration, which I kind of doubt, is that it just sort of resonates with the whole -- They're for the fat cats. Cheney, when he was putting his energy policy together, met I guess six times with Enron, 'cause their advice, you know, was so good.

[Laughter]

They're so smart at Enron. And he didn't meet with any environmentalists, 'cause their advice, of course, wouldn't be as smart.

Bill: Yeah. **Al:** As the Enron people.

And -- [Laughter]

And so, you know, it's just -- This is who they're for. This is who they're -- This is who they like.

And of course, the whole thing resonates also with Ken Lay, who, even though Bush says they weren't that close, does call -- He calls him Kenny Boy.

Bill: Kenny Boy. **Al:** Kenny Boy.

Kenny boy got away with over \$100 million. **Bill:** Yes.

Linda: It would be hard to think that they're not at all close when you consider that Enron is, I believe, the single largest employer in Houston and one of the largest in Texas, and at the time he was governor.

Al: The largest contributor to George W. Bush. **Linda:** To his campaign.

Bill: And the entire Houston district attorney's office had to recuse themselves. The entire office -- 100 people, apparently --

all had their fingers so much in the pie that they had to go, "We can't judge this thing." And that is the real scandal, isn't it? It's that campaign finance thing that we keep talking about for years and years, and nothing ever happens.

William: What's that --

Bill: What does it have to do with it? Nobody in Washington can investigate these people because they all took their money already.

William: I was gonna say, what's that old song in Washington that the truly scandalous things are not the illegal things, it's the things that are legal.

Bill: That's right.

William: Which is the lobbying system --

Bill: That's right.

William: -- in Washington.

Al: Which is why you have to make them illegal. **Bill:** And you know -- [Light laughter] **William:** Then it won't be scandalous.

Bill: Yeah. I mean, the truth is, when it comes to oil, what's good for Saudi Arabia, our friend --

[Laughter] **Cynthia:** As they so often say.

Bill: -- is also good for Exxon. And what's good for Exxon is good for an administration that gets a lot of its campaign money from oil companies. So we're in this strange position where we're fighting, you know --

Al: Well, thank God this Bush energy policy is gonna be encouraging conservation and use of --

[Light laughter] **Bill:** I know.

Al: And increase cafe standards in all the -- You know, this is why they're a little -- They're sweaty about it.

Bill: Yes, and they see the writing on the wall. I mean, I think if there's one good thing that's gonna come from Bin Laden-ism is that I think maybe we're gonna wake up and realize, "You

know, we love oil, but we hate the people who are killing us more. And maybe we shouldn't be in business with Arabs that hate us, even when they pretend they don't." [Applause]

And --

Al: When the second plane hit, I said, "Fine. Drill in the anwar." But also -- hybrid cars.

Bill: I got one.

Al: You know? Yeah, I mean --

Bill: You got one?

Al: I don't have a car. I don't own a car.

Bill: You don't own a car? **Al:** I live in New York City. **Bill:** Oh, that's right. [Applause]

Well, take a hybrid cab. [Light laughter]

Al: I go, "Taxi?" "Sorry, you're not hybrid." "Taxi?" "Sorry, you're not - - "

Cynthia: I just don't understand why this whole situation comes up in the same sentence, really, as Clinton and Whitewater. Because arguably, Whitewater always felt to me like Ma and Pa Kettle got together to do a deal, and it went bad.

Bill: It was. **Cynthia:** Enron has wiped people out.

And so --

Bill: I don't -- Right, I mean, people -- I don't understand this.

People do not seem to ever get agitated about huge corporations stealing billions and billions of dollars. It's the Mexican immigrants taking the car radio -- That's got to be stopped.

[Laughter]

William: But wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute, Bill.

Bill: Why can't people see the big picture?

William: This easy parallel between Whitewater and Enron I find a little troubling.

Cynthia: It's not an easy parallel. It's a ridiculous parallel.

William: You know, Laura Bush was not a business partner with the likes of a James McDougal character. You didn't have them emptying the U.S. attorney's offices across the country, purging them of people who might turn around and prosecute them someday.

You didn't have --

Al: Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa -- What was that? You didn't have them what?

William: When Clinton first came into office when he purged all the U.S. attorney's offices of people who may have been hostile to him -- And it was just wiped out.

Al: Where -- **William:** It was all over the country.

Sure, sure. **Bill:** I never read that, either.

Linda: You can't trust that. It's reported by minorities.

Cynthia: I was just gonna say, I want to know what black person reported that story.

Bill: -- Clinton now, he's always perjuring or purging. One or the other.

Al: And thank God that stopped him from being looked into.

William: -- And put cronies in the White House council office like Web Hubbell. You know, you had -- There are tremendous differences. You also don't have an intern -- You know, a Zaftig intern showing up with knee pads.

Bill: Oh, you know what? I was gonna read the rest of your book, but now I'm not going to. We gotta take a break. We'll be back.