

# Alan Colmes



## Liberal With a Conscience

*BrotherWatch™* proudly presents this award to

*Alan Colmes*

*for following his conscience with a gracious heart and an open mind.*

*– February 2000*

## Introduction

In the midst of the various Clinton scandals and within the political climate of character assassination and vilification of ideological foes, Alan Colmes offered a courageous voice of good-humored, reasoned debate. Colmes, a liberal with a conscience, exercises intellectual integrity in objectively examining even those events and issues which reflect badly on the Left, while simultaneously holding the Right accountable in a gracious, though firm, manner.

Alan Colmes, veteran radio and television talk show host, is “described as a professional dragon slayer” whom listeners “love to hate.” Yet, Colmes commands respect and commends courtesy while confronting controversy. Carefully consider these views of a liberal with a conscience:

## Interview

**BW:** What do you consider the “*defining moment*” of your generation?

**AC:** The “defining moment” of my generation was Watergate. It confirmed what many in the counter-culture had already suspected, that government could not be trusted. We see that being played out today, with the parties reversed: The conservatives are the ones who don’t trust government, and the actions of this administration haven’t helped. Watergate also ushered in a new era in journalism, where the secret pact between reporters and reportees was no longer in effect. So, when Bill Clinton did the same thing that JFK did, reporters would no longer stay silent.

**BW:** What event or experience has *most* shaped your life, and why?

**AC:** My life continues to be shaped by my ongoing interaction with viewers and listeners, and I marvel at the level of hate some people have for anyone with a different political point of view. I got an e-mail today that actually said “Because of our political differences, I wish you ill will.” That person had a sudden change of heart, though, and wrote me to apologize. In today’s atmosphere, we cannot even agree to disagree, it seems, and that makes it virtually impossible to have a productive dialogue, too often, about our differences.

**BW:** How do we elevate political discourse and transcend our differences, how do we eliminate this friend-or-foe and us-vs.-them mindset, how do we eradicate this idea that people of other persuasions are somehow automatically and inherently flawed, and how do we instead inculcate the realization that we are all human beings created in the image of God and deserving of respect and consideration – if for no other reason than that we are all God’s children?

**AC:** I believe we have to accept that even our political foes have the best interests of the country at heart, and our differences aren’t personal, but about how to get to where we all wish to be. But when we tear down the character of people with whom we disagree just because of political differences we have no ability to maintain a dialogue that can help further the process.

**BW:** Please describe yourself (sound-bite label), your worldview and the core components of that worldview.

**AC:** I’m a Caucasian male, 6’, oh ... you mean politically. Well, even though I hate labels, I often refer to myself as a liberal, because the world seems to demand that you identify yourself in some way for marketing purposes. (You did say “sound-bite label,” didn’t you?) A better word might be progressive, but I believe to accomplish goals you must work within the current political framework. I believe in freedom, but it sounds different coming from a liberal than from a

conservative, because I don't have an automatic disdain or fear of government. Conservatives say they want less government, but that's not true when it comes to a woman's right to choose, or having government getting involved with labeling movies, TV shows, and acting as guardians of our morality. I want government out of those areas, but to be functional in ways that provides a safety net for the least fortunate, and basic services (including health care) for all of us.

**BW:** How do you perceive the American political spectrum and where do you fall within that spectrum?

**AC:** I don't like the way the spectrum is defined. It should be the Liberal Party versus the Conservative party, not the Democrats versus the Republicans. And I think the Libertarians bring much to the table, but they have yet to catch fire as a viable third party. Yet they are the most consistent philosophically. But if we are talking in terms of a left-right continuum, I am firmly on the left, and I let my viewers (and detractors) debate how far left that actually is. I don't wake up each day and ask myself what the liberal view of an issue is, I ask myself what my view of an issue is, and it usually, but not always, falls within a certain zone on that spectrum.

**BW:** What are your criteria (Rosetta Stone, moral compass, foundational principles) for determining your "view of an issue" in order to exercise right judgment on the matter?

**AC:** It's a matter of balancing what's best for individual freedom with what is best for society. As such, it's a judgment call, and often goes to the heart of where liberals and conservatives part company.

**BW:** What do you see as the great divide between Left and Right and how can that chasm be bridged?

**AC:** The great divide between left and right, where it is, and how wide it is, is defined by who is engaging in the argument. There are the Clinton haters who are so viscous in their contempt for the President that it has extended to anyone who has a kind word to say about him. It is not respectable, to these people, to have a view that although the President did wrong, it didn't warrant impeachment. And there is no reasoning with them. I have received so much hate mail in the past year that it could fill volumes. One read, "Every day I read the obituary column and pray your name is in it." It is fair to argue policy and have respectful disagreements, but it too often becomes personal, and the election of Bill Clinton seems to have created quite a chasm. The only thing that will bridge that gap will be time and, hopefully, the rise of political leaders who don't do things like call the President a "scum bag," as Congressman Dan Burton did.

**BW:** *Why* do "Clinton haters" hate Clinton and what is the *liberal* counterpart?

**AC:** Clinton epitomizes everything they dislike: a child of the '60's, an anti-war protester, a brilliant politician who exudes tremendous personal charm who can outthink his opposition, and who has a wonderful time doing it.

If only life were so symmetrical to always give us pure counterparts. But liberals do disdain, with the kind of anti-Clinton passion conservatives vent, far-right ideologues who seem very unsympathetic to views unlike their own. Jesse Helms comes to mind, unhelped by his own belligerent rhetoric toward liberals. And, of course, Ken Starr has been a target for those of us who think we are more threatened by an over-reaching independent prosecutor than an oversexed president.

**BW:** Is there a correlation between character, conscience and courage?

**AC:** What a good question! Certainly character and conscience are related. If you have a conscience, you must have some degree of character if you are going to act on your good conscience. Without

conscience we are amoral. And courage? Well, some would say that Bill Clinton lacked character, even though I don't agree with that, but even if you take that premise, you have to acknowledge that the President showed courage in standing up to his political enemies and fighting for his right to remain in office in the face of tremendous pressure and vehement opposition. I'm sure that readers here will take great issue with that statement, and I can already hear the negative e-mail piling in.

**BW:** On what issues are you in *agreement* with the Right and where do you *differ* with the Left?

**AC:** I think the right is correct to point out that set-asides and quotas don't move us toward a color-blind society, but they are not the same thing as affirmative action, which is an outreach program. I worry that a progressive tax punishes those who are financially successful, which is why I like a flatter tax and/or a sales tax. But then I worry that we won't be able to pay the bills if we don't have enough money coming into the treasury. I am against a special category of crimes called "hate crimes," because all crimes are hate crimes, and when you create harsher punishments for a special category you are placing disparate values on human life based on race and sexual orientation.

**BW:** Ideological *purists* demand ideological *conformity*. They view moderates as neither "*real* Republicans" (McCain, Shays) nor "*true* Democrats" (Traficant). How does this contribute to the no-holds-barred us-vs.-them mentality prevalent in American politics and what other consequences arise from ideological purity? Also, whom do you see as the most conspicuous purists?

**AC:** Politicians like Shays, McCain and Traficant anger all sides because they don't fit the traditional left/right paradigm, although I would say that other than campaign finance reform, McCain is a true conservative, not the pro-choice semi-liberal as his opponents are trying to paint him. These are independent thinkers who look at each issue without party label, and often have to pay the political price for such independent thinking. As I've said, the Libertarians are more ideologically pure than either the Republicans or Democrats. "Ideologically pure" to one person might be an "extremist" to someone else.

**BW:** How do Orwell's *1984* and *Animal Farm* apply in contemporary America?

**AC:** The quote in my high school yearbook was, "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." There is no such thing as true equality, and no law or executive action can guarantee a level playing field, but good government should strive to do all it can to create such an atmosphere, including knowing when to do nothing. When I think of *1984* I think of the Internet and how it is raising privacy concerns. I hope that privacy can be protected, on the one hand, and government will stay out of the Internet, on the other hand. The Internet may be the truest form of democracy ever created, and created by accident, at that.

**BW:** How corrupting *is* power and how corrupted have the power centers of America – DC politics, NY media, LA entertainment, Wall Street commerce – *become*?

**AC:** This is why John McCain is connecting. He represents the idea that power corrupts, and a sincere reformer who is willing to stand up to the power structure resonates. The Republicans complain about Clinton's financing irregularities but refused to change the system when they gained congressional power. The congressmen who ran on the idea of term limits, like George Nethercutt of Washington who defeated Tom Foley on that very issue, now say they don't want term limits. What a surprise. I don't know that the New York or LA media centers are corrupt. The media wants to attract an audience, get ratings and make money. That's what it's about. It's not a matter of being left or right. The idea of a "liberal media bias" is a right-wing invention that allows

conservatives to play the victims of the big bad liberals. But when conservatives had the chance, marketed the Contract with America and used that as a wedge to gain power, we saw what happened, didn't we?

**BW:** How did the New York and Los Angeles media power centers escape corruption?

**AC:** I don't view the media centers as corrupt. The media is often referred to as the "liberal media," but it's neither liberal nor conservative. The media is neither pro-left, nor pro-right, but pro-media. The media is a capitalistic venture looking to make money and doing whatever is necessary, within bounds, to keep profit margins up. The media IS powerful, but to make a generalization that the media is "corrupt" doesn't make sense. Corrupt how? Because it looks to make money? Because it isn't always as high minded as purists would like it to be? I don't view it as corrupt.

**BW:** If you had to choose one virtue or value as preeminent, which would it be and why?

**AC:** That would be to treat others as you wish to be treated, the golden rule. It is the basis of most major religions and can lead only to good.

**BW:** What are the most important *lessons* you've learned in life and what would you like your *legacy* to be?

**AC:** Keep your commitments, show up on time, bring coffee (can be decaf), say thank you, be kind, even when you feel you're under attack, admit when you've screwed up, and know that there is no limit to one's capacity to love, and to forgive.

**BW:** What is the relationship between love and forgiveness and how do you exercise both when it seems impossible to do either?

**AC:** Love and forgiveness are intertwined. How can you love, but not forgive? If you forgive, that is an act of love. They work hand in hand.

**BW:** How do you *balance* justice and mercy and what are your *criteria* for determining whether to extend forgiveness or seek justice?

**AC:** These are questions best suited to a theologian or a judge. I'm only a talk show host, and I only have to mete out justice and mercy to guests and callers. But proper justice takes mercy into account, and one can seek justice and extend forgiveness concurrently. Justice being done doesn't negate forgiveness. To forgive is not to forget.

**BW:** What do you think of such stereotypes as "hard-hearted, mean-spirited conservative" and "bleeding-heart, soft-headed liberal?"

**AC:** Of course, these are unfair as stereotypes. But to go after Bill Clinton for lying in a civil trial about a sexual matter does come off as "hard-hearted" and "mean-spirited." And the Republicans have paid a political price last election and may do so again. Conservatives try to conserve, or keep things the way they are, and so they get angry with liberals advancing a progressive agenda. Liberals aren't as angry, although they often should be, and so they come off as "bleeding heart." But I don't believe you're "soft-headed" just because you are not fixed in your ways and are open to change and progress. And all hearts should bleed. After all, isn't the purpose of a heart to pump blood?

**BW:** How do you *define* "compassion" and how do you *express* it, personally and professionally?

**AC:** Compassion is the ability to put yourself in another's shoes. It comes up constantly, being able to empathize, work out issues, see the other person's point of view in both personal and professional situations. If I'm debating a right wing nut, the best thing I can do is put myself in his or her place before I mercilessly slam that person into the ground. A compassionate government isn't deaf to the needs of the less fortunate and doesn't judge people based on their neediness.

**BW:** What was the most *difficult* decision you've ever had to make and/or have you experienced a "crisis of faith" (religious/ideological) and how was it resolved?

**AC:** I've had to make decisions about what was best for my career, which wasn't always the best thing for my pocket book, and so I've taken huge steps backwards financially at times to do the work I love to do. While I have not had a personal "crisis of faith," I certainly had ideological crises when the Lewinsky crisis was at full throttle, and I felt Clinton had been a good president but wondered how I could support him continuing in office when he clearly besmirched the office of the presidency. Working it through, I separated his personal behavior from his professional behavior, and felt his personal behavior didn't rise to the level of impeachment as defined in the Constitution. And I came to believe that one person's personal failings need not be a statement about that person's political ideology.

**BW:** What is the most *courageous* thing you've ever said or done? The most *compassionate*?

**AC:** I've actually walked into a room full of conservatives. And I've done this without a metal detector present. Have you ever been a liberal in a room full of conservatives? Scary! I compassionately told them my points of view and, showing even deeper compassion, did not condemn them when they refused to agree with me.

**BW:** If you could change one thing in *America* what would it be? In *yourself*?

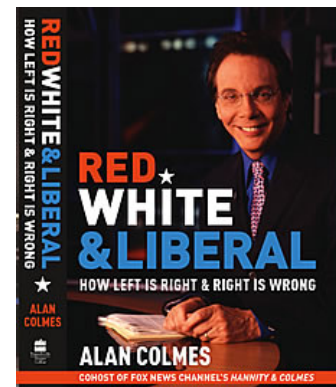
**AC:** I would change the campaign finance laws, make the election season shorter, much like they do in parliamentary governments, and I would try to get people to look at issues individually, not ideologically. That's two things, not one. And I would give myself more patience. I am sorely lacking in that trait.

**BW:** What are your *religious* beliefs and how do they inform your *political* positions?

**AC:** I believe in the laws of karma. I believe that how you act, how you treat people has a cause and affect. It's the basic golden rule, which is the basis of most major religions. We constantly have choices, and it is incumbent upon us to make choices that are in the best interests of the most people concerned on any given issue. I think that is the most spiritual path, and the one that is the best thing to do politically as well.

**BW:** In light of post-release news developments, what would you change, if anything, in *Red, White & Liberal*?

**AC:** Probably not much. The lack of information about WMD's, the continuing loss of life in Iraq, the fact that the very reasons we were given to go to war have not been justified, continues to make my point. Environmentally, we find out that the EPA, under pressure from the White House, was dishonest about the quality of air near ground zero after September 11, and that firefighters and other workers have had respiratory and other health problems. The events that have transpired since my book went to press only further make my case.



**BW:** Please compare the liberal credentials/positions of the various Democratic presidential candidates and what they portend for the upcoming election.

**AC:** I am still studying the candidates, as is the rest of America. Whoever is the frontrunner, and whoever gets the nod, will be characterized by the right as a raving liberal, further demonizing liberals and that candidate. (Again, this is why I wrote the book, to point out that “liberal” is a *good* thing.) They’ve already done this to Howard Dean, who was a moderate as governor of Vermont, who favored gun rights for states, and who balanced budgets for eleven years. Joe Lieberman may be the least liberal candidate, and Dennis Kucinich, the most liberal, in general, with the others falling somewhere in-between, depending on the issue. Continuing atrocities in Iraq, continuing evidence that Bush’s foreign policies are not working, more global terror, and economic woes will have a strong effect how well Democrats do.

**BW:** What would your ideal presidential dream team look like (irrespective of party affiliation) and who would you pick for their cabinet?

**AC:** I’d like a president or vice president with strong military credentials to disabuse conservatives of the idea that Democrats don’t care about the security of our country. I’d like to see Kerry or Clark on one end of the ticket, and I’d like a cabinet of socially conscious Americans who care about the environment, rule of law, and social justice. An attorney general who doesn’t feel we need more laws to protect us, but who will enforce the ones we have would be good for starters. An Interior Secretary who cares more about enforcing clean air standards than in making industry happy would be wonderful. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. would be perfect for that post or for head of the EPA. A Secretary of State who, along with a president who cared more about coalition building than alienating the rest of the world would be another good step. Colin Powell is a fine man, but seems to be overruled by the neocons in this administration. Reducing the number of oil men and big business advocates in the administration by 98% would be just fine.

**BW:** You cite Robert Jensen’s and Noam Chomsky’s charges that America is a leading terrorist state. Do you find a moral equivalence between the United States and terrorist organizations/states?

**AC:** There is no moral equivalence. I quote Jensen and Chomsky to encourage people to think. If I agreed with most of the quotes in the book, I’d be a conservative.

**BW:** In your political lifetime, what do you view as the most significant events or trends (and their impact) in the United States?

**AC:** Clearly, September 11 was a seminal event. It changed the way many Americans look at the world. If anything, though, it should encourage us to embrace our freedoms rather than to diminish them. Once we do that, we’ve given in to the forces of evil that would do us in. The biggest trend, aside from global terror, is the information age, the ability to communicate instantaneously, the presence of news and information channels on cable, the Internet. It helps us be better watchdogs against the forces of terror, but also against abuses of our own power structure.

**BW:** During your broadcasting career, which events or stories have most touched your heart or transformed your thinking?

**AC:** Again, September 11. It reinforces for me the beauty of our system, the value of our Democracy, the sanctity of our freedoms. It makes me want to fight harder for social justice and peace. As I see a strong attempt to restrict our freedoms and move this country to the right, it only enhances

my resolve to stand up for the freedoms and liberties our forefathers encoded in our Constitution, and to fight those forces, both internally and externally that would have us diminish them.

**Interview Dates:** January-February, 2000 and November 24, 2003.

### Personal Comments

Alan Colmes is a courteous and compassionate commando on the Left who passionately pursues his principles and zealously seeks the truth. Quick to acknowledge error, instant in extending grace, Alan possesses the *courage* to be *courteous* in an increasingly partisan profession. His humor is *engaging*, not acerbic, used to *build* bridges, not tear down opponents. Rather than retaliate in kind, Alan engages the opposition in a positive manner, often incorporating humor to disarm where others belittle and besmirch.

I am particularly struck by the *decency* with which Alan treats *all* people irrespective of how they treat *him*. Alan truly sees the God-given humanity inherent in every human being. Alan Colmes conveys the courage to care and to take tough stands on issues while extending courtesy and compassion towards his opponents. Alan offers an open hand in response to a closed fist.

**Bio** – <http://www.alan.com/radio-bios/>

After a string of successful radio shows on WNBC, WABC and WMCA in New York, Alan Colmes gained a reputation as a hard-hitting liberal known for his electric commentary on the American agenda. He has interviewed many key political and pop culture figures, including President Barack Obama, former President Bill Clinton, former Vice President Al Gore, Lynn Cheney, former Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Senators John Kerry and John McCain, Newt Gingrich, Deepak Chopra, and Carole King.

After penetrating the Boston and New York markets with hit local radio shows, Colmes went from major market success to national talk radio prominence in 1990 with his fast-paced and informative afternoon news-driven show, which aired daily on hundreds of affiliates nationwide. He joined FOX News Channel in 1996, and co-hosted *Hannity & Colmes* for over twelve years. Today his radio show is syndicated by FOX News and heard on terrestrial radio stations across America, XM and Sirius Satellite Radio, and the American Forces Radio Network.



To learn more about Colmes, check out his personal website: [www.alan.com](http://www.alan.com).