[From Heterodox Academy, this is *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, conversations with scholars and authors, ideas from diverse viewpoints and perspectives. Here’s your host Chris Martin.]

**Chris Martin:** Today's episode features Charlie Sykes, a conservative political commentator who hosted a popular talk radio show from 1993 to 2016. He later joined The Weekly Standard magazine and hosted The Daily Standard podcast. In December 2018, after the shuttering of The Weekly Standard, he and William Kristol founded The Bulwark website, hiring many former staff members of the Standard. Charlie currently hosts the daily Bulwark podcast, which features interviews with politicians, professors, and commentators.

He’s also the author of several books including *Fail U* (2016) and *Profscam* (1988). And his most recent book is *How the Right Lost Its Mind*.

Hi Charlie. Welcome to the show.

**Charlie Sykes:** Hey, it’s good to be here.

**Chris Martin:** Thank you for joining us. I do want to talk about your latest book. But before we start, because this is an academic podcast, I have an academic question. If you were to visit an undergraduate classroom today and give the students an introduction to the trajectory of conservative media in the United States, what would you say to them?

**Charlie Sykes:** Well, boy, that’s a broad question. I would start by saying please don’t blame me for everything that has happened even though I’m somewhat responsible for it. I was part of it. But I didn’t see it coming.

I want to start with one thing sort of before the fall of conservative media. You know, I’m going to put a quotation mark around that. I’m fascinated by the fact that there was really no significant conservative media infrastructure during the Reagan years. Ronald Reagan in the highlight of the conservative revolution.

There was no talk radio. There was no Breitbart. There was no internet. There was no Fox News and yet people look back on that as hey, conservatives did pretty well. They were able to be successful.

So I think that that’s important to kind of keep in mind for people who think that the conservative movement is a complete creature of talk radio and of the rest of the conservative media.
But I would also say that – you know, go back to when I started in conservative talk radio. I had been in print. I had been a newspaper reporter, a magazine editor and found the idea of talk radio to be somewhat fascinating but also puzzling, what was it about.

I started doing this on a regular basis about four years after Rush Limbaugh went on the air in the late 1980s. One of the things that really struck me was that there was a real appetite for alternative point of view and back then, that’s what I thought it was.

I thought we could be the other side of the story. We could balance out things that the rest of the media was either not interested in or was reporting from a jaundiced point of view and it was clearly a massive audience for this.

It was a little bit like pouring water on parched earth when people began to tune on AM radio, which by the way AM radio was like an abandoned strip mall. I mean nothing was on AM radio anymore.

There was no great conspiracy to put conservative talk shows on AM. AM was dead. But there was clearly an appetite for them. People said, “Wow, they have a media outlet that doesn’t look down on me, that doesn’t disdain me, that is actually concerned about the kind of things that I’m concerned about.”

It was I think healthy in those early days and you have folks – like Limbaugh I think had a certain sense of humor. There was a certain sense of parody and – but that did evolve over time which is what you’re asking about and really the larger point would be that it evolved I think from being one voice among many, an alternative voice, to becoming an echo chamber to morphing into an alternative reality silo that we have today.

One of the things that I wrestle with is how did this happen. How did it go from being – you know, that’s – I mean I always thought of talk radio – I thought of talk radio as sort of being like an op-ed page so that I would be writing columns from a center right conservative point of view. But suddenly it became – it took on a life of its own.

Chris Martin: And I would like to talk about your book, which is largely about conservative media. But before we jump to that, going to your 2016 book Fail U: The False Promise of Higher Education, what critique of higher education were you trying to level in that book and what was the genesis of that book?

Charlie Sykes: Well, the genesis of that book was a follow-up to my very first book, which was Profscam, which was published in I think 1987. I don’t want to do a Joe Biden and get the decades wrong here, which basically was a critique of the abandonment of undergraduate education. I mean the heart of that book was that higher education, particularly the big research universities had shifted their focus away from teaching undergrads, which also then led to the degradation of the liberal arts as central to higher education.
It also began to talk about – I’m going back into the ‘80s. Talk about what became known as political correctness, the ideological – the push for ideological conformity on campuses and the intolerance for certain ideas.

So I wrote that back in 1987 and decided to revisit it and ask the question, “Well, what has happened since then?” and tracing all of the things that I had critiqued in the late 1980s and concluded that many of them had become worse.

The flight from teaching had gotten – was more extensive. You also had the overlay of the explosion of student debt, the cost of higher education, questions about whether or not too many students were spending too much time, too much money on things that were not perhaps wise life choices and then of course revisiting what was happening with the intellectual climate on campus.

Chris Martin: OK. So now your latest book How the Right Lost Its Mind, it has been about a year since it came out. Received a lot of publicity when it came out because as you said at the beginning of this interview, you expressed some remorse over perhaps being part of this alternative reality bubble.

I thought it was a great book. I liked the reflections on the changes in conservative media that you document and the insider take that you have. But you do suggest that what happened in the 2010s was a departure from what had happened before that. I just see a contrast between the 2010s and let’s say the early years of National Review, which is one of the points you make.

But some of the developments don’t seem entirely new. For example if you look at Sarah Palin from 10 years ago, she was pretty similar to Donald Trump and then going back much further, Newt Gingrich had tactics that were quite similar to Donald Trump’s in some ways and I’m thinking of an interview he did with McKay Coppins in the Atlantic. He has been strongly approving of Donald Trump’s performance and presidency and as we know, his wife is – was appointed by Trump as the ambassador to Vatican City. So I do see these threads going back about 40 years at least.

Do you see something different about the 1980s compared to the present?

Charlie Sykes: Well, I did a follow-up for the paperback edition and one of the things I said that I regretted was that I didn’t – I didn’t focus more on the impact of Newt Gingrich in creating this new climate and there’s no question about it. You know, Sarah Palin, you could argue was sort of patient zero in this populist uprising.

But there’s no question about it and this is something that I am – I’m still trying to parse through. What was the recessive gene and what was the dominant gene? What did we ignore? How long does this go back? I mean clearly you can trace this all the way back to the new right back in the 1970s that was dwelling with the idea of George Wallace because he would fight.

You can take it back into the 1930s. You know, the Father Coughlin type of demagoguery. But no, you make a good point there. There was clearly a shift in the mid-1990s in which politics
became warfare and this did track with the rise and the evolution of the conservative – of conservative media.

It’s not a coincidence that when the republicans took control of congress in 1994, the freshman class invited all people Rush Limbaugh to speak to them because this was the beginning of this sort of synergy between the new conservative media and congress.

Now could people have predicted that the conservative media would morph into the alternative reality that it did at that point? No, because we weren’t that big. Could we have predicted that republicans would lose the ability to be – to govern or actually the interest in governing, because of this transformation? I don’t know.

I spent some time with Newt Gingrich early on in his speakership and I have to say that I was somewhat underwhelmed by his intellectual discipline and – I’m trying to parse my words here, which nobody does these days. But sort of his – shall we say his lack of a principled consistency? So in some ways in retrospect, it becomes sort of clear how that might lead to Trumpism. But let’s be honest. Nobody actually saw that happen, that coming.

Chris Martin: When it comes to Fox News in particular, that has had a really large role on the conservative media landscape. I should cite my sources. So this question actually comes from my wife. It was her reaction to reading your book. What do you see is the future of Fox News?

Charlie Sykes: Well, that is a good question and it’s particularly a good question this week because the president is lashing out at Fox News. I mean he thinks that Fox News is a house organ of Trumpism. I mean he demands absolute loyalty and he’s obviously very bothered by the fact that Fox is not 24/7 pro-Trump propaganda.

You know, and Fox – there’s no question but you cannot tell the story without Fox. Fox isn’t alone. But one of the things that if you would have asked me this question maybe six months ago I would have said is that Fox was at least for a time obsessed with being outflanked on the right, that they’re looking over their shoulder at groups like – was it One America Now Network? And concerned that well, if we’re not sufficiently pro-Trump, somebody else is going to seize that mantel.

They’re going to seize that space. I’m not sure that that’s the case right now and in part, it has to do with the succession. Who knows what’s going on with the Murdochs? There does seem to be cover for folks like Shepard Smith who have been actually – you know, legitimate journalist Chris Wallace.

But on the other hand, look at their primetime lineup and the primetime lineup has become more and more virulent. You know, the Tucker Carlsons, the Laura Ingrahams. So the answer to your question is part of like well, what is the future of the conservative movement? What’s the future of the Republican Party post-Trump? Are they still – is this sort of strain still going to have a market? Is this where they’re going? I honestly don’t know.
Chris Martin: And one of the things Fox News has done among others is allowed republican politicians to publicize these promises, these unrealistic promises that they make and that your book references EJ Dionne’s critique of the conservative movement in America and how one of the central problems is that republican politicians have promised a set of incoherent goals that can’t be – can’t really be reached.

But that sort of has snowballed. So do you realistically see some or any kind of republican leader pulling away from that and transforming the party?

Charlie Sykes: It seems naïve to think that that will happen. It really does and that critique is really central to the recent years is the – you make promises that literally cannot be fulfilled and yet you demand that leaders pursue it, even though there’s no chance and then when reality intervenes, you accuse them of caving in or being weak or betraying the base and that whole outrage machine has become the model now of the conservative media and because it has become the model of the conservative media, it has become the model of republican governance and lack of governance.

So no, I don’t see that. I was actually on a TV show yesterday and we were talking about Joe Biden suggesting that if he gets elected, he will be able to work with “good republicans,” which I appreciate that he’s open to bipartisan cooperation. But it feels extremely naïve to think that that’s going to be happening anytime in the near future.

Chris Martin: Right. One of the points I make to my students when I talk about politics in the US – and I try to differentiate the Republican Party from conservative parties in many other countries because in many countries, conservative parties are open to compromising with centrist and liberal parties and they form coalitions with them sometimes.

In the US, one of the tenets of the Conservative Party that – the Republican Party is we don’t compromise. So it’s really difficult to say in the United States specifically what we really need is for the Republican Party and Democratic Party to get together and reach some compromises.

Charlie Sykes: Well, and also – but that is a relatively recent phenomenon because in terms of conservatives, it depends how you define conservatism. If you define it in sort of a Burkan pragmatic sense, of course you’re going to compromise. You’re going to try to come up with solutions to real problems.

I mean we think of Ronald Reagan as a hardcore conservative ideologue but he had to govern when Democrats controlled both houses of congress. Most of his major achievements had to be on a bipartisan basis. Even the Bushes worked with Democrats on a variety of issues to get legislation passed.

So this notion that you must have not only purity but you can never work with the other side. I think Gingrich probably began – I mean really fired that up. But that really is something that would be a relatively recent phenomenon.
Chris Martin: Now you talk about some of this being due to an alternative reality bubble and the term “bubble” crops up a lot nowadays. People say conservatives are in a media bubble, liberals are in a media bubble. What proportion of conservatives and what proportion of liberals would you say are in a conservative and liberal media bubble respectively?

Charlie Sykes: Yeah. I try to use – avoid the word “bubble” because it got overused. So I use “silo” because it is sometimes hermetically sealed. So when I talk about an alternative reality silo, I mean someone who really is immune to outside information and the story – I will get to your question. I mean why I say that and I’m talking about people who – you know, I did a radio show for 23 years and for much of that time, I think I had a very good rapport with the audience.

When they would send me things that were false, were hoaxes, I would push back and I would say, “Look, this is not true. If you don’t like Hillary Clinton, that’s fine. But no, there are not bodies stacked up in a warehouse in Little Rock,” et cetera. No, no Barack Obama – you know, he’s not really a secret Muslim from Kenya. No, disagree with him on policy.

For most of that time, people would say, “Hey, thank you. I appreciate it. I’m sorry I forwarded Uncle Leo’s mass email, et cetera. I’m sorry I passed it on to my Facebook friends.” But in 2015 and 2016, I began noticing that became harder and harder, that nothing I could send people was considered credible.

If you send somebody something from the New York Times, the Washington Post or from NBC, the reaction would be, “Well, those are liberal rags,” and that was when I had to go, “Oh, OK.” So our media critique has been so successful that we have successfully delegitimized all this fact-based media. There are no referees anymore. There are no guardrails.

So when I’m talking about the alternative reality silos, you’re talking about people who really are immune to any sort of outside information. So that’s probably a relatively small but very active group. But see, this is the part of the problem. You look at the – you know, at the polls and it would certainly suggest that a strong majority of conservatives now are in this echo chamber. They are in this alternative reality silo and this is reflected in public opinion polls about Trump but also about different issues.

They live in a world with different narratives, different characters, different themes, different facts. You turn on Fox News on any given day and you’re talking about a – almost a completely different news cycle than if you’re talking – than if you turn on MSNBC.

I do think – my experience is that – and I don’t want to let the left off the hook here because I think to a certain extent, they would like to flatter themselves that they do not live in an ideological bubble. But I think it’s a little bit like fish don’t know they’re wet because they’re so surrounded by it, that every reasonable person agrees with them.

But I do get the sense that folks on the left still have a wider range of sources of information than those on the right and by the way, I think that all of this is accelerating. I think that everything I described in the book has gotten worse and will get worse in terms of the conservative media
seeing itself as a – as not really being a transmitter of information as much as a soldier in the
culture of war.

**Chris Martin:** I think one issue to be concerned about – and I should say I’m rarely shocked by
anything. But one of the things that really shocked me was Jack Posobiec. I’m not sure if I’m
getting his name right. But he was the Pizzagate conspiracy guy who was awarded a fellowship
by the Claremont Institute and I was truly shocked by that and if you have incentives for
conspiracy theorists to spread conspiracies, that’s a whole new universe.

**Charlie Sykes:** No, I was also – I share the same thing as – I’m increasingly hard to shock but
I’m still shocked and I think that’s good. I think it’s important not to normalize all of this. But
what you were describing was genuinely appalling because you have somebody from the far
reaches of the fever swamp and to go back to your original question about the evolution of the
conservative media, in my book, one of the things I’m really fascinated about was the way in
which some of the – some of the more radioactive, some of the more toxic conspiracy theorists
were brought into the mainstream by people like the Drudge Report.

They actually became part of the conservative media infrastructure and guys like Jack Posobiec
who’s spreading these just bizarre and sick conspiracy there is that have been completely
discredited, you know, have developed audiences and have not paid this – look, in a rational
universe, these folks would be absolutely exiled. Nobody would take them seriously.

So the fact that he is part of the media infrastructure was pretty outrageous. But then when the
Claremont Institute named him a fellow, this is one of those moments where you go, “Are there
any guardrails at all? Are there any freaking standards at all?” I mean I understand that they have
been moving to a more aggressive pro-Trumpian stand. But in what alternative reality do you
take someone who has been that discredited and named him a fellow? So that not only are there
now active incentives in the conservative media to be the most outrageous, to be the most
extreme, to throw out the most bizarre theories. But there are no stigmas. There’s no price to be
paid where the prize to be paid is not obvious.

Now having said that, there are people who have fallen off. I mean there are the – you know, the
Milo Yiannopoulos were big stars for a while. But Milo Yiannopoulos who traffics in some of
just the most vile rhetoric really only was exiled when – you know, because he was endorsing –
appearing to endorse pedophilia. Everything else apparently was OK.

But yeah, the Posobiec incident was – there are so many troubling markers. But that was a big
one.

**Chris Martin:** Now do you still keep in touch with other conservative radio hosts and see any
changes on that landscape occurring?

**Charlie Sykes:** I do keep in touch with some, many of whom have lost their jobs either because
they’ve quit or because they’ve been fired or because they’re just fed up with it. But what I find
interesting is just watching the way in which conservatism has changed.
So for example in Wisconsin, I tell the story. In Wisconsin, all the conservative talk show hosts were anti-Trump. He did not have the luxury that he had elsewhere. He did not have air cover from conservative talk radio and he lost badly.

In Wisconsin, Ted Cruz, who by the way is not a good fit for Wisconsin, beat him handily because all the talk show hosts thought that Donald Trump was such an aberration. But every one of those hosts – I’m off the air – hosting Green Bay. I was off the air. Every one of those other hosts now is completely pro-Trump and in part, that reflects the way in which the audience has come to see conservative media as a safe space. Despite all the conservative critiques of universities being safe space, on the right, they demand the conservative media be a safe space that confirms their bias, that gives them – you know, reassures them about their views and they’re very intolerant for dissenting points of views.

So as a result, a conservative talk show comes on and expresses outrage about President Trump’s comments about the loyalty of Jews or mocks him for canceling his trip to Denmark because they won’t negotiate the sale of Greenland. They’re going to get a huge amount of backlash and you would get 80, 90 percent of the callers calling in saying, “Why are you saying this? Why are you not backing our president?”

So that’s part of the morphing is that – is there was a time when in conservative media, you could – you had a variety of ideas. You could have really lively discussions and you could criticize the sitting president of the United States. People like that. But support and loyalty to Trump is now a requirement.

**Chris Martin:** And we talked earlier about Newt Gingrich and one revision you made to the – sorry, I’m going to restate that. You talked about one revision you made in the paperback edition regarding Gingrich and one thing you got wrong. Have you received any other interesting critiques of the book that have made you rethink some of the points you’ve made?

**Charlie Sykes:** Oh, yeah, many. Part of this is the – is, you know, my argument, which I’m still reasonably comfortable with although I question it all the time that many of the crackpot elements of the right or the overt – you know, hyper nationalist, nativist streams of – these were always there but they were recessive genes and that there was still a dominant relatively healthy mainstream.

I’ve had interesting debates about that with a number of people including – you know, going back and forth with Max Boot who has come to a different conclusion. He believes that these things were much more virulent and run deeper and of course now when I go back and I will talk about the role of William F. Buckley Jr. in National Review and creating a healthy, conservative movement and people go back and point out the editorials that were written about race and segregation in the 1950s and I will admit I cringe when I read them because this is going back to the founding. You know, the president of the creation with some stuff that was pretty ugly that conservatives had not come to grips with.

Also I guess part of it is that because of where I’m from, Wisconsin, and the people that I associated with, I think the whole emphasis on fiscal conservatism which now turns out to be
kind of a joke, you have to go back and go, “Was any of that real?” and I would like to think that it was real. I believed it was real. But clearly it was paper thin in the conservative movement.

Chris Martin: And I don’t know if you’re familiar with Corey Robin’s work. But his idea which has been – changed my perspective because I used to draw my perspectives just from social psychology. His perspective is that conservatives tend to not be focused so much on tradition but rather on preserving the status of people who were at the top of a hierarchy.

So it does seem like even going forward, we might see one strain of conservative politics being people defending some shade of white supremacy perhaps or the right of people who are billionaires like the Coke brothers do to influence the political system with no guardrails. Do you see that as a liability?

Charlie Sykes: Well, oh, there are many liabilities. I’m not familiar with his work. So keep that in mind as I say this. My experience with conservatism was not – was really not consistent with that and I think also as you watch what’s happening now to the right wing, there is this – a genuine populist element to all of this. There are people who – was not about wealth. It was not about – I mean see, this is part of the problem is like what was real and what wasn’t real.

The Tea Party Movement for example I believe was a sincere reaction, at least in the beginning to what they saw as government overreach. It was a sincere grassroots effort. But it was taken over by people who had different agenda.

So you have this disconnect between grassroots conservatives who are in fact concerned about traditional values, who are concerned about things like just living a decent good life versus people who say, “OK, we’re going to get you to vote for us and then we’re going to become tools of Corporate America.”

We’re going to be tools of [0:27:00] [Indiscernible]. So that’s part of the dilemma. What was real and what was not real?

Chris Martin: Right. In your book, you do talk about – in the early part of the book, you talk about what changed your perspective and your father’s perspective, which was returning Vietnam War veterans being insulted and demeaned by very left wing hippies so to speak. Do you feel like that was a foundational experience for people of your generation?

Charlie Sykes: Well, yes. For many of – and many of the people that I have associated with over the years, many of the people and I know it has become a dirty word to say things like “neo-conservative” but a group of conservatives who had been liberals in the 1950s and 1960s who became disillusioned with liberalism and went over to conservatism who were really driven away.

I think that in the division in the Republican Party over Donald Trump, you still see some of the signs of that. That folks who came from a liberal tradition – and by the way, I mean both big L and small L tradition were those – were the least likely to go along with Donald Trump. It was certainly a foundational experience for me.
I grew up in a very, very liberal household. My father was the President of the Wisconsin Civil Liberty Union. He was the campaign manager for Eugene McCarthy back in 1968 when he was the anti-war candidate running against Lyndon Johnson.

When I was in eighth grade, I flew around the state in the campaign plane with Eugene McCarthy. I was at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. I was a page there. I was on the executive board of the Young Democrats of Wisconsin for several years and yet like many other people who became active in the conservative movement, I think it was the excesses. It was the intellectual exhaustion of the left in late 1970s that drove people away.

**Chris Martin:** So before we wrap up, it’s almost time to wrap up, what future projects have you got? Do you have another book in the works?

**Charlie Sykes:** Well, you know what? At this point, I think it’s time to sit back and wait and to see how this all plays out because I – my crystal ball is extremely cloudy right now. So what I’m devoting myself to is working with the Bulwark. I do a daily podcast. I put out a newsletter, trying to track what’s happening.

But I think for a book, I’m going to need to sit back and have a larger perspective because when I wrote this book *How the Right Lost Its Mind*, part of it was just for myself. Like what the hell just happened? What did I not get? How did this takeover of the Republican Party and this transformation of the Republican Party occur? And I’m not sure that I got it completely right. So there’s going to be a perspective when we see what the world looks like post-Trump, how much of it is enduring, how much of it is just a blip.

Whether we’re ever going to come back from this precipice, I just don’t know. So I’m probably going to wait until then.

**Chris Martin:** All right. Well, I really enjoy the Bulwark Podcast. I guess my only complaint is that sometimes I have to delete other podcasts so I have time to listen to the Bulwark. I’m not saying that to flatter you. That’s actually something that’s going on.

Well, thank you for coming on the show. I really appreciate it.

**Charlie Sykes:** Hey, it has been a lot of fun. Thank you Chris.

**Chris Martin:** Thanks for tuning in. If you enjoyed the show, please take a minute to leave us a review on *iTunes*. It helps other people find out about the show. And as always you can reach me at podcast@heterodoxacademy.org or on Twitter @Chrismartin76.

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