

Shock Pundit

Ann Coulter got her start at the U-M Law School

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When Ann Coulter took the stage at this year's Conservative Political Action Conference, her audience knew what to expect. She'd made headlines the previous year by joking about killing Bill Clinton and by referring to Arabs as "ragheads"; the activists in attendance were primed for another dose of conservative red meat. And Coulter came through. "I was going to have a few comments on the other Democratic presidential candidate, John Edwards," she said with a smirk. "But it turns out that you have to go into rehab if you use the word *faggot*."

Coulter has built a career on her unrelenting animosity toward the left, and in the process she's become a conservative icon—and a cultural phenomenon. Yet twenty years ago, Coulter was just another U-M Law School student, pinching pennies and lounging on the Diag. Is her current celebrity a credit to the school or a dreadful disappointment? That depends on whom you ask.

Terrance Sandalow was dean of the Law School when Coulter studied there. He says that though he has "only a dim memory" of her as a student, "I saw none of the qualities that have brought her fame in subsequent years. I don't follow her shameful writing very much, but I've seen enough of it and of her on TV to know that in her case the Law School failed to achieve its educational goals." Which goals? "For example, a respect for facts and avoiding overgeneralizations. My impression of her is that she's irresponsible. She engages in vitriol, not reasoned argument about anything."

Though no one can deny that Coulter has made her mark in the world, "I'm disappointed in her," Sandalow says. "I'd be disappointed in anyone who engages in this kind of behavior. It's just not the kind of behavior we expect of people. I don't have the slightest idea whether she's sincere in what she says or whether she's decided that this is a good way to make a buck. I've seen both suggested, and I have no way of judging which is true. But I consider her to be sort of nuts."

Douglas Kahn, a professor of tax law at the U-M, couldn't disagree more. An outspoken conservative himself, he was a sort of mentor for Coulter during her tenure at Michigan, where she was an editor of the *Michigan Law Review* and cofounded a local branch of the conservative/libertarian Federalist Society.

"I got to know her primarily because she was involved with the Federalist Society here, and I was their faculty advisor at that time," Kahn says. "So she came and chatted with me from time to time. I found her basically sound and, I think, sensible." He smiles and shrugs slightly. "The way she puts things today might very well lead you to feel that she's an extremist. But I don't really think she is. I think she's quite smart, and I think she has a foundation for what she's

saying. Now maybe she puts it too strongly, or a little over the top, but that's partly to get attention. I mean, if you said things in a very measured, scholarly way, no one would listen to you—aside from maybe a few scholars. You wouldn't be on television, I can tell you that—because that's not what the media wants. They want something that excites, that gets people talking.”

He laughs. “I wouldn't necessarily want you to publish this, but when Ann was here, I'd say that she was not as glamorous looking as I've seen her on television. She was certainly a pleasant-looking young woman, but the first time I saw her on TV, I didn't know who it was. I remember seeing this striking blond, and after a while I realized that it was Ann. I think that's probably another part of the game: if you don't look right, you don't get on TV either.”

Even as a student, Kahn recalls, Coulter “liked controversy.” And as a vocal conservative on a liberal campus, she invited it. “Conservatives here are a significant minority,” Kahn says. “But most of them, frankly, are silenced. “For instance, if you speak out against affirmative action, you're going to get some people angry with you. I happen to be against affirmative action, opposed to the university's position. And I've been accused, by some kids, of being a racist because I feel that way.” He shakes his head. “There have always been taboo issues, but it seems like in recent times they have grown. In fact, I grew up in the McCarthy period, which I thought was atrocious, and I think this is worse.”

I ask him to repeat that. Campus political correctness is worse than McCarthyism? “Yeah. During the McCarthy period it was the left being silenced, and now it's the conservatives who are silenced in the university setting. And the reason I think it's worse is that it's accepted by the intelligentsia. In other ways, it's obviously not as bad. Back then there were people losing their jobs, being blacklisted . . . but it does trouble me that this intolerance to other views has become accepted by the intellectual community.”

I ask Kahn whether he thinks Coulter was radicalized by the U-M's politically correct environment. He laughs. “I'm sure she felt the pressure. I just don't think it had any effect!” As we say good-bye, he says, “I hope you'll get a chance to meet Ann. You'll find her engaging. She's actually quite charming. And I'm sure she'll give you some interesting quotes.”

I'm not so sure myself, as I try for the sixth time to reach her through her publicist, who's busy promoting Coulter's latest book, *Godless: The Church of Liberalism*. Earlier, the publicist said Ann was willing to be interviewed—but that was weeks ago. “Ann's probably not going to have time to talk with you until she's done promoting the book,” she now says, shortly. “Try calling back in a few weeks.”

Meanwhile, I call some of her fellow editors of the *Michigan Law Review*. “I'd rather not get involved,” one says, laughing nervously. “I'd prefer to stay above the fray,” says another, with the same nervous laugh. But finally I reach Melissa H. Maxman, partner and head of antitrust practice at Baker Hostetler in Washington, D.C.

She doesn't shy away from commenting on Coulter—and she seems to have known her well.

“We were in the same class back in law school,” Maxman recalls. “I got to know her on the *Law Review*. I can’t say she was my best friend, but we were good friends for four or five years—though we lost touch when she became famous.”

Appropriately enough, politics brought them together. “She was an outspoken conservative and I was an outspoken liberal,” she says. “I heard people talking about her before I got to know her—she had a reputation for being very vocal in class about her conservative views. But we became friendly anyway. She’s very, very funny. And I shared her macabre sense of humor.” Maxman laughs. “You know, when people find out that I was friends with her in law school, they can’t believe it, because I’m a big Democrat—I even ran for office. But it was because we respected each other’s right to disagree. In law school you’re learning how to debate, and I think that the process of debating each other was helpful to us both. She exposed me to some ideas that I hadn’t been exposed to before. Of course, we didn’t agree with each other on anything—I thought she was a right-wing crazy, and she thought I was a left-wing nut. But we could appreciate the other’s point of view.”

Ann Coulter? Appreciating a liberal’s point of view? “Ann wasn’t nearly as strident then as she is now. She was much more muted back then,” Maxman explains. “And that’s the part that troubles me—she’s become more and more shrill. I mean, some of the stuff I read now, I can’t believe she said it.” She mentions some passages in Coulter’s new book, in which she accuses a group of 9/11 widows who’d been critical of President Bush of “enjoying their husbands’ deaths.” Maxman insists that her friend Ann wasn’t like that: “Knowing the Ann I knew years ago, I can’t believe that she actually believes the things she says. When I read her, I think she must be joking and people are misinterpreting her, because she really does have a terrific sense of humor. She’s very quick witted and acerbic. But if you don’t know she’s joking, you could be taken aback. And I think maybe people are taking her more seriously than she takes herself.”

Maxman pauses. “But I do think people’s feelings get hurt. And that’s unfortunate, because I don’t think she’s the type of person who would intentionally want to hurt people. I mean, she’s not a cruel person.”

Maybe not, but for some reason the punch lines of her jokes tend to involve the death of her political opponents. Coulter’s greatest hits include advocating a nuclear attack on North Korea, calling for the assassination of {a liberal Supreme Court justice}, wishing terrorists would target the *New York Times*, and insisting we “invade [Muslim] countries, kill their leaders, and convert them to Christianity.” If Coulter is joking, does Maxman have any idea how her funny, tolerant conservative friend got to be so harsh?

“I remember asking how she ended up so conservative, and she said it was because of the way she was raised,” she says uncertainly. “But the Ann I knew privately chain-smoked and dated Democrats and liked rock ’n’ roll. In fact, I used to tease her about her taste in men. She always liked these progressive, good-looking musician types.”

Though many prominent Republicans distanced themselves from her recent comments about John Edwards, Coulter inspires passionate devotion among her fellow conservatives. When I call the Washtenaw County Republican Party for some comments on her, they refer me to Dave Adamson, a local party activist. “Ann is our bomb thrower,” he says, his voice overflowing with enthusiasm. “She’s our Michael Moore, you know? She’s wonderful. We all love her.”

But surprisingly, he says that most local conservatives have no idea she’s linked to Ann Arbor. “I think if you asked them, ninety percent of Republicans in Washtenaw County wouldn’t know that she went to school here. The university is kind of alien to us. It isn’t a big thing to us to be connected to it. But she went there. I feel sorry for that, but she survived.”

I ask Adamson whether he thinks Coulter would have turned out differently if she had gone to a conservative school. He pauses to think. “Well, I bet she wouldn’t be as much of a bomb thrower as she is. If she had gone to a conservative college, she wouldn’t be as outraged as she is.” I run a brief list of Coulter’s more outlandish comments past him—in which she advocates televised torture, carpet bombing of Muslim countries, and beating liberals with a baseball bat. Adamson laughs uproariously. So does that mean he takes it all as a joke?

“Are you kidding me?” he shouts. “*Of course* she’s joking. “See, we have a sense of humor. You guys don’t. Nobody in their right mind would think that she was serious, because it’s obvious to normal people. Now, there aren’t a lot of normal people on the left. So you take these quotes and say, ‘Look what she said!’ And we just think it’s outrageously funny that you guys take it seriously.”

So every inflammatory thing Coulter says should be taken as humor? He stops laughing. “Of course the things she says are funny. They’re outrageous—but they’re kind of half true. Humor is not funny if there isn’t some truth to it. And that’s what Ann does so well.”

He’s right, of course—Coulter walks a fine line between humor and hate, and that’s the root of the question I’m dying to ask her. Coulter herself has been consistently coy about whether she means the things she says literally. When taken to task for an offensive remark, her standard response is to declare that she was obviously joking and accuse her opponents of lacking a sense of humor. Yet she often follows that accusation by amplifying the remark that originally caused the offense. For instance, when asked whether she regretted her comment about wishing terrorists had destroyed the *New York Times* building, she replied, “Of course I regret it. I should have added ‘after everyone had left the building except the editors and the reporters.’” Her critics are left wondering whether this is yet another joke that they’re too humorless to appreciate, or a sly insinuation—understood by her followers—that she was serious all along.

And perhaps that’s the secret of Coulter’s success. She validates the dark underside of conservative belief—without openly taking ownership of it. She uses humor as an escape hatch, and the more she gets away with, the more her fans love her. But in talking to local conservatives, I catch a glimpse of a deeper reason for her appeal. Coulter provides an outlet for her followers’ indignation, while reinforcing the assumption behind it: that conservatives are

victims of an entrenched liberal establishment. Seen from this perspective, her words and her very presence serve as a sort of battle flag for conservatives—a symbol of tribal unity. Her attacks become acts of heroic defiance, exempt from the standards of traditional political discourse.

I call Coulter's publicist one more time. To my surprise, her characteristic impatience is gone; she sounds almost happy to hear from me. I ask her if Ann's still willing to be interviewed. "As of next week, I won't be employed by Ann anymore," she says. "Now that the book rush is over, Ann's taking some time off, and she's not going to use a publicist for the foreseeable future—probably until her next book comes out."

I express my condolences, but she doesn't sound very upset. So I ask her whether there's any way I can still get my questions through to Ann—even if we don't meet in person. She's very obliging: "If you can send me an email by the end of the week, I'll see that she gets it."

It takes me some time, but I succeed in squeezing everything I've wanted to ask Coulter into ten simple questions, which range from her memories of Ann Arbor to the sources of her rage. My final question ends, "Do you mean the things you say, or are you just doing it to sell books and get attention? If it's the latter, do you ever wonder if you've taken the act too far?" Coulter doesn't reply.

"She likes being controversial, and I think she's doing it for a purpose," says her onetime friend Melissa Maxman. "She's very shrewd, and it sells books. It's kind of akin to what Howard Stern does—she's like a shock pundit. She enjoys the idea of stirring up a debate. And if she says something outrageous to get the debate going, you know, so what? It's not a popularity contest. And if it is a popularity contest, and you measure it in dollars—she's winning."