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When late night goes beyond wacky

Ken Briggs | Feb. 23, 2011 NCR Today

During sleepless interludes I sometimes tune in to those denizens of the late night airwaves who still manage to carve out a niche for themselves. As befits their location outside the mainstream, they're generally an odd lot, hepped up on obsessions with the end of the world, lost or nearly lost causes and pleas to save our souls.

You never know when something from the eccentric fringe might be the missing piece to a puzzle or raise a valid mystery. Those people who allegedly record the voices of dead people have an ounce or two of credibility. Every astrologer has to be right sometimes. And promoters of secret messages in the Bible are at least intriguing.

I can't take too much at a time but like it in small doses because it reminds me that those who occupy that wild and woolly territory use assumptions that are no less lamebrained than those used by dominant politicians in Washington. But the radio guys are more colorful and candid. To their followers, they are the voices of truth in a world gone mad, the misfits who will be vindicated in the end.

Sometimes the rhetoric by the lone wolves of the night becomes more than entertaining, however. Such was the case last night on the widely syndicated show, "Coast to Coast."

The host, George Noory, is a pleasant sounding guy who is courteous to a fault. He invites the usual collection of soothsayers, "one world" alarmists, travelers on UFO ships, ghost hunters, Noah's Arc finders,and an assortment of other relatively obscure purveyors of unheralded notions and schemes who are given a chance to preach to the multitudes.

Noory functions much as Larry King did on radio and television. He throws softballs at guests and makes them feel good about themselves by agreeing with them no matter how ludicrous that might seem. Being agreeable is in lieu of asking insightful or tough questions, something that distinguisehd the founder of the show, the redoubtable Art Bell. It's difficult to escape the conclusion that Noory isn't equipped to challenge his guests so roots them on instead.

In the spirit of "equal time," he recently gave time to a scientist who destroyed the argument of the British scientist whose claim that autism was caused by childhood immunization, in part because the experiment behind the claim had been exposed as fraudulent. Then Noory allowed the discredited scientist air time to reassert his claim without acknowledging the blatant flaws in his work. Noory was there to give him support.

Last night, however, he went further than that. Using a guest's description of surveillance technology as a take-off point, Noory wondered why the gadgeteers didn't come up with a method of following bank robbers from the scene of the crime and killing them before they made progress on the roadway. After all, he said, there would be no doubt about the guilt of the robber so why not just get it over with and protect other drivers from possible harm.

There was no mention of that tenet of American jurisprudence that promises a fair trial for the accused or

sympathy with the notion of being innocent until proved guilty.

The guest concurred. Why not just get rid of the perp? You can't trust the government anyway, they chimed in, though Noory said he wished he could. Even buried in the wee hours, it was horrifying.

At such points, the fun stops and unchecked, illegal vengeance is recommended to millions of listeners. Noory actually doesn't sound like the kind of guy who would approve of authoritarian tactics, but that makes his callousness even more egregious. Being the kind who joins whatever campers he happens to end up with, he likely assumed that his audience saw things the way he did.

Hope not.

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