

Radio/TV talk host Michael Smerconish tries to appeal to the middle



Michael Smerconish is making waves by criticizing the lack of civility among his fellow radio and TV talkers. (Michael Perez/For The Washington Post)

By [Manuel Roig-Franzia](#) April 24

ARDMORE, Pa. — He’s reaching for them. Somewhere out there. Somewhere in the elusive middle.

Michael Smerconish believes that they exist, a chunk of Americans who don’t skew to the extreme right on politics and don’t skew to the extreme left. And, most importantly, want to talk about it.

Smerconish rose to prominence as a nationally syndicated conservative talk radio host, but complicated his public image by becoming a regular fill-in host on left-leaning MSNBC. Now he’s neither. He’s shed land-based radio — where he says he was pressured to be more and more right-wing — for Sirius XM satellite radio; and he’s stepped away from MSNBC for a one-hour Saturday morning slot of his own that debuted in March on the more ideologically neutral CNN.

It may be conventional wisdom that the only way to truly succeed in the world of talk is to occupy one of the poles. But Smerconish is betting his career that there’s a great untapped center.

“I’m the referendum, aren’t I?” he says on the patio of his spacious home in swanky Villanova, Pa., his arm draped

across a pillow bearing the outline of his signature bald head. “I’ve put my livelihood on the line to prove that you can.”

As Smerconish makes his transition, he’s delivered a kind of manifesto: [“Talk: A Novel,”](#) scheduled for release May 6. The book’s hero is an ambitious talk radio host named Stan Powers who is so desperate to get a national syndication deal that he’ll say anything and trash anyone, even though every move he makes is tearing him up inside.

In the novel’s climactic scene, Powers locks the studio door and delivers a speech about the decline of civility and compromise in American politics, but it might as well be Smerconish pointing a finger of blame: “It’s the polarized media,” Powers declares. “Notice that in the precise period when polarization progressed in Washington — that is, the last 40 years — there has been a corresponding polarization in the media. Coincidence? No way.”

Smerconish, who has published five nonfiction books, mentioned his desire to write a novel over dinner one night several years back with his close friend, the mega-bestselling author, Nelson DeMille. In an interview, DeMille says he gave his friend his standard advice to aspiring novelists: “Take two aspirins, lie down in a dark room and wait for the feeling to pass.”

Smerconish didn’t ask for advice on how to write a novel. So, DeMille says, “It came as a surprise when he said, ‘I finished my novel.’” DeMille liked it so much that he wrote a book jacket blurb, saying “Smerconish has taken the plunge into fiction and it is a beautiful swan dive.”

Smerconish, who is 52, is a product of the political realm. As a teenager and young man growing up in Doylestown in suburban Philadelphia, he worked for Republican candidates, eventually getting deeply involved in the campaigns of President George H.W. Bush and Sen. Arlen Specter, who became a close friend. He took a job as a regional housing administrator in Bush’s administration.

But he found his calling in the 1990s when he started doing talk radio on Philadelphia stations, eventually landing coveted time slots and big ratings at WPHT, as well as a syndication deal. An affirmation of Smerconish’s prominence was delivered on election night in 2000 when then-candidate George W. Bush called his show before the polls closed.

That was back when he had hair. But one night late in 2001, he happened to be celebrating his wife’s birthday at a restaurant next to her hair salon. Her stylist was working late and since “I’d had a couple pops,” Smerconish says, he agreed to walk over and make an appointment. He returned the next day, and found himself alone with a room full of female clients. They took a vote. It was unanimous: every strand had to go. (The political commentator Mary Matalin signed a poster that Smerconish keeps in his Ardmore, Pa., studio: “Nice hair-do.”)

That moment stands out in Smerconish’s mind because shortly afterward he traveled to Havana with Specter. The highlight of the trip was an epic seven-hour meal with Cuban dictator Fidel Castro. “I was convinced when he saw my shaved head that he was convinced I was some military or CIA operative,” Smerconish recalls. The meal might have dragged on longer, Smerconish says, if not for Specter’s wife, Joan, saying she was exhausted and needed to return to the hotel.

Smerconish’s brand was wrapped in his identity as a moderate Republican, so it was something of a seismic event when he announced that he was endorsing then-Sen. Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential bid. “He knew it was going to hurt him, hurt him badly,” said Shanin Specter, the senator’s son and a longtime friend of Smerconish’s. But, as Specter puts it, his friend is “stubborn.”

Smerconish says he had grown disillusioned with the direction of the Republican Party, particularly because of its support for the Iraq invasion and because he “thought the party was too much at the beck and call of evangelical leaders.” Smerconish was flooded with angry e-mails. In 2010, Smerconish went a step further, leaving the Republican Party and becoming an independent.

In the years to come, syndication would not always be easy for Smerconish. In his novel, he channels his frustrations by creating a mysterious radio consultant whose mantra for his hosts is “conservative, consistent, compelling.”

“There is no political middle,” the consultant insists. “It doesn’t exist on radio. You will never get anywhere saying anything moderate or mushy . . . three extremists are worth more than ten moderates.”

In real life, Smerconish says he encountered program directors and syndication executives who couldn’t fathom his desire to hew toward the center. During talks about what to name his program, Smerconish says, “The Right Answer” was floated by radio executives. He countered with “The Correct Answer.”

“ ‘Nah’ ” was the response, he says. “Nobody wants the correct answer.”

He was particularly bothered when he got a peek at an e-mail he says he wasn’t supposed to see regarding his White House interview with Obama less than two weeks before the 2012 election. Smerconish considered the interview a huge get. But that view wasn’t shared by some of the show’s promoters at Dial Global, his syndication firm, an indication to Smerconish that the climate in talk radio was becoming intolerable for him. “We need to downplay this interview,” a syndication executive wrote, according to a copy of the e-mail provided by Smerconish. “It is toxic.”

“Toxic?” Smerconish responded in an e-mail. “Downplay an Oval Office interview with the president? Best left unpromoted? I can’t believe what I am reading.”

A spokesman for the syndicator, now known as WestwoodOne, did not respond to a request for comment.

There would also be fights over sponsorship of his syndicated radio program. Smerconish says he chafed at the scripts for gold advertisements, a staple of many conservative networks. “The pitch was, ‘The world is going to hell-in-a-hand-basket. It’s Obama’s fault. You better stock upon gold because when the economy collapses, gold is all you’re going to have left,’” he says. Smerconish says he thought the scripts were irresponsible. The gold company canceled its ads, “which was fine by me,” Smerconish says. When a syndication sales executive tried to arrange a fence-mending meeting with the company, “I told him to pound sand,” Smerconish recalls.

But it wasn’t just the political right and its allies that were bothering Smerconish. When he was guest-hosting for Chris Matthews on the MSNBC program “Hardball,” Smerconish found himself increasingly uncomfortable with the tone and content. He’d show up for work, read the script and frequently end up saying, “We’ve got to re-do this.”

The show’s executives would tell him, “This is lean-forward,” he recalls. “I would say, ‘No, this is tipping over.’”

By the time the CNN opportunity came up, Smerconish and MSNBC were ready to part ways — it was clear he wasn’t going to be getting his own show anytime soon, though he says he could have continued as a guest host.

“They made it clear that liberal and nerdy was what they want to be,” Smerconish says. “That’s not who I am.”

In an e-mailed statement, MSNBC President Phil Griffin said: “We had a wonderful, decade-long run with Michael and loved having him on MSNBC. When Michael came to us saying he wanted to go to CNN, we were supportive. We continue to wish him well.”

But even getting his own television show — something he says he’s long wanted — hasn’t been entirely smooth. His name was recently mentioned in reports as a possible replacement for Piers Morgan, who is leaving CNN. It didn’t happen.

“So, I’m no longer the guy who finally got his own show,” Smerconish laments. “I’m the guy who didn’t get the Piers Morgan gig.”

Still, Smerconish sounds like a man who feels like he’s found a home. “Intellectually, I’m in a very comfortable place,” he says. “I’m in three different environments [satellite radio, CNN and his Philadelphia Inquirer column] where I can completely be myself.” His CNN program will compete against established shows such as Fox & Friends Weekend and Up With Steve Kornacki on MSNBC.

Smerconish almost never listens to talk radio on land-based stations anymore. Most of the presets on the radio of his Ford F-150 pickup (he needs those hefty wheels for trips out to the Bucks County farm where he keeps miniature donkeys) are set to music stations.

“A lot of the talk radio business disgusts him,” Shanin Specter says.

Indeed, Smerconish has little praise for some of the big names of radio and TV talk.

Rush Limbaugh? “Masterful entertainer. I question the authenticity of it all.”

Keith Olbermann? “I thought those vitriolic commentaries he did about Bush were appalling in the same way as I see the right doing with Obama.”

Ed Schultz? “Angry, doctrinaire, predictable. Lacking in independent thought. Inflaming the passions of a few.” (Limbaugh and Schultz did not respond to requests for comment; Olbermann declined to comment through a spokesman at ESPN, which televises his show.)

Smerconish thinks he’s found another way. The theme music on his Sirius XM show sums it up: “Stuck in the middle with you . . . Clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right.”

The question that remains is whether anyone will join him there.

Manuel Roig-Franzia is a writer in The Washington Post’s Style section. His long-form articles span a broad range of subjects, including politics, power and the culture of Washington, as well as profiling major political figures and authors.

© 1996-2014 The Washington Post

