



January 23, 2007

Rough Cuts with Michel Martin

We want the new show we're developing to be one you can't live without -- and we'd like your help. This blog lifts the curtain on our process. We'll talk about our ideas and play "rough cuts" of pieces we're piloting. Do you like what you hear? Why or why not? Let us know -- and let's make some great radio!

January 22, 2007

Powerful Voices

[Listen to the segment on women in leadership](#)



Iraqi women listen as the head of the Rafadin Women's Coalition, Iman Abdel-Jabber, speaks during a press conference in Baghdad, August 3, 2005. The RWC works to encourage women to play an active role in Iraqi politics.

Ahmad Al-Rubaye/AFP/Getty Images

"The perspective of the two eyes is different from the perspective of one eye." ---Mariam Alsadig Almadi

Unless you've taken a vow of no news, you've probably heard that Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY), the former first lady, has decided to run for president. No doubt this will occasion even more commentary than we've already had about whether a woman can be elected, whether women govern differently and so on.

So I don't want to talk about that.

Here's what I do want to talk about: The U.N. estimates that only 15 percent of heads of state, parliamentary and cabinet ministry positions worldwide are held by women.

What difference does this make? One difference it makes is that reporters traditionally pursue "leaders" for comment on significant stories. The logic is that these are the people in a position to effect change so we want to know what they think. But what if there are no women "leaders"? Do we lose an important perspective, as the quote above, from Sudanese politician Mariam Alsadig Almadi suggests?

I mention Sudan because an ongoing civil conflict -- U.S. officials have called it genocide -- centered in the Darfur region has left tens of thousands of people dead and hundreds of thousands displaced. New Mexico's Governor Bill Richardson just returned from Darfur where he was participating in talks to support a previously negotiated ceasefire; [he spoke to Talk of the Nation's Neal Conan about his trip](#).

If you've followed this story then you've probably seen many images of women weeping or carrying sick babies or staring the traumatized war victims' stare. What you probably have *not* seen or heard are women taking leadership or even being consulted in regard to the events that so affect their lives. So when we had a chance to interview two women political officials from Sudan, we could not pass it up.

A group called the [Initiative for Inclusive Security](#), which recently hosted its eighth annual conference in Washington, wants to increase political participation among women in "high conflict" and post-conflict areas. The conferences allow women leaders to learn skills from each other as well as from other political and policy professionals. This year delegations came from Colombia, Nepal, Uganda and Sudan. Individuals came from Liberia and Iraq.

We honestly cannot tell you whether the women we interviewed would be considered "power players" back home. One, Amna Ahmed Ali, was born in Darfur and was one of the first women graduates of the University of Khartoum. She is a civil servant who now works on development projects in Darfur. Mariam Alsadig Almadi, quoted above, is a former pediatrician who gave up medicine for politics. She is now a communications officer for the Umma National Party, a secular Islamic centrist party (and an opposition party).

We thought the opportunity to hear from women in positions of responsibility in that region was so rare that it was worth it just to hear their voices and opinions.

Also joining our group: Mishkat Al Moumin, who somehow managed to survive as a lecturer in human rights at Baghdad University under Saddam Hussein's regime, only to be the target of two assassination attempts during [her stint as Minister of the Environment in the interim Iraqi government](#). Her take on how to move forward in Iraq is very different from what you have been hearing elsewhere.

We've said that one of the missions of this program is to let you hear voices that often go unheard. In today's show, you'll truly hear some of those different voices.

To expand on the question of women in leadership, we also talked to the person who founded the Initiative for Inclusive Security, someone who feels passionately about the importance of promoting women's political participation. Swanee Hunt is a former Ambassador to Austria in the Clinton administration. She is a philanthropist, has a doctorate in theology and happens to be one of the daughters of the now-deceased H.L. Hunt, once one of the richest men in the world. She recently [published a memoir](#) about her own remarkable journey to leadership, so we decided to interview her as well.

And there's more: We round out the program with a commentary by economist Julianne Malveaux, well known to some for her appearances on *News & Notes* and other programs. Dr. Malveaux didn't appreciate a comment made by Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-CA) to Secretary of State Condi Rice last week and??? well??? we'll just let her tell you.

I know this is a long post, but I thought I needed to take a little extra time to explain some of our editorial choices this week.

I'll be out of pocket for a couple of days; I'm guest-hosting this week on *News & Notes*, which is based in Los Angeles, so I may or may not post something from there. We don't want to let that California bliss escape.

My questions for this week: The interviews are a bit long??? we have a traditional idea of the length a program should be and we have completely disregarded that in this case. Is the length OK or did your attention wander? And the accents may be heavier than you are accustomed to for an American program. We felt that the opportunity to hear from these women in their own words was worth the risk of turning you off because of it. Do you agree with our decision? And thank you again for helping us with this project.

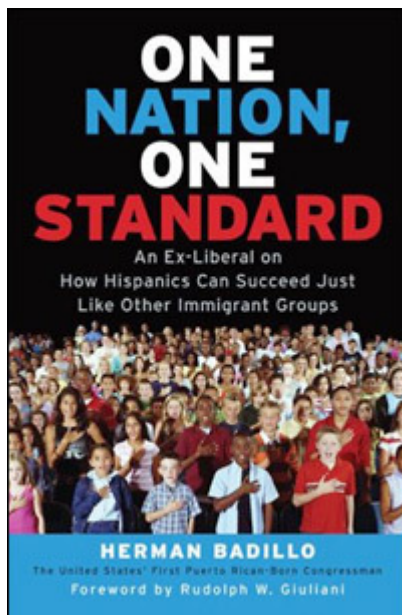
-- Michel Martin

5:08 PM ET | 01-22-2007 | [permalink](#) | [comments \(7\)](#) | [e-mail post](#)

January 18, 2007

A Puerto Rican Bill Cosby

[Listen to the interview with Herman Badillo](#)



In his new book, *One Nation, One Standard*, Herman Badillo claims that Hispanics don't put the same emphasis on education as other American immigrants.

Do you remember the dustup about three years ago when Bill Cosby [spoke at a dinner](#) commemorating the anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* case? That was the case that ended legal segregation of the schools, and Bill Cosby was, shall we say, disappointed with the way some members of the black community had risen to the opportunity in the years since the decision. He was a lot more blunt than I am being; let's just say there's been a lively discussion of the merits of his argument in the three years since -- which is ongoing, by the way.

Mr. Cosby has traveled all over the country, meeting in community forums with people who want to talk about his view that too many black folks have become so fixated on racism they aren't doing what they can to improve their communities, educate their children and live up to the promise of America. These sessions -- I covered one for ABC's *Nightline* -- are heartrending, exhausting and uplifting at the same time. Heartrending because these people are in so much pain; they are terrified and furious about what they see happening in their communities with kids who seem out of control and parents who won't take control. They're exhausting because they go on for hours and sometimes the anger is very raw. There's a lot of finger pointing.

But then there's an uplifting side because, while Cosby does speak, he also goes out of his way to showcase people from each community who have done something remarkable -- overcome great odds to get an education, started a mentoring program, etc. At the session I attended, most people came because they agreed with Cosby and wanted to tell him and wanted some inspiration. Some came because they found his message offensive. One scholar calls Cosby's meetings the "blame the poor tour" and [wrote an entire book just to rebut him](#). The debate continues.

Now comes a book by a public figure who may not be a household name all over the country but who is a giant in New York politics. His name is Herman Badillo and the book is called *One Nation, One Standard*. Badillo was the first Puerto Rican-born U.S. congressman. His own story is nothing short of remarkable. He was orphaned as a small boy, came to the mainland to live with relatives at the age of 11 (speaking not a word of English), and went

on to become a lawyer, a congressman, a mayoral candidate and the chairman of the board of one of the largest public university systems in the country.

Badillo was one of the main architects of bilingual education law; the principal sponsor of the Bilingual Education Act of 1974.

But now he says he was wrong -- a rare admission for most of us! When I read the book, I knew I wanted to talk to Badillo, in part because the book reminded me so much of the debate Bill Cosby set off. Only this time, the subject is the Hispanic community.

In [today's segment](#) (audio), we take a traditional NPR-ish approach to a topic like this: A famous person writes a book and we talk with him about it. But we thought Badillo's argument was such that he needed the floor to himself to discuss it. Our question to you is: Is this approach, with one subject, satisfying? Or did you find yourself hungering for more of a debate? [Let us know](#).

-- [Michel Martin](#)

4:04 PM ET | 01-18-2007 | [permalink](#) | [comments \(33\)](#) | [e-mail post](#)

January 17, 2007

P.S. on HPV and 'Ordinary Oprahs'

Your responses to our two most recent segments -- on [HPV](#) and "[Ordinary Oprahs](#)" -- have been remarkable. First, on the story of the two women who have built or supported schools overseas, most of you loved the story but hated the title.

A typical comment: "There's nothing ordinary about these women, and the title is actually somewhat demeaning." I hear you, but I don't agree. The title actually came from a conversation with one of the guests, Wendy Johnson. When I was writing her intro, she was standing near me (because, remember, she works here) and I said, "How shall I describe you?" She responded, "I'm just an ordinary person." So I thought, yes, that's it.

Wendy and Lidia don't mind at all that we called them ordinary and that you think they are extraordinary. In related news: Dennis Whittle of [Global Giving](#), the organization we also highlighted in the program, was so impressed by both Wendy and Lidia that he is going to try to include their projects among those supported by his organization. We mentioned that Wendy's family previously adopted a little girl from Ethiopia. After years of effort they have succeeded in locating her sister and are bringing her to the U.S. on Thursday, Jan. 18. We are so happy for all of them.

Finally, many of you wrote to highlight the efforts of "extraordinary Oprahs" whom you know. We're going to see if we can do this story again and reach out to some of the people you told us about. Stay tuned for that and keep the ideas coming.

On HPV: After we posted our story, the news broke in the Washington Post that the Washington, D.C., City Council is [proposing a requirement that girls be vaccinated for HPV](#), the virus that can cause cervical cancer. The logic is that D.C.'s large population of African-American women are disproportionately affected by cervical cancer. That has provoked much discussion here in D.C., where we are based. One prominent local columnist [denounced the proposal as well meaning but racist](#); there's been lively discussion on neighborhood discussion boards about this.

If we can figure out a follow up that would be interesting to a national audience, we'll jump on it.

We also asked our male listeners to tell us if they found the story interesting. Many of you were quite emphatic about your desire for more information about how the virus affects men. We're trying to figure out the best way to handle that side of the story, either through this vehicle or in a future podcast.

Once again, thank you for your close attention and passionate interest in our work in progress!

-- [Michel Martin](#)

11:55 AM ET | 01-17-2007 | [permalink](#) | [comments \(5\)](#) | [e-mail post](#)

January 11, 2007

Yes, You Are Invited

“When we say we want to appeal to diverse voices, what exactly do we mean? Is this a program meant to be mainly by and for African Americans, or is everyone invited?”

Asking for feedback from the public is a lot like asking strangers if your pants make you look fat. You're not totally sure you want the truth. That's what this open piloting process has been like so far. But for the most part, I'm happy to say, the jeans are looking just fine!

If you've been reading this blog for the last few weeks, you know what I am talking about. But if you're just discovering this space, let me explain. NPR decided to open up the process of developing my new show (a work in progress) to the public. We are asking folks to listen to the segments and to offer their comments. And you have done so.

The comments, whether laudatory or critical (and most have been remarkably supportive -- thank you very much) have been overwhelmingly thoughtful, constructive and gratifying to read. There have been a few nasty, dyspeptic cranks, which I plan to talk about in another blog. But for the most part, people seem genuinely interested in what we have to say and in helping us improve our ability to say it.

One question seems important to address right now: When we say we want to showcase new voices and appeal to a diverse audience, what exactly do we mean? Is this a program meant to be mainly by and for African-Americans, or is everyone invited?

You know from my photograph, and perhaps from my work in television, that yes, I am an African-American. We expect to have a very diverse staff, and we expect that diversity will inform the stories we do and the conversations we have.

I am also a journalist with more than 20 years experience covering everything from presidential politics to the performing arts. I love basketball and ballet. I am a mom, but I spent so many years as a single woman traveling the world I have not forgotten that life. I devour international news. I like to cook, shop and read. I am fascinated by faith. I am trying to learn to swim. In short, African-American is what I am -- but not all that I am.

My producers and I are deeply interested in the intersection -- and sometimes clash -- of cultures in the United States. We are also deeply interested in the world, especially parts of the world that don't always get a lot of attention.

I read an interview with Maya Angelou that I loved. She quoted Terentius Afer (also known as Terence), an African enslaved in Rome and later freed, who became a popular playwright circa 154 B.C. He wrote, "I am a human being. Nothing human can be alien to me."

So if the question is, "Are you invited?" Whoever you are, the answer is, "If you are a human being, yes."

And we have some questions for you and they might be a bit sensitive, but here goes:

Can a program that emphasizes African-American and other ethnic minority commentators still be considered diverse? Do you need to hear from white commentators to consider a program appealing and relevant to you? How important is it to you to hear voices that sound ethnically diverse? We really want to know, so please be honest (and please be respectful).

And remember to [check out this week's feature](#).

-- [Michel Martin](#)

3:24 PM ET | 01-11-2007 | [permalink](#) | [comments \(37\)](#) | [e-mail post](#)

Ordinary Oprahs

[Listen to the segment on 'Ordinary Oprahs'](#)

[MP3](#) [Download](#)



Lidia Schaefer, a Washington, D.C.-based manicurist built the Lidia Secondary School in her home village of Feres Mai, Ethiopia.

Courtesy of Lidia Schaefer



The death of Medhine (above), a 9-year-old from Feres Mai, Ethiopia, gave Lidia Schaefer, a manicurist from Washington, D.C., the inspiration to build a school for the African village. Medhine was killed by hyenas during her three-hour walk home from the nearest school.

Courtesy of Lidia Schaefer

We were interested in the hullabaloo surrounding the opening of [Oprah Winfrey's Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa](#). We stumbled onto a story, actually. We realized that two people we see all the time are doing what Oprah has just done, and let me tell you, they don't have Oprah-sized pockets.

[Lidia Schaefer](#) works as a manicurist at a salon in Washington, D.C., but she managed to build schoolhouses in Ethiopia. And [Wendy Johnson](#), an administrative assistant here at NPR, works part time so that she has the time to hand deliver her contributions in support of projects overseas. We thought you'd be interested in meeting them and hearing about what they do. We broaden the story with a conversation with [Dennis Whittle from Global Giving](#), an organization that helps small donors find worthy projects. We also talk with [Gene Sperling](#), a leading economist who tells us why this is good for the world and not just the soul.

Oprah stories are irresistible, but discovering that ordinary people are doing the same thing was too good to pass up. Do you agree? [Tell us what you think](#). Was it interesting? Did it keep your attention? Are you comfortable with the variety of accents you heard? Did you hear something that you have not heard anywhere else? And did it make you think about the choices you make with your time and money?

-- [Michel Martin](#)

12:34 PM ET | 01-11-2007 | [permalink](#) | [comments \(65\)](#) | [e-mail post](#)

January 5, 2007
A Common Virus

[Listen to the segment on HPV](#)



"Every single sexually active person is going to get it at some point in their life."

What?! Who?!

When I first heard a guest on [today's program \(audio\)](#) say those words, I almost stopped the interview to fact check the statement right then and there. I didn't -- because I was taping and we could do it later (which we did, in fact, do; see below*). But it made such an impression on me.

The guest -- her name is Tamika Felder and she's a women's health advocate -- was talking about something called HPV. It's a common virus, harmless to most, but it can cause genital warts as well as cervical cancer and other cancers. I had never heard of it until I read an article she wrote for a women's magazine. I spend hours every day reading, watching and poring over the news. So how could I not know about something that is both so common and yet has serious potential consequences?

One answer is: There is just so much to know -- science, history, politics, international affairs. How can anyone keep track of it all? In the news business we struggle with the same question from a different vantage point. With so much going on, how do we choose what to tell you?

One way to sort through it all is to use events to focus awareness. January is Cervical Cancer Awareness Month. So, that is what we would call a news "peg" -- an event on which to hang a story.

Another way is to compartmentalize information into segments. Think of it this way: If programs are like supermarkets; segments are like the aisles. If you want pickles, say, you go down the pickle aisle. If you want mac and cheese, you go down the row for that. While you're there, we hope you'll pick up something else.

We want to do some reporting on health and have been thinking about how to do it. The issues are important and often there are things one needs to know immediately. But how do we make it interesting as well as informative?

Having "met" Tamika through her article we thought, "Here's a [personal story that will make this issue very real.](#)" And we paired her with Michelle Hannah, an activist who is [working to eliminate the HPV virus.](#) We did not go to a traditional medical expert because we thought the science is well established and the personal narrative made the story more accessible.

What do you think of our approach? Does the so-called "bottom-up" method of covering this work for you? Or would you still want to hear from an "expert?" Finally, the issues raised in this segment primarily affect women, but we'd like to ask our male listeners if you find it interesting, as well. [Tell us what you think.](#)

*As to Tamika's statement about everyone having HPV, the Centers for Disease Control Web site says the following:

"At least 50 percent of sexually active men and women acquire genital HPV infection at some point in their lives. By age 50, at least 80 percent of women will have acquired genital HPV infection. About 6.2 million Americans get a new genital HPV infection each year."

We asked Tamika to comment. She says her conversations with CDC researchers and HPV medical experts suggest these figures are too conservative. Her understanding is that unless two virgins become sexually involved and remain completely monogamous (forever!) one would be exposed to some form of the virus.

-- [Michel Martin](#)

2:34 AM ET | 01- 5-2007 | [permalink](#) | [comments \(99\)](#) | [e-mail post](#)

January 2, 2007

Evolution or Revolution?

[Listen to the 'Talk of the Nation' segment on 'Wikinomics'](#)

Happy new year all.

It was a strange day here in Washington. There remained a bit of that subdued holiday mood: quiet streets and little traffic since much of the federal government was closed due to President Gerald Ford's funeral. I think we are still trying to absorb the meaning of Saddam Hussein's execution -- a brutal man meeting a brutal end. And it was a day of new beginnings: a new mayor in Washington was sworn in, new members of Congress are starting to arrive.

And -- surely not as momentous -- it was my first time as a guest on NPR! I was a guest on Talk of the Nation this afternoon (I show up about 17 minutes into the segment).

[The subject was a new book called Wikinomics](#), and one of the authors, Don Tapscott, talked about how major corporations are using the open source method to solve problems and research new products. I found this fascinating because I was familiar with corporations (and news organizations, for that matter) using focus groups to test new ideas and products, but I wasn't aware that some rather large companies had begun opening that process up to the public. Which is, of course, exactly what we are doing with my new show. And I thought it was our idea! OK, not really. Are there any original ideas? And does it matter?

As you may know, Talk of the Nation is a call-in show and it occurred to me that our open piloting method is the logical extension of the sense of community and inclusion one gets from that show. One caller asked, "Is this evolution or revolution?" I don't know. You tell me.

-- [Michel Martin](#)

6:11 PM ET | 01- 2-2007 | [permalink](#) | [comments \(15\)](#) | [e-mail post](#)

December 28, 2006

What If Your Santa Ain't Pink?

[Listen to the segment on holiday cultural differences](#)



Happy holidays, all! By the time you read this, you will probably have consumed your turkey, goose or ham (Some latkes maybe? Peas and rice?); opened your gifts (and we hope you got some nice ones); and are looking ahead to... well, what are you looking ahead to? For some of you, at this point it's all about New Year's. For others, maybe you're still in the middle of Kwanzaa or you're going to observe Epiphany, the Feast of the Three Kings.

The point is that a multicultural society like ours offers a feast of opportunities to celebrate and worship. But it can also get complicated. The traditions of Christmas, as practiced in North America, draw heavily on imagery shaped by northern Europe: the pink-cheeked Santa and all that snow, snow, snow! It's a problem for some of us to see ourselves in the story. And Kwanzaa can be a dilemma, too: Does it add to Christmas or detract from Christmas?

You may find yourself thinking about these things when you're on your own, but for most of us, what and how to celebrate doesn't really become an issue until we decide to share our lives with someone else, especially when we have children. So we decided to ask some savvy multicultural moms how they navigate the cultural minefield of holiday time. We hope to offer this kind of practical, accessible talk about real issues as a regular feature of our

program.

Our working title for this segment is "Mocha Moms" -- and no, we weren't clever enough to come up with that one. Mocha Moms is a [national organization founded by stay-at-home moms of color](#), but open to all. I stumbled across the group a couple of years ago when I interviewed some of their chapter members for a story for ABC News *Nightline*. When we started developing this program, my colleague Marie Nelson had the idea of building a segment around members of the group, which was founded here in the D.C. area.

We liked their common sense, chemistry and energy, and we hope you do, too. [Please listen](#) (audio) and take a minute to [tell us what you think about the segment](#). What about the topics? If this were a call-in show, is this the type of segment that would move you to call or write in? What if you knew about it in advance from our blog? Would you make more of an effort to participate in the conversation?

On a side note, a husband of one of our Mocha Moms just returned from a tour of duty in Iraq. That reminds me to take a moment to thank all of you who are spending your holidays abroad, whether in the military, Peace Corps or Foreign Service. Thank you for your service and sacrifice, and that of your families. And thanks also to those of you who are spending the holidays working here at home -- in squad cars, firehouses, newsrooms, fixing utility lines, serving food or taking care of the sick. Whatever you do, we appreciate it, even if we don't always take the time to say so. So thank you and happy new year to all! We're gone for the holiday but will be back next week to respond to posts.

-- [Michel Martin](#)

2:13 PM ET | 12-28-2006 | [permalink](#) | [comments \(47\)](#) | [e-mail post](#)

December 22, 2006

Grooving to a Different Beat

[Listen to the segment on African-American Christmas music](#)



The Jackson 5 Christmas Collection

So, as we said before, we all agree that we want this new show to talk about things other people might not talk about. And -- I may not have said this soon enough -- we plan to have fun doing this.

So we were thinking about the holidays and we started thinking about the whole "white Christmas" thing -- as both a song and a metaphor. That got us to thinking about how and why African-Americans started putting their stamp on the holiday. Which led naturally to thinking about the great (as well as the resolutely cheesy) holiday songs we all love, from the Jackson 5 to the mighty Temptations.

We started looking around and soon found Mark Anthony Neal, a professor at Duke University who actually studies African-American history and pop culture (that's what's so great about America -- and Google). We got his

take on the subject and listened to some great tunes. We were grooving all week long!

We hope [you'll listen](#) (audio) and, if you'll take the time, tell us what you think. Specifically, have you ever heard a radio segment on this topic and did you find this conversation interesting? What about our use of music? Is music an important cultural marker and would you like to hear more music segments? Don't be shy. [We need to hear from you](#) to make this show sing -- pardon the pun. Happy holidays! We'll be back on Thursday after our own little holiday break.

-- [Michel Martin](#)

12:53 PM ET | 12-22-2006 | [permalink](#) | [comments \(24\)](#) | [e-mail post](#)

Wonder Women



NPR producer Marie Nelson

Photo courtesy of Jacques Coughlin



Sue Goodwin, executive producer of Talk of the Nation.

Photo courtesy of Jacques Coughlin

Now might be a good time to let you know that, although I am writing in the first-person singular, I am by no means doing this by myself. Sitting one office over is my pal Marie Nelson. She is a former producer and colleague of mine at ABC News Nightline and she came over here a couple of months after I did to help us get this show off the ground. Marie has an interesting background, but the short version is: very international, scary smart, fabulous wardrobe. In short, I hate her. I would have HER tell you a little bit more about herself, but she's too busy editing an interview I just did. So, more on her later.

And working two floors below us is Sue Goodwin, the executive producer of [Talk of the Nation](#), who's also been helping us navigate the rocky shoals of a startup. Sue has worked on just about every show at NPR as well as on the Science Desk. She is amazing: a great listener, super efficient, fun to talk to -- except when she gets all nostalgic about cutting audio tape with razor blades. Spare me!

-- [Michel Martin](#)

11:28 AM ET | 12-22-2006 | [permalink](#) | [comments \(0\)](#) | [e-mail post](#)