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Lethally blonde

Ann Coulter has made a career out of saying the unthinkable. Last week the bestselling American author caused outrage when she described the widows of 9/11 as 'witches' who revelled in their husbands' deaths. Mixing soundbites with short skirts, this former lawyer has become the most extreme - and popular - polemicist in America. How did that happen?

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Ann Coulter has a stalker. She doesn't like to dignify his actions by talking about him, but she'll tell you, if you ask, that he's what the FBI class as the most dangerous kind - John Lennon's assassin was one of these. They're the sort that start out as fans and turn into your worst enemy.

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Feelings about Ann Coulter run high and extreme. Often described as 'the Republican Michael Moore', Coulter is possibly even better equipped than Moore to offend people, because, it seems, she is 100 per cent shameless. Actually, make that 99 per cent. 'I've always told my friends,' she says, 'if only I could be a black Jewish homosexual - then we could really have some fun! Then I could say anything!'

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Luckily, she is a woman, which puts her in a so-called minority and gives her considerable ammo (literally - she is very much in favour of guns, partly on account of the stalker). James Wolcott described her in Vanity Fair as 'the Paris Hilton of post-modern politics'. Eric Alterman, columnist for the Nation, calls her 'Rush Limbaugh in a miniskirt' (Limbaugh is a popular right-wing talk radio host). Sean Penn has an Ann Coulter action figure on his desk - which he uses to put out his cigarettes. Press a button and the doll speaks: 'Why not go to war for oil? We need oil. What do Hollywood celebrities imagine fuels their private jets? How do they think their cocaine is delivered to them?'

Coulter's weekly column is published in Human Events, once Ronald Reagan's favourite paper. It is read by few outside the conservative heartland, yet she has achieved a notoriety that suggests a far greater circulation. Liberals love to hate her, some conservatives hate her, but every time she writes a book - and *Godless*, published this week, is her fifth - it's an instant bestseller.

She's a little like Batman, or the Joker. You don't hear from her for a while then suddenly you can't miss her. This is a can't-miss-her moment. On Tuesday she went on the Today Show, NBC's morning programme, defending the passage of *Godless* that concerns the 11 September widows who lobbied for the creation of the 9/11 commission. She describes them as 'witches' who have cashed in on their husbands' deaths.

On Wednesday she took up the entire front page of the New York Daily News: 'Coulter the Cruel', it blared, next to a picture of Coulter smiling as if she'd just been crowned Miss World. On Thursday Hillary Clinton fought

back against what she called a 'vicious, mean-spirited attack'. Perhaps, Clinton suggested, Coulter's book should have been called 'Heartless'. At a public reading in Long Island a town councilman presented Coulter with a letter requesting an apology. Triumphantly, she tore it up. Ah! The book tour had begun.

'This is of course exactly what she wants,' says Joe Klein, who tells me that she inspired a character in his *Primary Colors*. He adds: 'She's a really cancerous example of the American political disease. You know, there's a whole generation of people in this country who think a serious political discussion is Ann Coulter and Michael Moore yelling at each other. It's driven serious, nuanced conversation out of the market.'

Her effect, however, has to be carefully calibrated - yes, she's a loudmouth right-winger, along the lines of Limbaugh and broadcaster Bill O'Reilly, and far more iconic than both of them. But is she no more than a jester? How dangerous is she?

'She's not dangerous,' Joe Klein clarifies. 'The phenomenon she represents is dangerous'. Alterman agrees: 'The effect is to make racism and other forms of chauvinism acceptable in polite society. You're a killjoy if you take her seriously.'

The night the Twin Towers fell she wrote a now famous column suggesting that 'We know who the homicidal maniacs are. They are the ones cheering and dancing right now. We should invade their countries, kill their leaders, and convert them to Christianity'. She took a whole lot of people with her. She is, as blog king Mickey Kaus, self-described 'neoliberal' and friend of Coulter, says, 'one of these people who's had the so-called Fox effect, of rallying voters to the polls that nobody thought existed'. Coulter became a pied piper for a certain kind of patriot.

Entire chapters of other people's books (Alterman's, and liberal radio host Al Franken's) have been devoted to pointing out her factual errors. Coulter has written a book taking down Bill Clinton (*High Crimes and Misdemeanors*); one about the so-called collected lies of the left (*Slander*); a collection of previously published columns (*How to Talk to a Liberal*); a volume celebrating the work of Joe McCarthy (*Treason*). *Godless* is an expression of her religious views, and takes in the obvious issues: abortion, science, the death penalty ...

Some of Coulter's more charming opinions are that the

country would be better off if women couldn't vote, that in December 2001 America should have attacked France, and that the death penalty should be brought back everywhere. She supported apartheid in South Africa, she has gently suggested that Timothy McVeigh should have blown up the New York Times building, she believes that defending the right to abortion is akin to defending slavery. Airlines, she says, should have - and flaunt - a policy of racial profiling: 'You are now free to move about the cabin - Not so fast, Mohammed!'

I am due to meet Ann Coulter for lunch, but there has been some confusion over the location. Her PR emails me to apologise. 'As you might imagine, her schedule is very hectic, and I do not have total control over her until next week,' she writes, effortlessly confirming my suspicion that Coulter is in fact an automaton. Total Control? How does that work? One week, her book publicist; the next, Dick Cheney? I soon learn that this idea is ridiculous. Coulter would never let a moderate like Cheney get his hands on her.

When I arrive at the restaurant, Coulter is sitting down, which is just as well because had I seen at first how tall she was, I might have fainted. Coulter's look is that of someone who has paid close attention to the hairstyles favoured in Stepford, and to the eyeliner worn by the evil android in Metropolis. Her motto might as well be: you can never be too rich, too thin, too blond, too tall, or too rude. She has a mane of expensively blond hair, the crane-limbed body type of a pterodactyl, and a smile that seems entirely un-Machiavellian. Now I understand.

All the interviews I've read involve the interviewer (usually a liberal man) wanting to dislike her and coming away with some excuse for her behaviour, on the grounds that she is actually quite nice in person. And it turns out to be true that she makes everything seem like a joke. She loves to argue, she smiles and laughs with every answer she gives. She's like a puppy waiting to be thrown a ball. Look, she says, I'm just doing this for fun. I'd rather be a married stay-at-home mom, but until that happens, taunting liberals seems like a good way to fill up my day.

After we've ordered our drinks, I ask Coulter whether she thinks she owes her success to a conservative following, or to liberals' need for a bogeyman.

'Oh, that's a good question,' she chuckles. 'One of my favourite liberal friends has laughed about how it's just like clockwork: they attack you, and all it does is give you

publicity, and they can't help themselves - they just keep attacking. Liberals hate me because I understand them better than they understand themselves. They pretend not to get the joke.'

As the first plane went into the World Trade Centre, Coulter was in a cab on her way to LaGuardia airport. She was listening to the radio she always carried with her, before i-Pods were invented. 'At first I thought it was some shock jock joke,' she says now, 'but then everyone was pulling the same joke'. When the second plane hit, she leaned forward and told the cab driver the news. He didn't react. He was a Muslim. Coulter was instantly alarmed.

After spending all day in a bar in Queens (the bridges were shut, the subway had stopped, she couldn't get back into Manhattan) she wrote her infamous 9/11 column on her laptop, and hasn't changed her view since. Was that her position before, I wonder?

'No, I never cared about the Muslims,' she says of the people she more frequently refers to as 'ragheads'. 'It seemed like a morass - that's why so many popular jokes are based on peace in the Middle East. I thought, it's a morass, other people are dealing with it, I'll write about Clinton.'

'But you don't think America should intervene on other occasions?'

'No, I wouldn't have intervened in Bosnia, in fact I think it's questionable whether we were on the right side on that. I don't want to be the world's policeman. But when they start flying planes into our skyscrapers, then it's time for a little tough love.'

'Do you feel like your personal involvement led you to those views?'

'No, I don't think it is personal. It's not a personal thing because my city's been hit. Most of the rest of America is more anxious to fight the terrorists than New Yorkers are.'

Coulter thinks conservatives are in a minority in the United States. 'Oh, we definitely are,' she says emphatically, 'in places like the Department of Justice, the CIA, the State Department ...' she pauses for a millisecond. 'I think we probably have the Pentagon.'

What Coulter would like to see is: No Democrats. There

would still be a two-party system, but it would be composed of Republicans, and moderate Republicans. 'And then,' she says, 'America would be safe. And I've got to say,' she adds, as she is presented with a plate of beef carpaccio, 'the way the Democrats are going, I think that's not as much of a pipe dream as it seems.'

She couldn't be President herself, she says, because she couldn't 'do the diplomacy thing'. 'Here's Bush going around talking about Islam being a religion of peace - I mean, I know he has to say that, but come on! No. I could not do that. Those words aren't coming out of my mouth.'

In Coulter's ideal world, George Bush would be the leader of the opposition.

I had prepared to meet Ann Coulter with the aim of finding out how on earth any human being could turn out to be so extreme. What was her upbringing? When had she formed these opinions? Why was she so angry? It was only when we were sitting in the restaurant that I realised my approach was all wrong.

I looked up over the starched white tablecloth at the starched white collars of the other patrons. I looked out at Madison Avenue and its innumerable blond shoppers. There was nothing unusual about Ann Coulter. Chances are, if any of these Upper East Siders - neighbours of hers - were as acid-tongued or as unconcerned about decorum as she is, they would be like that too. 'One thing people say to me more than anything else,' she says, 'besides "you're taller than I expected" - is: you say exactly what I'm thinking, and you say the things that no one else will say.'

When I ask who she thinks espouses these views, she shrugs and says, 'you've seen the maps'. As simple as that: wherever the America is conservative-coloured [on the political map], people agree with her. 'She's not so exceptional, and that's the shock,' an acquaintance later tells me, 'People disguise themselves as more sentimental, but what they really feel is probably closer to what she says. It's quite wrong to think [her position] is a redneck phenomenon.'

Coulter was born in 1961 in New York then moved to Connecticut, birthplace of both Colt and Winchester gun manufacturers. Her father was a WASP lawyer who made his name as a union buster, and her 'Southern Belle' mother looked after Ann and her two elder brothers. It was a 'really nice', 'boring', 'happy' family, she says. Every Friday, they would come into the city and go to the

Philharmonic. As a family they never talked about personal things. 'It's not necessarily all about politics but when you're with smart people, you're talking about things at a higher level,' Coulter expands, 'You're talking about ideas, telling jokes, it's not: this is what happened to me today.'

'Who looked after your emotional welfare?' I ask.

Coulter laughs out loud - a laugh that means: what will these idiot liberals think of next? 'Wasps aren't into that,' she says. 'In fact, if I ever used the words "emotional welfare", I would be sent to my room without dinner.'

She went to Cornell University, then to law school in Michigan. In 1994 she was hired as a legal adviser to Paula Jones in her sexual harassment case against Bill Clinton. But don't mistake her for a feminist. 'It wasn't feminists who came along and made what Clinton did to Paula Jones illegal,' she says, 'That's been illegal in this country since 1492.'

She wasn't simply acting in Jones's interests, however. Coulter has been quoted as saying that 'we were terrified that Jones would settle. It was contrary to our purpose of bringing down the President.' She got a job working for a Republican senator, and helped to write the country's laws - some of which, she says gleefully, the New York Times is complaining about even now ('I toughened up the provision on removing criminal aliens from the United States').

But there was one thing she wasn't so good at when she was a Senate staffer: 'They did figure out pretty quickly that I should not be the one meeting with constituents.'

Why not?

'I started threatening to mace them.'

'I suppose the question that often comes up is, does she really believe these things or does she say them for effect?' says Mickey Kaus. 'And I've come to think she really believes them. She says the same things in private. They are as sincere as any beliefs any of us have.'

John Cloud, who profiled her for a cover story in Time last year, ended up thinking she was so funny it must be some kind of stand-up routine, that she was like a right-wing Ali G. Coulter tells me that she once went on

the Tonight Show with Jay Leno, and Leno came into the green room holding a copy of her book. 'You know,' he said to her, 'I've heard some of these jokes before, but now that I'm reading your book, I see that they kept dropping the punch line - this is very funny.'

That is exactly the sort of response that some of Coulter's opponents think is to blame for her popularity. Eric Alterman was hired at MSNBC with Ann Coulter 10 years ago in what was her first media job. 'I couldn't believe the crap that was coming out of her mouth,' he says. Alterman watched Coulter get fired during a commercial break, after she had mocked a paraplegic Vietnam vet. 'These people think it's all a joke,' Alterman says, 'like the guy who wrote the cover story for Time last year - that 5,000 word love letter - and decided it was all ironic.'

'Well, I don't give the mass audience that much credit for irony. She's told an awful lot of lies that are very damaging, and have terrible consequences. There's a kind of daisy chain in the media that's allowed her to reach this level, with Hillary Clinton responding to her comments about 9/11 widows. Hillary Clinton shouldn't have to wipe that stuff off her shoes. The gatekeeper function of the media has entirely disappeared.'

In May 1999 Harpers magazine threw a party at Keith McNally's hip restaurant, Pravda, for Christopher Hitchens's book about Bill Clinton. For that night at least, it was the epicentre of the liberal intelligentsia. Ann Coulter showed up; everyone was appalled. 'But then they were fascinated by her,' one partygoer recalls. 'People fell over themselves wanting to talk to her - especially the older men. It's one of those things: if you're attracted to someone, who cares about politics?'

This, Alterman argues, is Coulter's 'great talent - to make people like her and think there's no consequence to saying we should be committing mass murder in the Middle East.' Coulter's friend Jon Ledecy says; 'As a platonic friend, it's interesting to see intelligent and handsome men transformed into slobbering groupies when they meet her.' Coulter herself tells me that every boyfriend she's had in the past five years has been a fan: 'a total stranger who walked up to me in a bar or in the street.'

I ask why her relationships never last long.

'This reason or that reason,' she says.

'It's not because they're afraid of you?'

'Oh no.'

Currently popular in Washington is a blog with an unprintable title. It takes the form of a fictional sex scene in which the liberal narrator picks Ann Coulter up at the farmer's market in Los Angeles and takes her home. (By the way, Coulter really does have fans in Hollywood. When the creator of 24 - one of her favourite shows - threw a party for her there, promising to introduce her to all the right-wingers, she assumed 'there would be five of us sipping sodas', but when she got there, it was 'a huge party'. Anyway, back to the sex blog.) They get to his place, and turn each other on by fighting over politics.

'With every point I expressed that ran counter to a view she held, she removed one article of clothing,' it reads. 'Soon she sat on my couch naked.' They climax: 'I repeated every Karl Marx quote I could think of until I reached my own "historic inevitability"'.

See what I mean about her appealing to both sides?

Every Sunday, Coulter goes to church. A mega-church. In the middle of Manhattan. The pastor packs it with 600 to 800 people four times a day, she says. Once, she even tried to convert a Muslim boyfriend to Christianity there. I ask Coulter if she's ever had a crisis of faith.

'Only when liberals don't attack me enough,' she says with a smile. 'Then I think: what was the matter with that column? I thought it was good.'

Quotable Coulter

On 9/11

'If Chicago had been hit, I assure you New Yorkers would not have cared. New Yorkers would have been like, "It's tough for them, now let's go back to our Calvin Klein fashion shows. "'

On Muslims

'The question is not, 'Are all Muslims terrorists?' The question is, 'Are all terrorists Muslims?' The answer is yes.'

On her Muslim ex-boyfriend

'The relationship was complicated by his interest in

committing jihad. I took away his box cutters. '

To a Vietnam veteran

'People like you caused us to lose the war.'

On Princess Diana

'Her children knew she was sleeping with all these men. That just seems the definition of "not a good mother".'

On women

'America would be a much better country if women did not vote.'

On the French

'A bunch of faggots.'

On her critics

'The more vicious they are, the happier I am.'

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