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So Weird and So Awesome: Rachel Maddow, California Rhodes Scholar, 1995

Banuta Rubess

Over the last year, the words “Rhodes Scholar” have ricocheted all over the American media space, and this time it’s not thanks to Bill Clinton. True, if you don’t live in the US, or don’t watch television, you may never have heard of Dr. Rachel Maddow. In that case, you’re also blissfully ignorant of the wild world of US cable news, with its yelling, angry men, purveyors of right-wing extremism and finger-stabbing slander. Maddow is the antidote to their poison, a media doctor without borders, coming to the aid of what Americans call ‘the left wing,’ and Europeans call ‘liberals.’ Both have lacked a strong voice in American media for a long time, and Dr. Maddow is filling the absence with an elegant vengeance.

Nowadays, you can watch her on the internet, download her podcast, track her on your Iphone, yet in May 2008 Maddow still thought that trying to get her own TV show was “like trying to get hit by lightning,” as she quipped, “especially when you’re an out, commie dyke.”¹ A few months later, lightning struck. September 8, 2008, MSNBC television premiered *The Rachel Maddow Show*, one hour every weekday at 9 p.m. “Rachel blew up as huge as I’ve ever seen someone in the media sphere... Suddenly there were profiles of her in every major magazine... And she was on all the talk shows... It was like a comet. I’ve never seen anything like it: that big a splash, going from relatively unknown...to major politico pundit in such a short order,” said Matthew Polly (USA 1995).²

In 2009, the big splash is still splashing. Liberal magazine *The Nation* nominated Maddow as one of the Most Valuable (Progressive) National Media Personalities in America. *Rolling Stone Magazine* named her number 22 in its list of one hundred people changing America. (Number 1 is Barack Obama.) She’s also been honored for her visibility and outspokenness as a lesbian,³ and she prides herself on being the first “out lesbian” in America ever to be granted a Rhodes.⁴

¹ Colleen M. Lee, “The Inside Story from Rachel Maddow,” *Curve, The Best-selling Lesbian Magazine*. 10 Oct. 2008 <<http://www.curvemag.com/Curve-Magazine/Web-Articles-2008/The-Inside-Story-from-Rachel-Maddow/>>

² Matthew Polly, “Re:Maddow,” email message to author, 9 Aug. 2009.

³ “Rachel Maddow,” *Wikipedia*, 30 Sep. 2009 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rachel_Maddow>.

⁴ The very first “out lesbian” Rhodes Scholar was Carellin Brooks from Canada (British Columbia, ’93).

Is Cecil Rhodes rolling in his grave yet? How fast? *Rolling Stone* sandwiched Maddow between the shocking humorist Sacha Baron Cohen (number 23) and leftist intellectual Naomi Klein (number 21).⁵ The framing is apt. Cohen shocks and amuses; Klein shocks and analyses; Maddow is a combination of both.

If there was a Nobel Prize for élan, Maddow would win it. At the end of a morning show on KTLA, the hosts surprised Maddow with a cheerleader wearing glasses and a tight t-shirt saying I HEART RACHEL. Maddow the intellect flung her arms into the air, threw her head back and exclaimed “My life is so weird and so awesome!”⁶

Indeed. Maddow is the outsider who conquers the mainstream; a radical who charms conservatives; a leader with an ‘aw shucks, who - me?’ persona. To news-savvy American liberals, she is a household name.

As one Twitter commenter wrote:

Could @Maddow be any cooler? Badass-smart liberal chick who can shoot a gun, and spends her free time studying classic cocktails!

Lesbian, Leftist, Rhodes

“Being first, breaking new ground, undermining prejudices – I think that is a primary motivator in her career.”⁷

1995 was the third year in a row when more women than men won the Rhodes Scholarship in the US. Maddow celebrated her success like a proper non-conformist — by shaving her head and dyeing her hair blue. (A picture of Rachel with her baby blue buzzcut, wearing John Lennon glasses and a leather jacket, circulates among lesbian fans on the Internet.)

To fellow Scholars, Maddow was an obvious choice. “When I met her at the cocktail party in LA the night before our final Rhodes interviews, I had no doubt that she would be one of the four people selected,” Jordan Schreiber (New Mexico 1995) recalls.⁸ Yet Maddow may not have considered herself a shoo-in. Yes, she had the athletic background, though injuries forestalled notable achievements; yes, she had the grades – she also received the Marshall

⁵ “The 100 People Who Are Changing America,” [Rolling Stone.com](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/26754176/the_rs_100_agents_of_change/6), 18 Mar. 2009, <http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/26754176/the_rs_100_agents_of_change/6>.

⁶ *Morning News at 9*, KTLA, Los Angeles, CA, 30 Jul. 2009.

⁷ Matthew Polly, “Re: Maddow,” email message to author, 9 Aug. 2009.

⁸ Jordan Schreiber, “Re: query for Jordan Schreiber,” email message to author, 30 Jul. 2009.

Scholarship; yet for her growing up gay meant growing up alienated, in a perennially hostile environment. Maddow hails from Castro Valley, California, a context she describes as “really homophobic and really racist.”⁹ Things didn’t much improve when she went to Stanford as an undergraduate, majoring in public policy. The 17 year old Maddow felt compelled to advertise her sexual preference by posting leaflets in the bathroom stalls of her dorm (an action she now rues as ‘obnoxious’).¹⁰

Clearly, Maddow was a fighter, yet she didn’t join a radical lesbian separatist motorcycle gang. Instead, moved by the suffering she’d seen in nearby San Francisco, Maddow became an AIDS activist. Her commitment to public service greatly impressed her Stanford professors,¹¹ and she received the John Gardner Fellowship in order to work with the Aids Legal Referral Panel in San Francisco. She went to Oxford in 1995, to study HIV/AIDS in British and American prisons, and finished her doctorate in 2001. Even in 2005, she still felt that “AIDS is the defining thing in my life, it makes me understand the world and my place in it.”¹²

But at Oxford, Maddow felt restless and out of place. A few months into the program¹³, she put her doctorate on hold, traded her Oxford apartment for a London squat, and became the general manager of a fledgeling organization called the AIDS Treatment Project. “Rachel took me to a public housing project,” says [Corey] Booker. “That was where she was hanging out, in this London version of a tough neighborhood...Most Oxford kids wouldn’t have even known that neighborhood existed.”¹⁴

Though every interview with Maddow mentions the scholarship, the magazine excerpt above is the only substantial nugget of information regarding her Rhodes experience in a sea of articles. She does not provide many details about this part of her past – in an email interview, she wrote “I don’t talk about it” — and given the media maelstrom she now inhabits, fellow

⁹ Shauna Swartz, “Radio Star Rachel Maddow,” [AfterEllen.com](http://www.afterellen.com/taxonomy/term/655?page=7), 29 Jan. 2007.
<<http://www.afterellen.com/taxonomy/term/655?page=7>>

¹⁰ Julia Baird, “When Left is Right,” [Newsweek](http://www.newsweek.com), 22 Nov. 2008.

¹¹ “Two Alumnae with Rhodes, Marshall Scholarships.” [Stanford University News](http://www.stanford.edu), 13 Dec. 1994. “John Cogan, senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and former Reagan administration official ... said Maddow was ‘one of the dozen best students I have taught at Stanford. I have never met any student who has her level of commitment and dedication to public service, bar none.’”

¹² Dyana Bagby, “Two ‘L-words’: Morning host adds ‘lesbian’ to ‘liberal’ radio’s success,” [SOVO: Southern Voice Online, Gay News, Entertainment, Opinion and Community Information for Atlanta, GA](http://www.southernvoice.com) 28 Jan. 2005.

¹³ In an email to the author dated 29 Sep. 2009, Rachel noted that she “was indeed in Oxford for my whole first year” and only moved to London “a couple of months” into her second.

¹⁴ Jessica Pressler, “The Dr. Maddow Show,” [Nymag.com](http://www.nymag.com), 2 Nov. 2008.
<<http://nymag.com/news/media/51822/>>

scholars I contacted were reluctant to provide many of their own. Diana Sabot Whitney (New Hampshire, '95) describes her as

*brilliant, hilarious and intimidating. When I first met her she had close-cropped blue hair, a thin physique, and a distinctive personality. She wore Doc Marten boots, white tee-shirts, and baggy jeans with chains hanging at the belt. I was terrified of her fierce intellect and a little in love with her. She had a wry half-smile, sweet doe-eyes, and this tough-as-nails dyke persona....Rachel was one of the funniest people I'd ever met. Friendly with everyone in our year, she was often the life of Rhodes gatherings with her dry wit.*¹⁵

Other stories and facts regarding her Oxford experience add up to amusing trivia, like the Cocktail Moments on Maddow's television show: She liked to party. She lived near the Bear. She loved London. She was mugged and, to ward off attackers, would sing at the top of her lungs while riding her bike home.¹⁶ Maddow is strikingly opaque about this period in her life. The woman who delights in revealing others on the air has deftly skirted the most common questions about her Scholarship experience.¹⁷

Q. In what ways does RM embody the values of the Rhodes Scholarship?

*A. The motto is "fighting the world's fight." In her radio and TV career, she's embodied it, challenging politicians she disagrees with and supporting those who embody what she believes in. Few people have the skills, ambition, or opportunity to impact the conversation the way Rachel has... in an extremely smart and witty way that pushes forward a progressive agenda.*¹⁸

Q. Name three ways in which she embodies a typical Rhodes Scholar.

*A. If you look at the selection criteria for the Rhodes Scholarship, I think Rachel embodies all of these qualities: "intellectual and academic achievement of a high standard, integrity of character, interest in and respect for their fellow beings, the ability to lead, and the energy to use their talents to the full."*¹⁹

¹⁵ Diana Whitney, "Re: dr. Maddow," email message to author, 13 Aug. 2009.

¹⁶ The Unofficial Rachel Maddow Fansite. Source - [The Rachel Maddow Show](http://www.maddowfans.com/bio/), Air America <<http://www.maddowfans.com/bio/>>, 18 Apr. 2006.

¹⁷ Rachel Maddow, Personal email interview, 29 Aug. 2009.

¹⁸ Matthew Polly, "Re: Maddow," email message to author, 9 Aug. 2009.

¹⁹ Jennifer Babik, "Re: rachel," email message to author, 20 Aug. 2009.

For any Rhodes Scholar who seeks to fight the world's fight – where are you going to fight it and how? Having her own television show, Maddow admits, is like winning “the job lottery.”²⁰ However, as Charlie found out in the chocolate factory, that winning ticket can weigh heavily in your hands.

The awesomely weird or weirdly awesome path to her present success began in 1999 with two job applications. While finishing her dissertation, she applied for a job as a yard boy and thereby met the love of her life, Susan Mikula, accountant and artist. Then, on a lark, Maddow auditioned for local radio and was hired on the spot. She hammed it up on the morning zoo (making goofy sound effects on her inflatable calculator suit), until her real break appeared: a job with Air America, a new, leftist radio station established in 2004.

This was the moment when she said goodbye to activism.²¹ Her first program was *Unfiltered*, where she shared the mike with a popular rap musician and a political comedian. *Unfiltered* didn't last, but led to the first *Rachel Maddow Show* on air. The AIDS issue, around which her scholarship and politics had previously centered, was – if not left behind – submerged in the larger issues of American politics.

Four years later, America voted for change, and all over the world, people were watching. Insofar as TV talk shows follow the zeitgeist, Maddow was a natural, and a two-for-one deal to boot: a woman and a liberal. She became the fresh face amongst veteran male commentators discussing the election on NBC, CNN, and MSNBC. As she herself put it, “we had this long, interesting, raving extravaganza of a Democratic primary ... with a white woman and a black man as the two major contenders. I think that it created a sort of affirmative-action impulse for pundits...”²² During election fever, Keith Olberman invited her as a guest host on his program *Countdown*, and by September 8, 2008, Maddow had her own show. MSNBC president Phil Griffin said: “We're hiring Rachel because she's a smart person. Rachel goes far beyond politics. She's an expert on military affairs. She was a Rhodes scholar.”²³ Maddow doubled the audience for the channel's 9PM slot in a matter of days.²⁴ A year later, her ratings have dropped to 1.1 million viewers, and 1.3 million follow her on Twitter. Given the fragmented audience of

²⁰ [Meet the Press](#), MSNBC, 16 Aug. 2009.

²¹ Bob Ickes, “Maddow About You,” [POZ.com](#). Health, Life & HIV, #155, June 2009. <http://www.poz.com/articles/rachel_maddow_hiv_2331_16629.shtml>

²² Kay Steiger, “Five minutes with: Rachel Maddow,” [Campus Progress.org](#), 20 Jun. 2008. <<http://www.campusprogress.org/5mw/3015/five-minutes-with-rachel-maddow>>.

²³ Bill Carter, “MSNBC Changes Prime Time Line-up,” [The New York Times](#), 19 Aug. 2008. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/20/business/media/20abra.html>>.

²⁴ Brian Stelter, “A Fresh Face on Cable, Sharp Rise in Ratings,” [The New York Times](#), 20 Oct. 2008. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/21/arts/television/21madd.html>>.

modern TV, these are great numbers.²⁵

Maddow must be one of the first outspoken women in the world not derided as “strident” or “shrill”. While her male counterparts often sound like boys in the locker room, spewing words like *butt*, *asshole*, *stupid*, *shut up*, *garbage*, she tends to be polite in a manner suspiciously Canadian. (Her mother hails from Newfoundland.) She’s described as *huggable*, *wonky*, *cutesy*, *quirky*, *winsome*, with a *gee-golly-whiz Wally Cleaver style*. TIME magazine lauds her as, “cheerful, careful and civil”...“the honeyed voice of reason,” she radiates “an essential decency”²⁶ And if sweetness makes you gag, note that she is often described as *sexy* and even as *Butch Fatale*.²⁷

Smart, Funny, Genuine

At the top of a raucous interview, former sidekick Lizz Winstead introduced Maddow as “one of the smartest...funniest...one of the most genuine” people she had ever met.²⁸ Being smart is the primary image of a Rhodes scholar, but that can be a perilous place for a mainstream news personality: too smart and you appear superior to your audience. Nevertheless, Maddow is against dumbing things down. She lets words like *liminal* and *arcane* float into TV-land, and she’ll tweet about a blog that posts poems by François Villon. When a television anchor complained that Maddow made her rush to her thesaurus, or even her dictionary, Rachel replied:

*There’s been an idea in American news, in American media, that people don’t really want anything that’s gonna make them think ... and I just don’t think that’s true. I think Americans are smart, and you can sort of do graduate school level work as long as you’re willing to explain things and assume people can come along with you.*²⁹

²⁵ “Because audiences have been so widely fragmented by the new technology, ratings that would have gotten a talk-show host canceled in the late 1980s create a superstar today.” David von Drehle, “Mad Man: Is Glenn Beck Bad for America?” [TIME.com](http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1924348,00.html), 17 Sep. 2009 <<http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1924348,00.html>>.

²⁶ Richard Corliss, “Rachel Maddow: MSNBC’s New Voice,” [Time.com](http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1838192,00.html), 8 Sep. 2008 <www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1838192,00.html>.

²⁷ Daphne Merkin, “Butch Fatale,” [The New York Times Style Magazine](http://www.nytimes.com/indexes/2009/02/22/style/t/index.html#pageName=22lesbian), Spring 2009 <<http://www.nytimes.com/indexes/2009/02/22/style/t/index.html#pageName=22lesbian>>.

²⁸Lizz Winstead, Shoot the Messenger, 17 Dec 2007 <<http://www.hotbar.com/Destination/Catalog/Play/Play.aspx?pid=857542>>.

²⁹ [Morning News at 9](http://www.morningnews.com), KTLA, Los Angeles, CA, 30 Jul. 2009. A few minutes after saying this, Maddow was embraced by the bouncy cheerleader – most likely a smart bouncy cheerleader.

One reason Maddow's graduate seminar works is because she finds striking metaphors for complex problems. When America's grand ol' man of talk shows, David Letterman feigned ignorance and asked Maddow to explain the economy, she compared Wall Street to a set of bumper cars.³⁰ On her program, in order to explain the situation in Iraq, she compared international relations to complicated sibling rivalry.³¹ Yet her real ace in the hole is a skill not on the Rhodes Scholar shopping list: her wit.

Maddow has a tremendous comic talent. She balances the tough stuff with *holy mackerel* stories. She makes up words like *pout-rage* and *war-metaphor-gasm*.³² She assumes complicity with her listeners – that they, like her, know the term *tea-bagging* counts as sexual innuendo; that they, like her, agree that some conservative opponents are — *make a funny face* — insane.³³ She frequently affects mock horror or astonishment, resembling no one more than Jimmy Stewart, whose characters were liberal naifs fighting for justice. She may be the only Rhodes Scholar to own clown shoes.³⁴ In the battle for the ratings, Maddow will don the red nose and make you laugh.

However, clowning can also dilute her contribution. Early on in her program, Maddow visibly flinched when criticized in person by conservative David Frum for her heavy sarcasm.³⁵ He later said that while Maddow was an “unusually thoughtful and intelligent person,” her show helped turn politics into a circus.³⁶ As if to illustrate this point, when Maddow's mentor Keith Olbermann leapt to her defense, it was with a gag-heavy ad hominem attack.³⁷ Personalities aside, Frum's challenge remains legitimate. “Given the small plate of responsibility that you have,” he asked, “how do you manage that responsibility?” Maddow pondered this issue during a *Mother Jones* interview:

*I'm a sarcastic person. I learn through humor. I think it's useful in the same way storytelling is useful, and that funny voices are useful, and emotion can sometimes be useful...*³⁸

³⁰[Late Show with David Letterman](#), NBC, New York, New York, 16 Mar. 2009.

³¹[The Rachel Maddow Show](#), MSNBC, New York, New York, 28 Jul. 2009.

³²[The Rachel Maddow Show](#), MSNBC, New York, New York, 24 Mar. 2009.

³³[The Rachel Maddow Show](#), MSNBC, New York, New York, 6 Feb. and 15 Apr. 2009.

³⁴Edward Levine, “A Pundit in the Country,” [The New York Times](#), 17 Oct. 2008.

³⁵[The Rachel Maddow Show](#), MSNBC, New York, New York, 13 Oct. 2008.

³⁶Baird, op. cit.

³⁷[Countdown](#), MSNBC, New York, New York, 16 Oct. 2008. Olbermann castigated Frum's apparent lack of “stones,” called him a hack, and nominated him for “Worst Person” to the strains of horror-movie music.

³⁸Alexandra Bezdikian, “10 Video Clips of Rachel Maddow with *MoJo* Editors Clara Jeffery and Monika Bauerlein,” on-stage conversation March 29, 2009, [Mother Jones](#), 31 Mar. 2009 <<http://www.motherjones.com/mojo/2009/03/exclusive-rachel-maddows-anxiety-dream-and-more-mother-jones-gala-video-clips>>.

The gags vs. gravitas conundrum re-surfaced during the controversy regarding Obama's birth certificate, when Maddow had the following discussion with Air America colleague Ana Marie Cox:

MADDOW: *Should we be making fun of this, or given how many people are buying into it, is this the sort of thing we should be totally sober and serious and debunking about?*

COX: *Oh, I think we have to be making fun of it. I think satire is actually a pretty serious weapon. ...*

MADDOW: *But what do you think is the sort of the darker reality and the darker implications of this? What do you think is the more serious stuff that lurks underneath the surface here?*³⁹

Television is an industry driven by ratings. What will keep them up? The graduate seminar or the goofy sound effects? "It's always important to have more fun than your enemy," Maddow said in 2007. "In political circles, it's always more important to be a) the cute people, and b) the people who have better parties and more fun. You get more recruits."⁴⁰ And Maddow's recruits are certainly flocking. She has a quality – let's face it – rare among Rhodes Scholars: she's cool. Sneakers, jeans, glasses, she's a vision of geek chic, lesbian chic, call it what you may. She's gut-splittingly hilarious describing the spinal implants she'd give to Democrats; priceless when parsing contemporary body language for Geraldine Ferraro; deliciously rumped while mixing cocktails in the morning for two scruffy boys on internet television.⁴¹ Will she win the charm offensive? Definitely. Still, I vote for the brain offensive. Here's hoping she doses her clowning carefully and keeps up the trend of making "smart the new black."⁴²

*Rachel was, and still is, very true to herself, and this is one of the qualities I most admire about her.*⁴³

³⁹ The Rachel Maddow Show, MSNBC, New York, New York, 3 Aug. 2009.

⁴⁰ AfterEllen.com, op.cit.

⁴¹ Spinal operations, Shoot the Messenger, op.cit; The Today Show, MSNBC, New York, New York, 20 May 2008; bartending for *Diggnation!* on internet television, 17 Jun. 2009, <<http://www.afterellen.com/blog/stuntdouble/rachel-maddow-mixes-a-drink-for-diggnation>>.

⁴² As she is described by Rolling Stone.com, op. cit.

⁴³ Jennifer Babik, "Re: rachel," email message to author, 20 Aug. 2009.

The Rhodes scholarship is not an IQ test — it is all the other qualities that make the scholarship unique, including the demand for “integrity of character.” In a world of artifice, Maddow’s authenticity is riveting. Under the glare of public scrutiny, Maddow has successfully resisted attempts to feminize her, though she submits to the make-up demanded by harsh TV lighting. She wears jackets with a plunging neckline, but tries to stick to dull colours. She’s true to herself in garb she describes as that of a “thirteen year old boy” though you could also call it the style of a thirteen year old, thirty year old, or even eighty year old lesbian.

Being out as a lesbian is the courageous emblem of her integrity, but in general she affects a folksy openness about her personal life. She tweets that she’s probably the only guest on a big-time talk show to bring her parents to the backstage party. She is frequently “humbled” – by her army of followers on Twitter or by the privilege of joining eminent broadcasters for a tribute to Walter Conkrite.⁴⁴ She’ll wear her own fishing waders to mock Sarah Palin, and if she brags, it’ll be about her collection of broken-down lawnmowers.⁴⁵ She told New York Magazine:

*Yeah, I’m the unlikely cable news host. But before that I was the unlikely Rhodes scholar. And before that I was the unlikely kid who got into Stanford. And then I was the unlikely lifeguard. You can always cast yourself as unlikely when you’re fundamentally alienated in your worldview. It’s a healthy approach for a commentator.*⁴⁶

Maddow is most impressive when she is 90% serious. Like a good Rhodes Scholar, she slaves like a workaholic to uncover what others overlook. Ignoring ratings, she devoted an entire hour to the war in Afghanistan, limiting jokes to the pronunciation of “Pakistan,” and she has jousting with Colin Powell and Queen Noor of Jordan on the same program. Genuine debates, like a recent one with Tom Ridge, former Bush Administration Homeland Security Secretary, generate tremendous interest.⁴⁷ The driving subtext to her program is an “intense concern with the American ideals of equity and civil responsibility”⁴⁸ and she’s strongest when this subtext becomes manifest, as it did after the discussion with Ridge, when she passionately urged Republicans to revive and redeem their party. There was no clowning and there was nothing unlikely about her.

⁴⁴ Rachel Maddow, “Humbling,” 18 Jul. 2009 <<http://twitter.com/maddow/status/2699873919>>.

⁴⁵ Levine, op. cit.

⁴⁶ Maddow quoted in Jessica Pressler, “The Dr. Maddow Show”, New York Magazine 2 Nov. 2008.

⁴⁷ The Rachel Maddow Show, MSNBC, New York, New York, 2 and 3 Sep. 2009.

⁴⁸ Ickes, op.cit.

The Rhodette Factor

Though she knows women have been rare in high-end media, Maddow tends to bristle when elbowed into the gender corner. “I get all sorts of credit for working on lesbian issues or women’s issues and even gay rights issues, none of which I do. ... When I graduated, the head of my department stood up and thanked me for my work on women’s rights and I didn’t do that at all. It’s weird.”⁴⁹

Is it weird? Or the logical result of the absence of women in authority? She might look like one of the boys, but that doesn’t mean she’s welcome in the club. David Letterman and media star Jon Stewart both damn her with faint praise.⁵⁰ She perches on the chair across from Letterman, hands primly folded as if she’s come to visit the vicar for tea. Next to the male high-media stars, she looks intimidated, and admits to it.⁵¹ As the only woman on a recent Bill Maher show, Maddow doesn’t comment on a tiresome sexist joke; despite her military savvy, doesn’t enter the discussion of Pakistan; and disappears under the bellowing of a pontificating panel-mate.⁵² She’s on a learning curve: how to stay “that charming woman,” not strident but still authoritative. Interestingly enough, Maddow used to perceive herself as aggressive. During a conference in 2005, Maddow complained that she wasn’t getting support “from women who I identify as feminists,” because she believed in confronting people, embarrassing them, and making them explain themselves. “I’m not a consensus builder.... I think that there is a wussie bias in feminist politics that doesn’t make room for people like me.”⁵³

The outsider who joins the mainstream will inevitably give up on something. Gone are the days when Maddow disrupted political gatherings, yelling and waving a banner that read “AIDS Drugs for Africa.”⁵⁴ She scrupulously separates her broadcasting role from that of an activist,⁵⁵ defining activism as “a system of organizing leverage toward a very specific thing you want to move in the world,”⁵⁶ and stresses that she’s not a “crusading” broadcaster. “The only

⁴⁹ Lee, op.cit.

⁵⁰ [The Daily Show](#), Comedy Central, New York, New York, 7 Jan. 2009; [Late Show with David Letterman](#), NBC, New York, New York, 16 Mar. 2009.

⁵¹ Regarding Conan O’Brien, for example, on KTLA, op.cit.

⁵² [Real Time with Bill Maher](#), HBO, New York, New York, 31 Jul. 2009.

⁵³ Transcript of conference, “The Scholar & Feminist XIX: Women as Changemakers: Building and Using Political Power,” Barnard College, 2005. [The Scholar & Feminist Online](#), <<http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/sfxxx/transcripts/S&Fpanel1.pdf>>.

⁵⁴ During Al Gore’s candidacy for president. Mentioned on “Unofficial Rachel Maddow Fansite,” <http://www.maddowfans.com>, source: [The Rachel Maddow Show](#), Air America, New York, New York, 26 May 2006.

⁵⁵ Ickes, op.cit.

⁵⁶ Bezdikian, op.cit.

thing I'm trying to change in the world is that I'm trying to increase the amount of useful information in it. And entertainment, honestly."⁵⁷ *Increasing the amount of useful information* is the reason Russian journalists get a bullet in their head. Gee whiz, it's no big deal? Let's arch a doubting eyebrow.

A Rhodes scholarship represents a promise to excel, and with the privilege of Oxford comes a gnawing anxiety over the years – are you? Not all Scholars feel the need to ask themselves this question – some even suffer from “rebarbative arrogance.”⁵⁸ Yet others lie awake, wondering if being “just” a professor, a financial analyst, a lawyer, a doctor, a mother, a lyric poet – is enough. Maddow has confessed to journalists that she is driven by a “fear of failure,”⁵⁹ wondering whether being a pundit is a worthwhile contribution to the world.⁶⁰

She can put the gnawing self-doubt to rest – her program teems with the desire to fight the world's fight, to persuade the viewer to see things the Maddow way – the liberal way, the smart way, the responsible way. Including – sorry, Cecil – the American way. It might be grimy and creased, but the potential glory of the Star Spangled Banner underpins every program, and the sound of the American hymn will make her cry.⁶¹ (The years in England barely made a dent in Maddow's quintessentially American world view, even though her dissertation included a study of British prisons.)

In fact, in the age of viral information, being a successful pundit is rapidly gaining a whole new meaning. That's why Maddow's reluctance to accept a leadership role as an agent of change is disappointing, given that “the other side” – the ranting circus on FOX television – attracts more attention. Take, for example, television and radio broadcaster Glenn Beck. His *Sturm und Drang* and ham-fisted humor have caused his popularity to balloon to such sizeable proportions that TIME magazine even put him on the cover. Beck dishes out innuendo in super-size dollops; he loves tasteless stunts, like pretending to be President Obama pouring gasoline all over a hapless bystander. Shenanigans aside, like any driven professional, Beck works assiduously to increase his profits. He has published five bestselling books; he is about to launch a magazine; and more importantly, he blurs the line between commentary and activism, goading thousands of disaffected Americans into political action. The numbers of people Beck can gather on the streets of Washington are still relatively small; nevertheless, he is focused on making an

⁵⁷ Clara Jeffrey, “Rachel Maddow's Star Power,” Mother Jones Jan/Feb 2009.

⁵⁸ As former American secretary of the Rhodes Trust, David Alexander puts it in ed. Anthony Kenny. The History of the Rhodes Trust 1902-99 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 101.

⁵⁹ Baird, op. cit.

⁶⁰ Sam Boyd, “Channel Changer,” The American Prospect – Liberal Intelligence. 24 Sep. 2008. Also Levine, op. cit.

⁶¹ Corliss, op. cit.; also Rachel Maddow, “Covering...” 29 Aug. 2009 <<http://twitter.com/maddow/status/3613621822>>.

impact. In this context, is Maddow's kinder, gentler kind of pundit a worthy contribution? In the end, that may not be enough to make much difference in the world's fight, especially in the American media. Yet to boost her political impact by trying to become a liberal Glenn Beck would be a contradiction in terms.

Maddow's visibility – shooting into Top 100 lists out of nowhere – belongs to the post-Obama landscape. Though Maddow is critical of the President, they have many things in common. Both enjoy a kind of cult of personality. Both change the optics of who can succeed and lead. Both got involved young as community activists. They are both highly educated and verbally adept. They are both creatures of the internet. They both seem remarkably real and natural on the screen. They both benefit from the hunger in America for something new, positive, and reflective of the new world order. They both embody the dilemma of whether being intelligent but civil can change the tone of political discourse.

On Election Day, Maddow joined the guru of fine living, Martha Stewart, on her show, and as they swapped food and cocktail recipes, they discussed Maddow's recent interview with Senator Obama. What did Rachel call the future president of the United States? "A policy dork," – which, she hastened to say, "was very comforting to me."⁶² Strikingly, 'dork' is a word Maddow uses to describe herself – a policy wonk, a dork.⁶³ On some level, Maddow identifies with Obama, and hence the extent to which she often dismisses Obama is surprising. Recently, on the Bill Maher show, she criticized the President for being "a moderate, centrist, not very revolutionary guy.... He's sort of a milquetoast guy who acts cautiously all the time...I find that the way he's being attacked is a totally unrecognisable caricature. People are attacking him as if he's me. But he's not – he's really normal." A surprised silence falls upon the audience, and Maher quips, "I must have listened to a different campaign."⁶⁴

Maddow's criticism of Obama, given their similarities, provokes the question – how revolutionary is Maddow? How cautious? If she discounts the power of Obama as an agent of change, then logically she discounts her own potential to transform the world simply by example.

No matter what the next weird or awesome bend in Maddow's career, her name will be writ bright in the history of the American left. For those who believe Rhodes Scholars are stodgy conservatives, it's worth reminding that many scholars in the past have been anything but. Amongst them are Fabians, American leftists, Australian Communists, Canadian social democrats. Yet before Trotskyites or fans of Ségolène Royal get too excited, here's a reminder as

⁶² [The Martha Stewart Show](#), Omnimedia, New York, New York, 4 Nov. 2008. While Stewart introduced Maddow to the technology of slicing garlic, our mixologist, in return, fixed a Joe Rickey.

⁶³ Explaining how she feels similar to the 1950s hero Wally Cleaver, she says: "Cause he is a dork." Levine, op. cit.

⁶⁴ [Real Time with Bill Maher](#), HBO, New York, New York, 31 Jul. 2009.

to what counts as left-wing in America. Speaking to scholarly feminists in 2005, Maddow said: "My Democratic Party, if I got to build it from the ground up, our core issue would be that if you can work in this country, you can make a living wage that you can raise a family on. You don't have to be far left to say that."⁶⁵ A few years later she added:

*I'm really motivated by the Bill of Rights. I'm really motivated by equality and injustice issues. In today's politics, that makes me a lefty. In 1960, that may not have made me a lefty. On some days, I kind of feel like an Eisenhower Republican, but there aren't Eisenhower Republicans anymore. I believe in a public sector that works.*⁶⁶

The spectre of socialist Maddow needn't haunt conservative America.

Smart, funny, genuine. It's only been a year since lightning struck, but already Maddow is revitalizing American liberalism, and making it cool to be smart. Rhodes selection committees, brace yourselves. Kids – girls and boys all over the United States -- are writing in their diaries: *I want to be Rachel Maddow when I grow up.* Dr. Maddow is an agent of change both with and without trying to be, in a way that may not be weird at all – just awesome.

The time is now to take the radical step as Americans, as civic-minded Americans concerned about our future. It's time to take the radical step of privileging correct information over incorrect information....

If you are wrong from here on out, you should lose the argument, and you should lose your political potency...get out of the way of the people who are actually trying to save the country.

--Rachel Maddow ⁶⁷

⁶⁵ "The Scholar & Feminist XIX," op. cit.

⁶⁶ Lee, op. cit.

⁶⁷ [The Rachel Maddow Show](#), MSNBC, New York, New York, 6 Feb. 2009.