

This article originally appeared on CNNMoney.com.

January 4, 2010

Will the real Lou Dobbs please stand up?

By David A. Kaplan

(Fortune Magazine) -- Lou Dobbs is apparently larger than life, which is pretty much just the way he wants it.

When you enter the Midtown Manhattan studio of his syndicated radio show, the first thing you see is Big Lou -- in a pinpoint shirt, striped tie, and dark-blue suit adorned with de rigueur flag pin. With his waves of sandy hair, confident gaze, and glint of a smile, the 64-year-old is the essence of Distinguished Broadcaster.

I approach to shake his hand. "Hello, sir!" bellows an emerging presence at the door at the opposite end of the room. That's the real Lou Dobbs, in argyle sweater, jeans, and a Rolex baseball cap. He waves me over. "Let's go get a sandwich!"

The other Lou is actually a life-size cardboard cutout, designed for radio trade shows and now part of the studio trimmings that include giant posters for his bestselling books. Cardboard Lou is so convincingly wrought that I was, believe it or not, certain it was he.

Dobbs jokes it's slimmer and trimmer than he is, but the line also unintentionally raises larger questions about who the real Lou Dobbs is: True Believer or Ideological Mercenary? Right now, depending on whom you ask, Dobbs is the most despised, or best-loved, broadcaster in America.

The questions about his identity matter, especially as Dobbs says he's contemplating a third-party run for national office in 2012, either for the U.S. Senate or, incredibly, the White House. Whichever route he takes, the erstwhile voice of the financial world -- the Cronkite for the business community for two decades -- is clearly casting about for his next act.

In 1981 Dobbs was one of the first business anchors at CNN and helped build the upstart. Steady, authoritative, and Harvard-credentialed, Dobbs won a Peabody for his coverage of the 1987 stock market crash and an Emmy for lifetime achievement.

Then 9/11 and Wall Street scandals like Enron transformed -- or transmogrified -- him into an opinion-spewing, rabble-rousing provocateur. You could count on Fox's Bill O'Reilly to attack from the right, and MSNBC's Keith Olbermann from the left. By

contrast, Dobbs was a bilious brew on CNN. Confoundingly, he also was hard to peg, an assortment of contradictions that reflected either independence or opportunism.

For example, he seemed to have genuine concerns for U.S. jobs and empathy for the middle class, yet it's hard to be a paragon of the people when you have your own plane and preside over a 300-acre farm, Hickory Hollow, in the suburbs of New York City.

He wants us all to buy American, yet that twin-engine Hawker jet of his was made in the U.K. by British Aerospace. He has railed against illegal aliens yet professed support for immigration. He opposed outsourcing, globalization, and unfettered trade yet calls himself a champion of free enterprise. He has little use for unions or corporations.

He's pro-choice and anti-gun-control. He wants out of Iraq and Afghanistan. He despises "elites" yet is an Ivy Leaguer. He has denounced the Pope, the United Nations, bailouts, and Columbus Day. He called for the impeachment of George W. Bush, and relentlessly skewers Barack Obama, whom he mocks as "our supreme leader." For the past eight years Dobbs has been a populist madman.

But then, in November, CNN cut him loose, though neither party to the breakup will officially describe it that way. Positioning itself as a neutral in the ideological cable wars between Fox and MSNBC, CNN concluded that Dobbs's fulminations had ceased to have utility, since his ratings weren't very good; it didn't help either that Dobbs was perceived at CNN as leaning right when a lot of folks there happened to lean left.

An executive at Time Warner ([TWX](#), [Fortune 500](#)), which owns CNN (as well as Fortune), calls it a divorce between spouses who hadn't been getting along for some time. Dobbs walked away with upwards of \$8 million, according to sources who asked for anonymity. Neither Time Warner nor Dobbs would comment on the terms of his contractual release.

Nobody, though, disputes that Dobbs was stunned that CNN was ending his run of nearly 30 years (interrupted only by a much-lampooned two-year interlude at [space.com](#) during the dotcom bubble). He announced his departure on the air and was gone minutes later, describing his exit in what sounded like a stump speech.

With a huge digital Stars and Stripes waving behind him, he said: "Over the past six months it's become increasingly clear that strong winds of change have begun buffeting this country. ... Some leaders in media, politics, and business have been urging me to go beyond my role here at CNN and to engage in constructive problem solving, as well as to contribute positively to a better understanding of the great issues of our day." Strong winds indeed.

He says now the hurt is gone and he is "exhilarated" to have fresh choices. Fox presumably would be thrilled to have him on its business channel or in its cable stable with such bloviating stallions as Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity. Even without a TV

presence for the moment, Dobbs can roar away on his daily three-hour radio gig (as well as a separate repeating one-minute spot on business news).

And while he's wise enough to acknowledge the hassles of politics, he is altogether charmed by the idea of elected office. "It's flattering that so many people have urged me to consider it," he says. So who are those people? Dobbs declines to say.

Roots from the heartland

Dobbs can rightfully claim to be a product of the heartland -- and he's also from places that know of immigration, much of it illegal. He was born in the Texas Panhandle, and after his father's propane business failed, the family moved to a small southern Idaho town called Rupert. (Besides Dobbs, its most notable citizen is Bill Fagerbakke, the voice of Patrick Starfish, best friend of SpongeBob SquarePants.)

A significant part of Rupert's population has long been Hispanic. Dobbs spent summers in the bean and potato fields with migrant workers, and autumns playing offensive tackle for Minico Regional High. He was an exceptional student and class president, and school administrators noticed.

They helped him apply to Harvard, and Dobbs was accepted in 1963. He made the Crimson football team, and after hearing a debate between Milton Friedman and Paul Samuelson across the river at MIT, Dobbs fell in love with economics and wound up majoring in it.

Harvard also left an impression on him, as he "became fascinated with the big questions." The farm boy had come east just as the cultural and political tumult of the '60s was beginning. Dobbs is vague about how much the Cambridge scene affected him. Pot? Protests? Free love? Did he behave in the way Lou Dobbs might criticize today?

"I would give you the answer that [Los Angeles Lakers coach] Phil Jackson gave to that very question: 'I fully participated in my generation.'" If Dobbs believes in transparency and asks his guests hard questions, why wouldn't he answer? "Now that my children are grown," he says, "I can tell you without reservation or equivocation I am glad that that's the only answer I have ever given anybody." It's a curiously coy admission of youthful indiscretions but also an indication that there is in fact more to Dobbs's arch, un-nuanced worldview.

'Mr. Independent'

After Harvard, he worked for a while in federal antipoverty programs on the East Coast, then returned to Idaho for a brief try at law school, then moved on to L.A. to work for a bank. He knew journalists who seemed to be having more fun than he was, so he got a job at the *L.A. Times* as a copyeditor. Unable to break into the reportorial ranks and mocked by his editor when Dobbs mentioned going into broadcasting, Dobbs did just that -- he moved to Yuma, Ariz., to work the police and fire beats for a radio station,

which led to a TV affiliate there, and then he was off to anchor positions in Phoenix and Seattle.

Dobbs was glib, and his voice and CEO looks gave him a commanding presence. And he was young. When Ted Turner's nascent 24-hour cable news network in 1980 went looking for a business anchor, Dobbs was perfect. Barely 35, he was chief economics correspondent and host of the nightly *MoneyLine*, which much later became *Lou Dobbs Tonight*.

Over time his detractors would come to think of it as *What on Earth Will Lou Say Tonight?* Corporate corruption and the terrorist attacks, Dobbs says, rattled him -- and made him think he had let his audience down. "I'm sitting there worrying about pro forma accounting in 2000 when I should've been worrying about outright fraud on the part of WorldCom and Enron." He says that 9/11 undercut his faith in government and caused him to connect the dots between national security and border security.

Dobbs embraces the notion that he's idiosyncratic. "Mr. Independent," as he brands himself, has to be. If you could predict every view he'd espouse "on the great issues of the day," you might opt for the easy nostrums of O'Reilly or Olbermann. To move "beyond partisanship" and instead engage in "rigorous, empirical discussion," Dobbs says, you have to do it "in the most honest, direct language possible."

The devil is in the details, of course -- and therein lies the commotion over Dobbs.

Here he is moving "beyond partisanship" a few months ago, on the occasion of President Obama's creation of a "pay czar" to monitor executive compensation: "The number of czars in the administration -- roughly 20. That would amount to almost as many czars as there were in czarist Russia." If the subtext wasn't clear, Dobbs then paraded various images of Nicholas II, Ivan the Terrible, and other Russky scoundrels across the screen.

On a "rigorous" discussion of "ObamaCare," here's Dobbs's prescription a few weeks ago: "We're going to have to move into street demonstrations. We're going to have to make it very clear and protest physically."

And from a few years ago, here's the TV voice of empiricism on his signature issue: "The invasion of illegal aliens is threatening the health of many Americans. Highly contagious diseases are now crossing our borders decades after those diseases had been eradicated in this country." One such loathsome affliction, he said, was leprosy; when Lesley Stahl on *60 Minutes* in 2007 called him out for misstating the actual number of cases, he unabashedly replied, "If we reported it, it's a fact." Dobbs told me he acknowledged he got it wrong. The better question is why leprosy was worth valuable airtime on CNN.

That's half the battle in editorial decision-making. It's not only what you say but the topics on which you say it. If the latter are heavily directed to issues that traffic on the

fears of the fringe -- of foreign things, of experts, of people who speak in sentences as long as this one -- then it means you'll ignore entire categories of what many folks consider news.

Take Dobbs and the Birthers. Even as he insists he believes "Barack Obama is a citizen of the United States," Dobbs has given voice to the conspiracy nuts who maintain the President was born elsewhere. "Why not release your [long-form] birth certificate?" bellowed Dobbs on the radio show in July.

When I asked Dobbs why he would fixate on that faux controversy, he feigns confusion. "I was just raising the question that others were asking," he says, as if that were an explanation of why it's that question he emphasizes rather than countless others, particularly when Dobbs has already conceded Obama is a citizen.

The entire line of inquiry has an absurd quality to it. If Dobbs weren't so affable, he'd be infuriating to engage in linear debate.

What's next?

Dobbs is now at a crossroads -- whether to go back to TV, aim to compete with the likes of Rush Limbaugh on radio, or enter the Twilight Zone of politics.

Not long ago, to the theme song of that Rod Serling favorite, I watched *The Lou Dobbs Show* open another afternoon inside the talk-show echo chamber. "You walk through the door and see partisan hacks selling out middle-class Americans," intones the radio MC. "Aghast at the sight of clowns to the left and jokers to the right, you seek the sanity of the political center -- you've just crossed over to the Lou Dobbs Zone."

There are the constant references to Lou Dobbs, "the radical centrist," and his commitment to "not just the facts, but truth, justice, and the American way." The program consists of Dobbs's monologues, interviews, and clips of politicians of all stripes saying stupid things.

And then there's the shameless hawking of Lou Dobbs products. "Check out the Lou Dobbs store -- all of that merchandise made in America!" Dobbs tells the audience, which is about 2 million people a week -- much smaller than Rush's but not bad for a program that turns two in March. "That's LouDobbs.com. Didn't know it could be done, did you? But it is possible. All it takes is will. And a little money to buy American."

I did check it out. There are \$24.95 "Wake Up America" travel mugs, \$19.95 "America By God" T-shirts, and a \$49.95 annual membership in Lou Dobbs's "Independent America," which gets you not only "premium member-only podcasts of *The Lou Dobbs Show*" but a discount "on all purchases in the Lou Dobbs store." I'm pretty sure Edward R. Murrow didn't offer this kind of loot.

But then Murrow was a journalist. By his own account, Dobbs doesn't call himself that anymore. "I'm a talk show host," which is to say, he's an entertainer.

One's self-image means a lot. When he puts on the professional mask each day, he has to decide who he is. His wife, Debi, who happens to be Mexican-American, says he's the same man with or without an audience; she told Fortune she decries "how they paint him out to be a racist" or any suggestion he's anti-immigrant.

Based on his performance as a business anchor, few doubt his intelligence, which is why many doubt his post-2001 conversion. The old Lou, if a bit of a Wall Street sycophant, showed mastery of subject and tonal modulation. In short, he knows better.

The new Lou, evoking the Howard Beale "mad as hell" character in *Network*, is more about heat than light -- and he's not even particularly good at it compared with other firebrands on the air. His populism often seems like calculation by any other name.

Lou Dobbs has traded in journalism for the carnival. The pay's better, but it's reasonable to ask if the price is self-respect. ■