

Opinion: Lou Dobbs and his issues

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Body

SAN DIEGO Many Latinos probably feel like salsa dancing in the streets now that CNN has finally cleared the air by purging itself of Lou Dobbs.

Dobbs' problem wasn't that he opposed illegal immigration. That's true of most Americans. Yet somehow they don't wind up being caricatured as Dobbs was recently on NBC's "Saturday Night Live" as a paranoid Latino-phobe warning of an invasion of folks eager to wash dishes, pick lettuce, and do other jobs for which Americans have lost their appetite. How did Dobbs get so lucky? "You could be a racist and not be against illegal immigration," said Enrique Morones, a San Diego-based immigration activist and anti-Dobbs crusader. "And you could be against illegal immigration and not be a racist although, a lot of times, if not most, they go hand in hand."

What really bothered Morones about Dobbs and how he ran his show bothered him enough to start corresponding in 2005 with Dobbs via e-mail and protest outside the CNN building in Atlanta in 2006 was where the host set up his lemonade stand.

"He was promoting his cause on CNN," Morones said, "which bragged about being 'the most trusted name in news.' And he's on there slamming Mexicans."

To Morones, Dobbs was polluting the CNN brand. It appears that CNN management finally reached the same conclusion. The Dobbs-CNN divorce has been packaged as a mutual parting. But the relationship between Dobbs and CNN President Jon Klein had, according to reports, become contentious amid Klein's attempts to rein in the egocentric host. "I'm perfectly clear about CNN firing Lou Dobbs," Morones said. "They're not going to say that. Because it's one of these situations where they'll say, 'Well, he realizes that the writing is on the wall, and that it's best for him to resign.' To me, that says he was fired. Jon Klein didn't want him in there anymore."

So how did Dobbs get turned into a cartoon that got canceled? One reason is that he did something that he criticized his critics of doing: he conflated legal and illegal immigration. Not only because he gave loads of airtime to commentators, authors and advocacy groups that want to ban all immigration, but also because his show would seamlessly weave together segments on border security (which pertains directly to illegal immigration) with segments on language and culture (which can also be impacted by legal immigration). People figured Dobbs had issues with Latino immigrants period. No matter how they get here. One former CNN executive who is Indian-American seemed to conclude as much. A few years ago, when she was still with the network, she told me that Dobbs saw himself as the defender of "real Americans" who looked more like him and nothing like her.

My own relationship with Dobbs is complicated. For the last few years, I've served as a regular contributor to cnn.com. And before that, I appeared on Dobbs' show a half-dozen times. Last year, during one of his monologues, he criticized me for backing up Obama after the then-presidential candidate accused Dobbs of stirring racial and ethnic animosity. A few years ago, during a chance meeting, Dobbs accused me of calling him a racist

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and a xenophobe. I told him that I had done no such thing, and that all I'd written was that he was making a handsome living (\$7 million to \$9 million per year, according to the New York Post) by pandering to racists and xenophobes. It was bigotry, fear, and ignorance that paid the mortgage on Dobbs' lavish horse farm in New Jersey.

Now Dobbs will have to find another way to pay his bills. Say, he could always take a page from immigrants and sell oranges on street corners. Don't laugh. It's a more decent product than what he's been peddling these last few years.

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