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Audience Discusses Politics and Vampires with Three Authors

BYLINE: Susan Rook

HIGHLIGHT:

A liberal and a conservative offer readers a test in their book, "Are You a Conservative or a Liberal?" Anne Rice watched CNN to do research for her first 20th century novel.

BRAD O'LEARY, CONSERVATIVE AUTHOR: I'm a liberal because I believe that all Americans should have equality of rights, regardless of race, religion, color or sexual preference, and because I believe as a society we have an obligation to take care of those who cannot take care of themselves.

VICTOR KAMBER, LIBERAL AUTHOR: I'm a conservative because I believe in the lessons that have been taught to us by our founding fathers in the Constitution. We should follow those lessons. We should also create a society where people who work for a living and build wealth don't have that wealth taken from them by a confiscatory government. I also believe that God is a partner in our society, and legislation we pass should keep that in mind.

SUSAN ROOK, HOST, CNN TALKBACK LIVE: So are you a conservative or a liberal, or are you just confused? Sort it out, just in time for election '96. And stand by to talk back.

Hello, and welcome to TALKBACK LIVE, our interactive talk show, right here at CNN Center in Atlanta. Phone us, fax us or go online with Compuserve to tell us what you're thinking.

Well, Campaign '96 is on the home stretch. And six days from now, how will you vote? Do you call yourself conservative, liberal or a little lost?

CITIZEN: I don't feel that there would be a whole lot of difference depending on which candidate is elected.

ROOK: Are Bill Clinton and Bob Dole blurring the lines between what has traditionally been

considered liberal and conservative? Dole accuses Clinton of stealing Republican ideas.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

ROBERT DOLE, REPUBLICAN PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: All he has to do is to find out my stand on an issue, and just stand up and say, Oh, me too, me too.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

PRESIDENT CLINTON: The era of big government is over.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

ROOK: Some Democrats believe the president is too moderate. Clinton signed a tough welfare reform bill. He believes in capital punishment. He says his tax hike was a mistake. And for the first time ever, the Fraternal Order of Police is endorsing a Democrat.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

WILLIAM BRATTON, FORMER NEW YORK POLICE COMMISSIONER: Something historic happened this year. A Democratic president stole the issue away.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

ROOK: At a campaign stop in Minneapolis last week, the president praised a liberal state senator's support of deficit reduction.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

PRESIDENT CLINTON: Senator Paul Wellstone said yes, that was the conservative thing to do.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

ROOK: Joining us now are the authors of the book, "Are You a Conservative or a Liberal?" Victor Kamber calls himself the liberal of the pair. Brian O'Leary is the conservative. And both are joining us from Washington. Welcome. We're so glad that you're here.

This is great. Now, you call your book -- and everybody has been taking your test -- you call it a fun and easy test to tell where you stand on the political spectrum. So I think this is a perfect opportunity for Conner's question. Go ahead.

CONNER: My question was, when are the Republicans going to go back to being Republicans, and when are the Democrats going to go back to being Democrats?

O'LEARY: Well, I'd certainly like to see that happen right now. Bill Clinton has become a Republican candidate, and Dole has moved a little bit towards that liberal sound that he hears.

And most candidates, at least the candidates for president, are doing that. Hopefully, the candidates out there in your congressional district aren't doing that.

KAMBER: Let me say it a little differently. I don't believe that they, frankly, have deserted their parties. The issues have changed, and frankly, most presidential candidates in our lifetime have been centrists. Bill Clinton is a centrist, slightly left of center. Bob Dole is a centrist, slightly right of center.

From John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerry Ford, Jimmy Carter, George Bush - they're all centrists. The only president we've had...

O'LEARY: Except Ronald Reagan.

KAMBER: ... in this century, of our modern lifetime, who was a conservative has been Ronald Reagan. We normally elect centrists.

O'LEARY: And I'm a Ronald Reagan conservative.

ROOK: Following on that, Buck has a question that we will send to Brad O'Leary. Brad, I bet you didn't know you had a new name.

O'LEARY: Yes, I caught it.

ROOK: Thank you for being a good sport about it. We apologize. Buck, go ahead.

BUCK: Well, as I was saying, I don't think I'm a liberal or a conservative. I feel like I'm more moderate. And I just don't -- well, that's just the way I feel.

ROOK: So Buck would be one of the ones who's a perfect candidate for your book. Now, we've got the book here. We're going to give it to Buck, have him start taking the test. And we'll kind of see because a lot of folks who feel like Buck take the quiz in your book, and they say, wow, I didn't realize that.

But let's go to the definition of liberal and conservative because a lot of folks who are in the Compuserve forum sent us messages, and they would say -- Quentin, by the way, is monitoring the forum for us today; thank you -- suggesting that we look it up in the dictionary. So we did.

Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary calls it, a conservative, "one who adheres to traditional methods or views." And Webster's defines liberal as -- it's from the same Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary -- a liberal: "one who is open-minded or not strict in the observance of orthodox, traditional or established forms or ways."

O'LEARY: I'm glad you used Webster's and not Random House, because Random House has a big bias towards conservative, and their definition is definitely out of sync with what Webster's is.

ROOK: We were trying to get the most unbiased.

O'LEARY: You did.

ROOK: Jerry, you have a question. Go ahead.

JERRY: In all this centrist movement that you're talking about, is there any chance of a third party emerging in this next decade? We seem to not have any spirit here in the American people of finding a new place. Can you comment on that?

O'LEARY: I think you're not going to have a third party. You're going to have both parties taken back by the traditional left side or right side. Ross Perot, I don't know where Ross Perot is on most of the issues out there, and he hasn't taken a stand on them. So you can't say you're going to have a feisty third party unless a party has true beliefs and can communicate that to the people.

ROOK: Norm is joining us on the phone from California. Hi, Norm.

NORM: Hi, Susan.

ROOK: Do you have a question or comment? Go ahead.

NORM: I have a comment. I would label myself as being a middle- of-the-road conservative. However, I find that in this election, terms like conservative or liberal have gotten completely blurred. Basically, we've dealt with issues such as Medicare, such as education. And Republicans are into Democratic issues; Democrats are into Republican issues. Affirmative action has basically been improperly explained to the average American so that they can take an honest vote on it.

And I think basically we don't need a third party in this country. We...

ROOK: Let's talk about the lines blurring a little bit. Norm, thanks for calling. We sure do appreciate it. A lot of the folks in the audience are agreeing with that. Tammy, go ahead.

TAMMY: It seems that the candidates these days have picked two, three, maybe four fashionable topics and harped on that and harped on that and harped on that rather than taking a look at all the issues that are affecting the American people and things that the American people need.

KAMBER: There's two reasons for that. One speaks to the American public's willingness to focus on many issues. Most campaigns, most consultants will suggest to a candidate that they frankly should focus on three or four issues, and repeat and repeat and repeat, because the American public isn't willing to spend the amount of time.

Let me go back to one other thing, Susan. When we talk about moderate, conservative or liberal or centrist, to be any of those, you have to take a position. Buck, one of your first audience, who said he's a moderate, in the center, that means he takes a lot of positions, some on the left, some on the right, some in the middle. But that's fine. That's what America's all about.

And the reason most of our candidates for president are centrists is because the issues do change and they blur. Bill Clinton on welfare was conservative. Bill Clinton on death penalties conservative, Bill Clinton on gays and marriage is conservative. But Bill Clinton on a whole lot of other things is liberal. So it balances out.

ROOK: We've got to take a break. Mike in Iowa just sent us this fax, following up on what you were just saying. "Labels can never accurately characterize an individual. But in a very hot political season, the labels will be kind of tossed around."

So we're asking you, do you call yourself conservative? Are you leaning toward liberal? What do those words really mean, anyway? The answer might surprise you. Stay tuned.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

ROOK: That question about Medicaid is one of about 30 questions that Buck is currently reading in the book, "Are You a Conservative or a Liberal?" And our guests will ask some of the other questions in the book to sort of help folks figure out where they stand politically.

And some of the questions even might surprise you. It's very interesting. So if you call yourself a liberal or a conservative, tell us, and tell us why. Ben is joining us at the Smithsonian. As you know, on Wednesdays, we're joined by an audience in the Information Age exhibit of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History.

Ben, go ahead with your question.

BEN: I've heard a lot in the media recently about how conservatives have been somewhat successful in making the term liberal a dirty word. I'm wondering if that's just the term itself or whether the ideas that are traditionally associated with liberal have also been kind of -- been considered dirty in recent times?

O'LEARY: I think it's the ideas but, you know, it switches. During the time when Barry Goldwater was running for president, conservative was a dirty word. Today liberal is a dirty word, and one of the reasons that Clinton has moved more towards the Republican side of the aisle on many of those issues is because the ideas that he came to Washington with didn't sell.

ROOK: Vic, you want to support your party there?

KAMBER: No, I disagree with Brad. Bill Clinton hasn't changed on his ideas. Bill Clinton was a governor from a Southern state, and he frankly has always been a centrist. He didn't change his views on the death penalty or welfare reform. This is what he's believed.

In terms of the question of the caller, I think it's just that it's a dirty word, that people have run against liberals for the last 10, 12 years, made it bad. The definition of liberals is big government, big spending, which has nothing to do with what a liberal is, but that's how they've been defined.

O'LEARY: It has everything to do with what a liberal is.

KAMBER: Brad was correct in the one thing when he said that the Democrats demonized the conservatives in the 60s with Barry Goldwater. If you were a conservative, you were a kook, you were a nut. Today Barry Goldwater is an icon, a hero, and conservative isn't that bad.

ROOK: Karen has a comment that she'd like to make. Go ahead.

KAREN: I think the label today is irrelevant. I think most voters will pick according to the issues. And I'm typical in that way in that I'm very conservative on some issues and very liberal on others, and the label doesn't apply anymore. And I think that's probably typical today.

So you pick the top three issues that are important to you, and which candidate supports those issues, and that's the one you wind up with, I think.

O'LEARY: We've got 120 questions in the book, and you've got to take them all to find out what you really are. Rush Limbaugh took them, found he wasn't the perfect conservative.

ROOK: Scored a 5.

O'LEARY: Right, scored a 5, found out he wasn't a perfect conservative on that test. But I think you've got to find out if the candidate -- if you're going to pick just three issues, you're missing out on American society today. There's lots more than three issues that should be important to you and your family and to the businesses that you work for.

KAREN: This is true. However, it could be that you have 10 issues, and 5 you're very conservative on, 5 you're very liberal on. And then you have to decide which are the really, really important ones to you, because there is a blur. I think the labels are irrelevant.

KAMBER: We don't disagree. It's not the labels we're really concerned with. That's the title of the book. What we're really saying in the book is, where are you on the political spectrum, though, and how did you get there? What is the totality of -- you're a human being with a lot of ideas, a lot of issues. You got there in a certain way. How did you get there, and where do you fit? And frankly, if you fit as a conservative, you may like Ted Kennedy on three issues, but if you come out as a conservative, you'd be ludicrous, even though on those three issues you like Ted Kennedy, to vote for him, because he is clearly a liberal.

O'LEARY: So you'd be ludicrous to vote for him.

ROOK: Sarah's joining us on the phone from Virginia. Hey, Sarah, go ahead.

SARAH: Hi. I consider myself probably a moderate to liberal. We've raised four children in a loving home, Christian atmosphere, and I can't stand that, you know, term Christian -- Muslim, whatever they want to use, everything. And we vote Democratic, but I mean, Newt and his friends, they've made it dirty to be a normal American, or what he considers a normal American.

And I just think we don't have to have any labels anymore.

People are people. This is America. And...

O'LEARY: We've had labels...

ROOK: Are we going for the shorthand in everything? Vic, to you first. Is this political shorthand that the pollsters can, you know, ask questions and we can toss around and use, pigeonholing people?

KAMBER: Brad started the answer. We've had labels all our history as a country, from George Washington on, and frankly, from

civilization on. We're not advocating shortchanging this to labels. All we're suggesting is, let's not deal -- the problem has been we stereotype people on one issue. You're pro-life; obviously, you're a conservative. You're pro-choice; obviously, you're a liberal. We're saying that's not the case. You've got to look at the full spectrum of issues to see where you come down on a political scale, and that's all we're really suggesting Americans should do before they vote.

ROOK: Lynn has a comment that she wants to make.

LYNN: I would like to know what is the problem with lines between the parties blurring? And if they're both moving toward the middle, isn't that our best chance for bipartisan cooperation? Isn't that our best opportunity to eliminate gridlock in Congress?

O'LEARY: I am totally against bipartisan cooperation, totally against it. And there is nothing wrong with two political views arguing and finding the middle. But if you don't have two political views, we're going to wind up with a state like communism was, where everybody agrees with what the leader tells us to agree with.

KAMBER: I think the difference that Brad and I have is you don't want to personalize it. There's nothing wrong with arguing issues, there's nothing wrong with having different views. And Republicans do. We have a limited pot of money. Each side wants to spend it in a different way. Republicans feel it should be spent one way, Democrats feel it should be spent another way. That's what good debate is, that's what good politics is. You the voter has to decide who you want to spend your money.

ROOK: Jimmy in New York just sent us this fax. "It's about time that people can be proud to call themselves liberal again. I am an ultra liberal. And..."

KAMBER: Good for you, Jimmy.

ROOK: "... in a democratic society, that's the way it should be." That's Jimmy in New York.

KAMBER: I think that's great. I want to meet him, Susan.

ROOK: Is it OK to call yourself a liberal now?

O'LEARY: It's always been OK, it's always been OK. I mean, you should be proud to call yourself a conservative or a liberal. The only people that are afraid of labeling are those people afraid of taking positions.

ROOK: OK. Another comment from Linda. Speaking of taking positions, I know you'll like this one. Go ahead.

LINDA: Yes. Really what we've talked about a lot this morning is the difference between Democrats and Republicans and middle-of-the-road folks. What about the integrity of the individual running for that office? I'm concerned that we've got the highest political office in the country and one of the gentleman running has several lawsuits up, you know, in court, and maybe they'll come about before

this election, maybe they won't. Shouldn't that individual have a little more integrity than, you know...

KAMBER: I assume you're -- you know, obviously, Bob Dole is not a saint, if that's who you're talking about. If you're talking about Bill Clinton, he's not a saint, either. The fact is both sides...

LINDA: I was talking about Bill Clinton.

KAMBER: I know who you were talking -- I know you were. I understood that. But the point is that we're not electing saints. We're electing leaders, politicians. Ethics should play a role, morals should play a role, but that's what you as a voter have to help decide, how much that plays a role versus other things. But we're not voting for saints here, we're not voting for priests or our religious leaders. We are voting for our leader of our country.

O'LEARY: But we're voting for someone who's going to teach our children, and that moral value has a lot to do with who the next president of the United States should be and should teach our children.

ROOK: We have got to take a break. Just ahead, more on the questions and the answers that will help spell out where you stand on the political spectrum. We're going to go over to Buck and see how he's doing on the reading of the political quiz -- right, left or right down the middle? We'll find out.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

ROOK: So some answers to our questions about how to figure out if you are a liberal or a conservative. Let's talk about the Medicaid question first. We're going over to buck. And Buck, which level of government is better able to administer key welfare programs such as Medicaid, federal or state? As you were looking at that in the book, what did you think?

BUCK: I think the federal government would be better.

ROOK: Brad or Vic, on the basis of that...

KAMBER: Well, on that question, clearly he is more liberal than conservative. If you're for state government control, local control, you're on the more conservative side. If you think the federal government is in a better position, you're more on the liberal on that question.

ROOK: On the death penalty, do you support the death penalty, Buck?

BUCK: Well, I do and I don't. That's the reason -- I don't know which way to go. I figure I'm more moderate on that particular deal than would be conservative or liberal. It's just the case that you're -- whether you have the death penalty or not. I would think you'd have to judge by that. And if you got sentenced -- oh, it's just terrible to say. I just don't know.

ROOK: Brad?

O'LEARY: It's up to a judge or a governor to decide whether or not you're going to get the death penalty, but a conservative view is to say yes, the death penalty should be legal and allowable in all the states.

KAMBER: But, Susan, what Buck was saying, though, if he's making a decision based on the case, then he obviously believes at least there is opportunity to use the death penalty.

ROOK: Do you think so, Buck? Opportunity to use it sometimes?

BUCK: Yes, uh-huh. Yes, I do.

KAMBER: Then that would put him on...

O'LEARY: That would be a conservative.

KAMBER: See, I believe there's no chance for the death penalty.

ROOK: OK. The quiz. The novel. Buck, would you rather read Tom Clancy than John Grisham?

BUCK: Well, I don't know. I guess I'd rather read Tom Clancy.

ROOK: OK. Gentleman, I know what that means. What does that mean about Buck?

KAMBER: Buck is becoming more and more conservative as this show goes on. That would definitely be a conservative answer. Grisham tries to teach liberal thought, and Clancy tries to teach conservative thought.

ROOK: One of the things also -- during the pre-interviews with our producers, you said that liberals like lawyers, so they like Grisham better.

KAMBER: Well, Brad must have said that.

O'LEARY: Victor may have said that. I didn't say that.

ROOK: Brad said that, yeah.

O'LEARY: No, no.

KAMBER: The only reason that a question like that becomes important is not -- I mean, obviously, you might like both authors, or you might not even have heard of either author -- is that we are a product of our environment. We are not born conservative or liberal. You are born as a neutral and you are a product of that environment, so television that you watch, books you read, movies you see all help shape who you are and your judgments and what makes you that person.

ROOK: We've got Pauline calling us from Florida. Hey, Pauline, how are you?

PAULINE: Pretty good. I wanted to join in to say that what he was asking about the president teaching children, I think parents should teach their children, not the president. The parents -- we cannot pass the buck all the time. And also liberal or conservative, the labels don't really matter. It's just what the issues are that matters.

ROOK: OK. Pauline, which do you call yourself? Or do you? What do you call yourself -- liberal, conservative, independent, issue-only voter? What do you call yourself?

PAULINE: Well, I am a registered Republican, but I voted for Bill Clinton because I like the issues. I really haven't heard what Bob Dole stands for yet. He spends all the time criticizing.

ROOK: OK. To Brad, do you want to talk to Pauline there? She's a vote that sounds at least a little bit undecided.

O'LEARY: Well, if she doesn't know what Bob Dole stands for, she needed to have learned that before she made up her mind to vote for Bill Clinton. She sounds like somebody...

PAULINE: I'm not undecided. I'm very much decided.

O'LEARY: Well, I know you're very much decided, but you said you decided without knowing what Bob Dole stands for.

PAULINE: You cannot hear what he stands for. He spends all his time criticizing.

O'LEARY: Uh-huh. Well, I mean that's a -- you know, I wish our voters out there wouldn't be negative about either candidate and would understand a little bit more about what decisions they're going to make for them and their families in these next four years.

ROOK: Because that's the true point on all of this kind of stuff. Thanks for calling, Pauline. We

sure appreciate it. And at least you're going to vote this year. I mean, that's the bottom line. No matter who you vote for, use your vote.

Charlie, you had a comment.

CHARLIE: Well, traditionally, the Republicans have stood for a laissez-faire sort of policy. And the Democrats, on the other hand, are for more government. But you take an issue like abortion, and it's reversed. Can you explain something about that?

ROOK: Real quick, gentlemen.

KAMBER: Well, that's a myth, frankly. It's a myth the Republicans have created about themselves. When you start talking about government, it's the Republicans that want to bring government into the schools with prayer, it's the Republicans that want to bring government into our bedrooms with laws of abortion, it's the Republicans that want to define by government what a marriage is. It's just the Republicans have one view of how we should use government with their moral standards; Democrats have a different view

of how we should use government. But Republicans have been more articulate in suggesting we don't believe in government.

O'LEARY: We could argue abortion.

ROOK: Brad, I'm so sorry, but we have got to go. Brad, I'm sorry you didn't get the final word.

O'LEARY: That's all right.

ROOK: Next time, I promise.

O'LEARY: Victor usually does.

ROOK: Thanks so much to both of you. Thank you, Brad, for being with us here today. We've got to say good-bye to you. But do not go away, please. Just ahead, we put politics aside for something spookier in honor of Halloween. Author Anne Rice will join us coming up next. Find out CNN's ghostly connection to her new novel. We'll explain.