

# THE PURPLE PASSION OF MICHAEL SMERCONISH

Michael Smerconish L'87 is talking to the nation—a satellite-based slice of it, anyway—as I step into the studio. He's leaning into the mic at his corner desk, headphones framing his shiny dome, bantering on-air about the upcoming White House Correspondents Dinner with T.C. Scornavacchi, his dark-maned executive producer, sounding board, and foil. When he sees me he waves me in, talking animatedly all the while, and points to a long table where I can park myself. On it a large map of the United States bristles with pins representing caller locations: 44 states at the beginning of Day 10 on POTUS, which stands for Politics of the United States, a channel on SiriusXM. By the end of the day it will be 45.

Near the door hangs a large framed photo of Larry David, the *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* creator, with a hand-written inscription: *Michael, are you my Caucasian?* Smerconish calls David his “radio inspiration,” and he frequently interjects irreverent *Seinfeld*-ian bits of Nothing into his show—though as in *Seinfeld*, those bits usually have something piquant at the center. David's playful inversion of a politically touchy phrase is also candy for Smerconish, who has written two books about political correctness and once spent part of a show ruminating about the appropriateness of white people using the N-word, somehow without sounding like a scold or an apologist.

Today's three-hour show is a stew of high-protein politics and zesty Nothings. He began by digging into a story that oozed red and blue, both the Penn kind and the political: Frank Luntz C'84, the former adjunct political-science professor and current GOP message-shaper, had just been on campus speaking to a group of College Republicans, and during his talk a student had asked about the causes of political polarization. After requesting that his comments be off the record, at which point the only reporter (from *The Daily Pennsylvanian*) shut off his recorder, Luntz pointed to conservative talk radio as a major source of political dysfunction and damage to the GOP. Certain right-wing talk-radio hosts get great ratings, Luntz told his student

**Can an unpredictably centrist talk-show host with a yen for “nothing” really have an impact on the national discourse?**

By Samuel Hughes

audience, and because they “drive the message,” they're driving the party out to the fringe. And, he added, it's a uniquely Republican problem.

Luntz's remarks only caused a firestorm when it turned out that another student (Aakash Abbi C'14) had *not* shut off his smartphone recorder, and had

sent the recording to *Mother Jones* magazine—at which point they went viral. (Luntz's “request to be taken off the record was never one to which I acquiesced,” wrote Abbi in a guest column for the *DP*, describing himself as a “passionate moderate with a strong conception of what is wrong in politics today.”) An incensed Luntz promptly withdrew funding for a scholarship that had paid for Penn students to travel to Washington.

Smerconish, after some indignant prodding by Scornavacchi, agrees that “the kid should have honored [Luntz's] wish” to keep his remarks off the record, adding: “There was plenty of stupidity and blame to go around.” But, he adds, his guy-next-door voice rising to a rusty-gate falsetto: “Frank Luntz is a big boy. It's ridiculous to say, ‘You're not recording me now, are you?’ To *college kids*? Are you *joking*? I do a lot of speaking, and I would never say to an audience that has brought me in, ‘Now, you're not going to record me on this, are you?’ That's *ridiculous*.”

On the content of Luntz's remarks, however, Smerconish agrees whole-heartedly.

“Luntz is saying that the world of terrestrial talk radio is doing a disservice to the GOP—which is straight out of my playbook,” he tells his listeners. “But I've taken it much farther. It's not just on the Right; it's on the Left as well. And it's not just the GOP that's being done a disservice. It's the whole country!”

He takes three callers. The first thinks Luntz was “simply acknowledging that the really rabid stuff is on the Right.” A caller from Virginia says that he “used to be a liberal and listen to liberal radio,” but now, after listening to Mark Levin, he tunes in almost exclusively to conservative talk radio. Finally, a conservative pastor from Illinois suggests the problem is that “oftentimes people don't listen to each other. Labels get in the way.”

“Those labels so rarely truly fit,” Smerconish agrees. “They apply only to the individuals who are on the air. The ones I meet [in person] are liberal on some things, conservative on some things, and they're not afraid to say, ‘Jeez, I don't know’ about some issues. But you'd never know that if you just tuned into the usual outlets.”



The Michael Spector Podcast

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There's a lot more in this morning's show—two interviews with book authors (one being Wharton professor Adam Grant) and another with police commissioner John Timoney (about the Boston Marathon bombing), a dissection of some high-profile tweets, and a discussion of the looming threat to football from parents worried about their kids' brain injuries—but we're getting ahead of ourselves. Now, as the segment winds up, Smerconish's voice gives way to that old Stealers Wheel parody of Bob Dylan: "Clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right—here I am, stuck in the middle with you."

"People need to recognize that with their entertainment choices come consequences," Smerconish is saying. "And if you're only going to get your news and information from one outlet or one grouping of outlets and make judgments based on it, that's going to have consequences for the country, and they're not going to be good."

We're sitting in an upscale restaurant near Smerconish's Main Line studio, and we have a little game going on. I tell him he should take a break from talking so he can have a bite. He agrees, so I turn off my recorder. Then, after a bite or two, he starts talking again, so I hit the *record* button. And so on.

"One of the ironies is that we're living in a time when we've never had so much choice," he adds. "And yet people are gravitating only toward the likeminded. I don't understand that. I want to hear all perspectives! And shame on me if I go on the air plugged into the *Times* editorial page only, without knowing what *National Review*—or *The Wall Street Journal* would be a better example—is saying."

Being well read and informed, he says, is one key to being a good talk-show host. Another is being a good listener—and on the rare occasions that I'm doing the talking, I have the odd sensation that his penetrating blue eyes are pulling mine out of their sockets. The third is an ability to "conduct a conversation."

Smerconish left the terrestrial realms of AM radio this past April, partly because there wasn't as much of a real conversation as he would have liked, even though he was syndicated on 80 stations across the country and got plenty of phone calls. While 80 stations is not Limbaugh or Hannity territory, it's nothing to sneeze at. But Smerconish was getting restless.

"Those 80 stations were very, very similar to one another, and they all had a decided ideological approach and bent that I didn't share," he says. "I would like to think that what I'm putting on most days is some independent thought. I'm not there to indoctrinate. I'm not even there to convince you that I'm necessarily right. I'm there to entertain you with headlines, definitely to offer you a perspective, but not to change your mind, necessarily."

"I think he might have been too good for this world in terms of the mud-wrestling arena that the AM talk-radio caricature has become. It seems to be imploding," says Holland Cooke, a Rhode Island-based radio consultant. "A couple of things doomed Michael from attaining A-tier status on AM and FM. The one that he has the least control over was that the Holy Trinity of Beck, Limbaugh, and Hannity had the biggest stations tied up. So he was doomed to [mostly] B-tier signals."

"What limited him is that he's reasonable," Cooke adds. "And *reasonable* doesn't conform to the Holy Trinity songbook. He does see both sides of an issue. Those guys throw lit matches at a microphone for a living. Michael really wants to get to the heart of the matter."

Smerconish says that while he was proud of the way he had grown his AM program, he was concerned about where he could take it. "And at that time SiriusXM came to me and said, 'We think you'd be a really good fit for the way in which we want to rebrand the POTUS channel.'"

Scott Greenstein, SiriusXM's president and chief content officer, basically confirms that account.

"Michael has a distinctive, powerful voice, and those are the kinds of people we want at SiriusXM," Greenstein says. "He was a star in terrestrial radio, which was attractive, but more so, we saw that he was the kind of talent who could go even further on satellite radio, and we are going to take him there."

Smerconish is more than just a gifted talk-show host, though that gift is hardly an insignificant one. He is a regular substitute host for Chris Matthews on MSNBC's *Hardball* (having subbed for Bill O'Reilly and Glenn Beck before that), and writes a weekly syndicated column in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. He has also written five books: *Murdered by Mumia* (co-written with Maureen Faulkner, the

widow of murdered Philadelphia police officer Daniel Faulkner); *Flying Blind: How Political Correctness Continues to Compromise Airline Safety Post-9/11*; *Muzzled: From T-Ball to Terrorism*; the autobiographical *Morning Drive: Things I Wish I Had Known Before I Started Talking*; and *Instinct: The Man Who Stopped the Twentieth Hijacker*.

Trained as a lawyer and steeped in politics, Smerconish is very much at home in the rapid-response world of hardball politics. Though his energy is controlled, he brings an almost frightening amount of it to his work, along with a boundless curiosity about the world and ideas, a junkie's attraction to politics, and a storyteller's gift for finding fresh angles.

He's also a smart-mouth who can be "a *tremendous* pain in the ass," as Scornavacchi puts it. When she waxed indignant on the air over the Luntz incident, for example, Smerconish snarked: "I appreciate your faux outrage." (Asked about that later, she exudes sisterly exasperation: "What is *wrong* with him?" A bit of bickering helps keep things lively.) He's certainly not lacking in nerve; four years ago he posed buck-naked for a *Philadelphia* magazine profile—though the photo, shot from behind as he stood arms akimbo looking into foggy woods, made him look like a hairless alien contemplating his new surroundings.

Smerconish pushes his staff hard, though Scornavacchi says he never asks anyone to do more than he would. His intellectual energy and restlessness have probably kept him from settling into a comfortable rut. Politically, he's very much a mixed bag, having veered from the fairly far Right to somewhere around the Center, even if his detractors would say that he's gone over to the Obama Left. He'll blast a Mumia supporter on one show, and vigorously defend Eric Holder on the NSA's surveillance program the next. Until 2008 he had only supported Republican presidential candidates, and he's still a gun owner who believes in the death penalty, supports ethnic profiling in airports, and thinks harsh interrogation should be available in the cases where it can save lives. But he's also pro-choice, would like to see pot and prostitution legalized, and supports same-sex marriage and other gay rights. The one constant about Michael Smerconish is that you never know where he's going to pop up next.

**Warning:** the following program may be inappropriate for ideologues at either end of the political spectrum,” the anonymous announcer intones. “This is the Michael Smerconish Program on SiriusXM’s POTUS. Proving there is passion in the middle.”

If you’re a talk-show executive, chances are you believe that getting someone to tune into a political discussion requires making their amygdala light up like a hot-weather map of Texas. Moderation is for dim bulbs. And yet, as a growing number of voices warn about the dangers of political extremism and polarization, the idea of a hot-purple (red-and-blue) talk-show zone may yet gain some traction. If, of course, the centrist in question has the chops to pull it off.

“In some ways what Michael’s doing is a bit of an experiment—can you succeed by being more pragmatic, more in the center?” notes Michael Delli Carpini C’75 G’75, dean of the Annenberg School for Communication, who suggests that there may be enough “frustration with the extremes” to support

someone who is passionate about being moderate. “Certainly you can find examples of that working, though it tends to be almost always on PBS and NPR. But any time you’re dealing with the media it’s a kind of chicken-and-egg problem. You can say that whatever you hear on talk radio is a reflection of what people ‘want,’ but media doesn’t just react to public sentiment—it also shapes public sentiment.”

“It’s going to take some level of passion in the middle to truly change things, where I really believe the great majority rest,” says Smerconish. “Polling data suggests that more people identify themselves as Independent than as Republican or Democrat. More people would say that their own view of the issues is mixed or moderate as opposed to liberal or conservative. They’re out there. But they’re not the ones who are heard from oftentimes in these debates.”

Shades of Nixon’s Silent Majority, I suggest. Smerconish nods. “I was just thinking that.”

The problem, he adds, is that “passion has the power in this country, not raw consensus of votes. And passion is driving the bus. And passion is expressed at the extremes of the radio dial.”

Which is partly what caused him to light out for the satellite territories.

“What satellite radio has going for it is that it’s premium content,” says Cooke, the radio consultant. “People who hear it have paid to hear it. People who hear Michael Smerconish now really want to hear him. And frankly, the coverage that he gets is better than what he would have attained on AM radio. No, not everybody has satellite radio, but now he’s heard on all 50 states from sea to shining sea, and that would have been a long, hard slog one [terrestrial] station at a time.”

SiriusXM doesn’t give out audience numbers for individual programs, though it does note that the station has 24.4 million subscribers and roughly twice that many total listeners.

“Michael knows that Americans are actually hungry for smart and compelling talk radio,” says SiriusXM’s Greenstein. “But you would be wrong to think his show is in some mellow middle ground. If you’ve listened, you know that he brings fire and passion—and intelligence—to an incredible range of topics.”

Smerconish says he takes the same approach to callers that he used on terrestrial radio, which is to be “keenly interested” in them, “but not to assume that that’s great science in terms of who’s really listening.”

Sofar, the callers to his program on SiriusXM have shown a “variety of mindsets,” he adds. “And there frankly has not been an edge to them the way that I grew accustomed to hearing from many of those in terrestrial talk radio.” Asked if that edge was one of ideological extremism or anger, he says: “Both.”

“I think there’s a discernible burnout on this sorehead caricature that talk radio has turned into,” says Holland Cooke. “And part of what’s driving this is demographics. Millennials have no appetite for bloviating, for bias, for 100-round ammo clips—you know, society itself is moving in the direction where Michael resides.”

Whether that’s true about society remains to be seen (though a recent survey of younger Republicans conducted by the College Republican National Committee suggests that Cooke may be right). But what is unquestionably true is that Smerconish hasn’t always resided in the place where he is now.

## “I’M REGISTERED AS AN INDEPENDENT BECAUSE I DON’T WANT TO BE ASSOCIATED WITH THE THOUGHT PROCESSES OF EITHER ONE.”



**“I grew up in a house that had big, fat, gaudy, colored Christmas lights,” Smerconish is saying.** “At some point, when my house became a little bit larger than the house in which I was raised, and I drove a car that was a little bit nicer than the car my parents used to drive—we decided we are now white-light people.”

By “we,” he presumably meant his wife, Lavinia, with whom he has four children. This evolution, and his riff about his resistance to it, touched a nerve among his listeners.

“I remember coming back from a commercial break and saying, ‘Well, it’s my wife’s birthday—December 7—and in our house this is the day we get the Christmas tree,’” he recalls. “And if history repeats, we’re going to go home, and then she’s going to bathe it in white lights. But frankly, I’m really not a white-light person; I’m a colored-light person.”

“It turned into a sort of Howard Beale *Network* moment where I then said on the air, ‘You know, I’m mad as hell about this, and I want to get rid of these white lights!’” he adds. “So of course I went home, we got the tree, and we put up the white lights. She won that argument. But the phone lines melted down with people who wanted to offer social commentary about what the color of your lights said about you.”

It was the kind of radio moment he strives for, connecting the trivial and the profound. But it was also a populist statement, affirming that he wouldn’t let his personal prosperity co-opt his taste. And Smerconish is unabashed about his colored-light enthusiasms. (He’s a classic-rock aficionado who loves to get members of bands like Yes on his show, for example, though he’s not so much of a fan-boy that he won’t call out obnoxious behavior, as he did last year after attending a Led Zeppelin press conference notable for Robert Plant’s withering disdain.)

Smerconish grew up in a solidly Republican household in Doylestown, the governmental seat of Bucks County. He describes himself as a “cafeteria Catholic,” and says that, like many others, he followed his parents’ political inclinations. As a sixth-grader he wrote fan letters to Philadelphia Mayor Frank Rizzo, and by the time he was 16 he was invited to a five-hour breakfast at Rizzo’s Chestnut Hill home.

“I liked his values,” Smerconish told *The Philadelphia Inquirer’s* Tom Fox in

1988. “They were the values I was taught at home. He’s an ethnic and so am I.” He describes his father’s ethnic heritage as “Austro-Hungarian Empire and Italian,” and his mother’s as Montenegrin.

At one point I ask him whether a lifetime in the Philadelphia suburbs may have had an impact on his worldview.

“I think we’re all a product of our environment to a large extent,” he says. “I mean, if I had been born in Pakistan I’d be a Muslim right now. So I’m sure geography does have something to do with it.”

And, he adds, the Philly ’burbs are a remarkably accurate political barometer for the country:

“People would say to me before the election, ‘Who’s going to win?’ And I would say, ‘Tell me what happens in the Philadelphia suburbs, and I can tell you who’s going to win this general election.’ My mindset is like that of a lot of people around here, regardless of how they’re registered, in that they tend to be fairly liberal on social issues, conservative on fiscal and military issues, and there are a whole host of issues they don’t have figured out.”

During his senior year at Central Bucks High School West, he met then-presidential candidates George H.W. Bush and Ronald Reagan. “I wanted to vote for both of them,” he says, and was “elated when they joined forces and became a ticket that summer.” That fall he entered Lehigh University, where a liberal-turned-conservative urban-studies professor named David Amidon sparked an intellectual awakening in him. Smerconish, who went on to graduate Phi Beta Kappa, also developed an “obsession, not just to go to law school but to go to Penn’s law school,” he recalls. “It was a sole focus of my junior and senior year.”

In 1986, during his second year at Penn Law, Smerconish ran for state legislator in his native Bucks County. He lost the race by 419 votes, partly because he supported the controversial nuclear-plant pumping station along the Delaware River, whose opponents included one Abbie Hoffman. In his 2009 book *Morning Drive*, he recalled telling supporters that he was “proud of our effort to bring conservative government to Bucks County.” But, he added, he would no longer describe himself as “conservative.”

He cops to some regrets about his time at Penn Law. “I worked so hard to get in there, and then my mind wandered by the end of my second year,” he says. “I was in such a

damn hurry to get out and start doing things that I didn’t take full advantage of what was going on around me. I wish I had appreciated that I’m surrounded by all this intellect.” (One of his professors, Gary Francione, now at Rutgers and an expert on animal-rights theory and law, has been on Smerconish’s show several times.) “If I had to do it all over again, I would have handled my third year of law school differently,” he adds. “Because then I started to consult on campaigns.”

That included running the successful senatorial campaign of Arlen Specter C’48 for southeastern Pennsylvania, and advising Rizzo’s unsuccessful mayoral campaign in 1987. He was also appointed housing coordinator for the Department of Housing and Urban Development by President George H.W. Bush.

“It was, frankly, having those great political experiences at an early age that caused me to be invited to offer commentary on radio and television,” he says. “And I think initially the ego of it consumed me.”

He began doing talk radio in the early 1990s, first at WWDB and then WPHT, known as The Big Talker for its lineup of high-powered, mostly conservative talk-show hosts. In those days he more or less fit right in. His book *Murdered by Mumia* gave him street cred among cops and the Rizzo Right, and he had a knack for organizing goofy stunts like the Ira Einhorn Killer Tomato Contest (which sought the tomato that “best exhibits the plump, seedy characteristics” of Einhorn C’61, then fighting extradition from France for the murder of girlfriend Holly Maddux). But although Smerconish “probably wasn’t the most socially tolerant person” in those days, as one old friend told *Philadelphia* magazine, his views were by no means rigid.

“I came of age in the early ’80s on Ronald Reagan’s watch,” he says. “And you can say, ‘Well, that was a very conservative time period.’ What people forget is that 60 percent of the Senate were moderates. And so many moderates existed in the Republican Party that there was a group called the Wednesday Lunch Club. They were the face of the Republican Party. Today, if you tried to put together the Senate moderates of the GOP, you’d be in a phone booth. They’ve all been drummed out by these ideological purity tests.”

Those, in turn, are driven by gerrymandered “safe” districts (in which compromise is seldom needed), the role of fundraising,

and the closed-primary system, he says, pointing to some recent primary elections in which fringe Republican candidates like Christine O'Donnell in Delaware defeated better credentialed but more moderate candidates. "Why?" asks Smerconish (who supported former Governor Jon M. Huntsman Jr. C'87 Hon'10 in the Republican presidential primary). "Because only 16 percent came out in that primary. Who are they? They are ideologues. Where are they getting their information? Talk radio, Drudge, and Fox. That's it."

### **Smerconish's personal migration to the Center was driven by a number of things.**

"I was never in for the program driven largely by evangelical Christians, who have controlled the GOP platform on the social issues," he says. "I think like many others I just sort of turned the other cheek and acted like those social planks didn't exist in the platform, when in fact they do. And the party has gone much too far in that direction, in my view. So the party probably left me more than I left it."

"Notice I haven't joined the Democratic ranks, either," he adds quickly. "I'm registered as an Independent because I don't want to be associated with the thought processes of either one."

Until the 2008 election, Smerconish had consistently supported Republican presidential candidates. But he found himself becoming disenchanted with the Bush administration's approach to the War on Terror.

"I was initially very caught up in the bravado of 'We need to fight them over there so that we don't have to fight them here,'" he says. "And then I grew increasingly skeptical of that approach—and in particular whether we were keeping our eye on the ball with regard to the hunt for bin Laden."

"You know, I make a lot of mistakes, and I've called a lot of things wrong, but the one area where I'm like a soothsayer is that I always thought that Pakistan was where we needed to be. I thought we were getting rolled by the Pakistanis and the ISI—and that if we really wanted to go get bin Laden, that needed to be our focus."

When then-Senator Barack Obama came onto his program in the spring of 2008, they discussed the hunt for bin Laden, and Pakistan in particular. "He believed that we needed to be aggressive with regard to Pakistan on this issue," Smerconish recalls. "People who are strong on defense don't

normally get drawn to the Democratic side of the aisle, but that's what happened to me. I thought that the Republicans, for all the tough talk, weren't being smart about this. So it was foreign policy, and terror in particular, that made me cast that ballot."

Not surprisingly, he announced his change of allegiance on the air.

"I shared it with my audience, not in a scolding way of, 'This is what I'm doing and this is what you need to do,' but one of, 'This is how I got here, and this is what I'm going to do, and I feel like I should let you in the booth with me.' Yeah, that was a significant moment for me, and I think a significant moment for a lot of listeners, many of whom will never forgive me for having made that move. But I sleep well in the whole way in which this thing has evolved."

The reaction to his political evolution/change of heart/apostasy was, well, fast and furious, and it hasn't calmed down much. Just check out his Facebook page.

"It's amazing to watch the 180 turn you have made from proud Ronald Reagan and both George Bushes supporter to cheerleader, lackey, and apologist for the Obama administration," wrote one perpetual critic a few months ago. "I guess that money was good enough to sell your soul and shred whatever remaining integrity you once had. SAD."

Smerconish shrugs. "Doing what I do, I've heard it all," he says. "It goes with the territory that you've got to put up with a lot of bullshit. None of it bothers me. The only thing that bothers me is when someone says, 'Well, you voted for Obama for career gain,' or 'You've called out what you perceive as hypocrisy for career gain.' That's the one that gets me—because nothing is a clearer, surer path to success in the business I'm in than to hammer this president whether he deserves it or not, and to spout only conservative talking points. It's like paint-by-numbers. My god, how easy it would be for me just to come on the air like the others and kick the shit out of this guy hours on end. It's not how I see the world, and it's not how I choose to spend my professional time."

**I**n August 2009, Obama did his first live radio interview as president. His interviewer was Smerconish, who was slightly flummoxed when the president arrived five minutes early.

"We have this expression in the business about 'not leaving it in the locker room,'"

he explains. "I don't want to be unfriendly, but if you do speak to someone [off the air] and they tell you something, they forget that they told you off the air. So how can I now make stupid talk with the president? I'm thinking, 'Jesus, I don't want to ask him about Cash for Clunkers or healthcare. I'm almost sorry he's here early, but not really.'"

So he pulled out a question from his sons, who wanted him to ask about a certain book in the film *National Treasure 2*.

"I said, 'Mr. President, what's in the 'Book of Secrets?'" And without missing a beat, he said to me, 'I would tell you, but I'd have to kill you.'"

Smerconish has interviewed Obama seven times now, as well as every other living president. The effect of that on his audience is hard to gauge, though.

"People do not come up to me and say, 'Oh, I heard your interview with Obama—when you asked him about the hunt for bin Laden, that was really good,'" he says. "They will ask me about things like the color of their Christmas lights. They'll ask me about poker. They'll ask me about the declining rates of circumcision."

### **Which is why, on this late-April morning, which happens to be Day Two of the NFL Draft,**

he's trying to maintain a dialogue with a high-school football coach from Pittsburgh. "You're caught up in the hyperbole," the coach tells him. Smerconish, who thinks that parental worries about football-related brain injuries may someday doom the sport, is diplomatic at first, but when he brings up the research by Sports Legacy Institute founder Chris Nowinski, the coach dismisses it. The head injuries are no worse than they are among soccer players, the guy says, and soon he's not listening anymore, just getting louder and more dismissive, until finally, after a warning—"Coach, I'm gonna finish my thought, whether you'd like me to or not, 'cause that's how we roll here"—Smerconish thanks him for his call and cuts off his sound. Then he addresses his audience.

"Listen, the way we play, for those of you who don't know—you don't have to talk over me," he says. "You don't have to rush your words. I like hearing what you have to say. As a matter of fact, the reason the coach was taken in the order in which he was, is because he disagrees with me. So I'm not looking to quell dissent. But it's a two-way street." ♦