

## Contributing to the Political Conversation

An Interview with Dana Perino

**EDITORS' NOTE** Dana Perino is a regular Co-Host on the popular weekday talk show *The Five* and an on-air contributor for Fox News. She is a frequent public speaker through *Leading Authorities*, a communications consultant, and head of *Minute Mentoring*, a program for young women starting their careers. In November 2009, she was nominated by President Barack Obama to serve on the Broadcasting Board of Governors. Perino served as the White House



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Press Secretary for President George W. Bush from September 2007 to January 2009. Altogether, she worked for over seven years for the Bush Administration. Prior to that Perino worked on Capitol Hill, for public relations agencies and in journalism. She attended graduate school at the University of Illinois-Springfield, where she obtained her master's in public affairs reporting, and Colorado State University in Pueblo, Colorado. She was born in Wyoming, raised in Colorado, and now lives in Manhattan with her husband, Peter McMahon.

**Your recent focus has been on the TV show *The Five* and your philanthropic endeavors. How have those projects evolved?**

When I left the White House, my husband and I volunteered at an HIV/AIDS PEPFAR Center in South Africa. This was certainly the best thing I did that not only changed my heart but also gave me perspective going forward. Americans have so many blessings and it's easy to get bogged down in life's troubles. But what I saw in Africa made me realize that we don't have much to complain about.

When I came back, I felt a bit pressured and somewhat frantic to get settled into a business and a routine. I joined a PR firm, Burson-Marsteller, in a part-time capacity. I also had a speaking contract and started working for Fox as a contributor. I realized that being a part of a PR firm was not the best for me at the time because I needed more independence and flexibility.

Around that time, I saw President Bush at a function and talked it through with him. President Bush is an excellent listener and career guidance counselor.

I remember that he told me, "You work too hard not to be very happy with what you're

doing." That gave me the push I needed to start my own business.

Being a business owner came with other stresses: I had employees, I needed office space, and I was traveling a lot and didn't see my employees for weeks at a time. As other small business owners know, it can be difficult to solicit business and take care of current clients, not to mention to put in the hours you want to for various charitable endeavors.

In June 2011, I went on a trip to Africa on behalf of Voice of America, and on my flight on the way home from Nigeria, I put together a new plan for how I could better spend the hours of my day to get everything done and still enjoy time with my family.

When I returned to Dulles Airport, I was waiting at baggage claim and got a call from Fox asking if I would consider coming in for a temporary period to work on a show they were planning called *The Five*.

My first thought was, I don't live in New York and that is not on my plan. But I was intrigued enough by the opportunity that I said I would do it. When I called my husband, his initial reaction was much different – he said, "Congratulations!" Now that was another way of thinking about it.

I never expected to be living in New York. I thought I would have a small but effective PR firm with solid clients, live in D.C., travel when I needed to, continue on the speaking circuit, and do some occasional hits on Fox. Then, *The Five* took off.

**What has made the show work well and how has the dynamic been so effective?**

The 5 o'clock hour has always been difficult for television ratings. Roger Ailes (President, Fox News Channel) has a sense for talent and chemistry. He sensed that viewers were looking for more of a dinner table conversation at 5 o'clock, one where you can have a heated debate about a topic but end up laughing with one another going into the commercial break. It's amazing, but we do that every day. We have become, in a way, part of other people's families – and I love that.

**TV has become very partisan and opinionated. Should more be done to achieve a balanced approach?**

There is a part of that happening on cable news but it's also happening during a major technological shift that has changed the way people consume news. They now don't have to be home at 5 o'clock to see what is on *The Five*; they can watch it later or read about it on Twitter or Facebook.

Opinion – at certain times of the day, like in the evening – is interesting to viewers, and I believe that that's one of the reasons Fox continues to be number one. We had the top 13 cable news shows in the first quarter of 2013. Fox also had the highest ratings during the Boston Marathon terrorism attack. We have experienced, talented journalists and an energetic set of pundits. It's a good mix.

It has been an interesting change for me. When I was Press Secretary, no one wanted my opinion. It took me awhile to get comfortable with saying what I thought. With that comes a rash of criticism, but Fox has given me the confidence to express who I really am.

**Are there more opportunities available for women today?**

In this transition period for the U.S. economy, both women and men are facing challenges and a lot of them still want to have a family. We're not going to find immediate answers to the biological need for women to be home with their kids at a certain point in their lives.

Some companies are changing and giving employees more flexible work hours. Technology is helping a lot in allowing one to work from almost anywhere.

As a mentor, I also find myself encouraging women to give themselves a break. Women talk negatively to themselves all day long. Every woman I've met is better than she thinks she is. If women put less pressure on themselves, they would all perform better and enjoy life more.

**Is elected office in your future?**

I never had a desire to craft legislation, preferring instead to think about the strategy and communications that can help reach legislative and policy goals. Some people think that I should run for office because I can put a sentence together, but that is a poor way to choose leaders and politicians. I'm in a better place now to be a constructive contributor to political discussions. ●