DINESH D’SOUZA Is Winning

Conservatism’s former enfant terrible has been cast out of polite society and may soon face jail time. But business has never been better.

By SIMON VAN ZUYLEN-WOOD

Photograph by Kevin Roche

Dinesh D’Souza is scrolling through his iPhone, showing me photos of C-list movie stars. “So my latest thing is tweeting out pictures of me with really attractive actresses,” he says, giggling. There he is, standing next to a blond woman. “This is the actress Kelly Carlson. She came to one of our screenings. She’s in, you know, Made of Honor.” (“Christie/Wife #6.”) He scrolls some more. “This is Stacey Dash, who’s in Clueless.” (“Dionne.”). “She’s a huge fan so she tweets out all my stuff.”
Ah, fame. It’s late July, and D’Souza and I are wrapping up a lunch buffet at an Italian restaurant in the Omni Mandalay Hotel at Las Colinas in Irving, Texas. With us is D’Souza’s business partner and frequent travel companion Bruce Schooley, a self-described inventor from Washington state whom D’Souza met on a National Review cruise. They’re here in the Dallas suburbs to promote D’Souza’s documentary America: Imagine the World Without Her on Glenn Beck’s radio and television programs, which are broadcast out of a nearby studio.

Many a nostalgic Generation X-er has surely dreamed of tweeting out a photo of Stacey Dash from Clueless. But D’Souza, perhaps remembering that two years ago he lost his job as president of a Christian college in New York City for carrying on an extramarital romance, feels the need to explain his new hobby in political terms. “My main goal through this is to annoy the Left, because you have all these guys railing on my Twitter,” he says, grinning impishly. “They’re just seething with envy. They’re like, ‘Shit!’”

“We thought we’d buried him!” Schooley says, mimicking a seething liberal.

“Yeah, exactly,” D’Souza says. “You should just see the number of times there are articles on Dinesh’s career is over. My career is apparently over every two years.”

Such articles first began appearing with regularity around 2007, after D’Souza published a book heretical to people across the political spectrum, arguing that responsibility for the September 11 terrorist attacks lies with the “cultural Left.” Three years later, the thesis articulated in The Roots of Obama’s Rage—that the president was a rabid “anticolonialist” acting out the wishes of his dead Kenyan father—earned D’Souza even more scorn. Then, in 2012, came the mistress flap, which unsurprisingly damaged his credibility as an ambassador of the Christian Right.

Thanks to the accumulated bad press, a certain aspect of D’Souza’s career is indeed over. A Phi Beta Kappa graduate from Dartmouth, he established himself in the 1980s as a wunderkind provocateur, racking up bylines in serious magazines and working in the White House at the tail end of the Reagan administration. His first major book, Illiberal Education (1991), a screed against political correctness and multiculturalism on campus, earned admiring reviews in The New Republic and The New York Review of Books. The big three conservative think tanks—Heritage, AEI, Hoover—vied for his attentions.

That was then. “I’m trying to think about the last time I thought about him,” says Roger Kimball, the editor of the conservative journal New Criterion. “I don’t think he’s moving the conversation intellectually.” Instead, he’s become a regular on the CPAC circuit and a reliable punching bag in the lefty blogosphere, surfacing periodically when he says something outrageous. Recent Salon tweet: “Delusional Dinesh D’Souza compares Ferguson protesters to ISIS.” Earlier Wonkette headline: “Dinesh D’Souza Wishes the Blacks Appreciated What Slavery Did for Them.”

Until recently, D’Souza’s problems were mainly reputational. Now he’s got a legal problem, too—one that would seem to be an obstacle to a successful career in political punditry. Last May, D’Souza officially became a criminal, pleading guilty to a campaign finance violation in which he funneled $20,000 through two straw donors to 2012 U.S. Senate candidate Wendy Long, a Republican and an old college friend running a long-shot campaign in New York. Sentencing—D’Souza faces up to two years in prison—is scheduled for Sept. 23.
Viewed through the lens of the intelligentsia and the media elite, D’Souza has suffered a tragi-comic fall from grace, undone by some combination of conspiratorial thinking, pseudo-academic posturing, and hubris. But in a separate, larger universe, the one-time rising star is ascendant once again.

Glenn Beck’s headquarters are located in the sun-starved sprawl of Irving, Texas, in a 72,000-square-foot movie studio where Robocog, JFK, and Barney were filmed. Beck, exiled from Fox News, bought the studio in 2013 to house his rapidly growing media empire, The Blaze. On a wall in the building’s cavernous lobby, there is the familiar conspiratorial overtone: The message “OPEN YOUR EYES” is spray-painted over the ubiquitous “Keep Calm and Carry On” insignia. Plastered nearby, another Beckian proverb: “David slew Goliath with five smooth stones. GO GET SOME STONES.”

Outfitted in a pink button-down shirt and blue slacks, D’Souza waits outside a homey set full of old baseball bats and radio microphones, ahead of an 11 a.m. television interview. He’s here to promote his second documentary, America, and his new book by the same title. The years since he was cast out of polite conservative circles have in many ways been good to D’Souza, who’s now 53. His first foray into film, a 2012 jeremiad called 2016: Obama’s America, is the second-highest-grossing political documentary of all time, behind Michael Moore’s anti-Bush Fahrenheit 9/11. And America, which has already raked in $15 million, isn’t far behind. But not all is well. “My publisher is really furious because The New York Times best-seller list came out yesterday, and I’m No. 2,” he says as he stands at his phone, in his American flag case. “My book is outselling the No. 1 book by a mile.” How does that work, exactly? “They don’t want me to be No. 1, I think.” He puts his phone away. “I’ll show you the numbers after the set.”

This is a fitting place for D’Souza to be tapping a promotional interview. Beck’s reputation took a hit when he claimed that Obama was a “racist.” D’Souza, similarly, was put in time-out after espousing his theory that Obama was trying to weaken the country from within, as punishment for its ostensibly colonial behavior. Beck, who was still on Fox at the time, immediately embraced the argument, anointing D’Souza as “the only one” who understood the president. (“He helped to propel The Roots of Obama’s Rage to No. 1,” D’Souza tells me later, gratefully.)

Despite his pariah status, Beck still has enough loyal disciples to launch a book, Oprah-style, to the top of the charts. In addition to his 6.67 million radio listeners, 400,000 subscribers fork over $99.95 a year to watch his TV channel. He sees a kindred soul in D’Souza, whose Hollywood success he aims to replicate. “I hate politics, I hate politicians, and I feel like I’m wasting my life,” Beck told a reporter after buying the massive studio last year. His new role models, he said, are Baz Luhrmann, Darren Aronofsky, and Frank Capra.

The interview begins with Beck, wearing white Adidas Sambas and a pair of John Lennon glasses, telling his viewers: “So I want to introduce you to a guy I didn’t think we could find. It’s 2005, 2004, and Michael Moore is everywhere and he’s packing the movie theaters and I thought, why can’t we find somebody to make good documentaries and tell the truth about America on our side?” Pause. “Lo and behold: Dinesh D’Souza.”

D’Souza, sounding every bit the wise-yet-approachable professor, explains the premise behind America: There is a left-wing narrative, a “shaming of America,” that overstates the bad things our forefathers did (enslave Africans, kill Native Americans, conquer Mexicans). This narrative has infected the nation with a desire to perform a sort of political harakiri and drastically reduce its own influence. “Over time, I’ve seen it spread into the elementary and secondary schools, into the media, into Hollywood, into the mainline churches, and now into the highest corridors of politics,” D’Souza tells Beck’s audience. “So it’s the dominant ideology of the country today.”

“So how do we change?” Beck asks. “What are the steps that we need to happen next? Do we stay America as we know it? Do we save the culture?”

“Yes,” D’Souza replies coolly. “There’s one way to do it, I believe. Our movie is an attempt to take a flag and plant it in Hollywood, an area where the Left believes it has a complete monopoly.”

D’Souza’s foray into mass culture was precipitated by the publication of The Roots of Obama’s Rage in 2010. TD Ameritrade founder Joe Ricketts read the book, liked it, and asked D’Souza how to spread the word further. Hollywood, D’Souza told him, so a call was placed to conservative mega-producer Jerry Molen, who had made Jurassic Park and Schindler’s List, and 2016: Obama’s America was born. (When I asked Molen if he worried about tarnishing his reputation with his dive into political work, he replied, “Let me ask you a question: What’s wrong with the truth?”) 2016 wound up grossing $33 million on a budget of less than $3 million.

This was revelatory for D’Souza. “I’ve been writing books for 25 years,” he tells Beck, “and I might have been a controversial figure in the world of academia. But 2016 was seen by 8 million people. We’ve already put well over a million—over 50,000 a day—to see America in the theater. So it’s a different level of influence.”

D’Souza also chalks up his popular turn to a growing intolerance in the center-left intellectual circles where he was once welcomed—or at least debated. “The America book is the kind of book that is awaiting an in-depth critique by a major political or historical authority,” he told me in his dressing room before the interview. That is debatable. America, book and movie, orbit around the premise that the radical-left worldview of marginal figures like Bill Ayers lies at the heart of American liberalism, while trafficking in a selective historiography that—to name one example—seeks to minimize the horrors of slavery by pointing out the existence of black slave owners.

Still, D’Souza—who calls himself “a product of a culture in which the intellectual liberals and conservatives had a mutual regard for each other, even though they were doing combat”—waxes nostalgic for his intellectual glory days. “[Christopher] Hitchens and I went way back,” he says, “and we would do a debate about atheism, and then we’d sit down and talk about literature. We’d sit for two hours with a bottle of wine and talk about Evelyn Waugh, or about history, or the Clintons. That was the world we inhabited. I don’t believe that world exists anymore.”

The next morning, when he returns to the studio for Beck’s radio show, D’Souza bounds into the lobby and asks if I’ve seen a piece that was published on The Atlantic’s website earlier that day. (The Atlantic is owned by the same parent company as National Journal.) “You should read it,” he tells me in his sprightly manner. “It’s called, ‘What Happened to Dinesh D’Souza?’ I ask him to summarize it for me, fearing that some other writer has stolen my story. ‘It’s a liberal lament,’” he says. “It’s that Dinesh used to be really good when he was writing for really small magazines and having no impact. Now that he’s writing big books and movies, you know, he’s really gone downhill.”
D’Souza has his own answer to the “whatever happened to Dinesh D’Souza” question: absolutely nothing. Sure, there were some old-school, mugged-by-reality liberals who appreciated his earlier work. But mostly, he says, journalists and intellectuals reviled his books as much as they do now. “What you should do,” Simon said, “is go back and read Illiberal Education and its tone, and then read the America book and its tone,” he instructs me as the makeup lady, who is a big fan, dabs his face. (Beck’s radio show is also televised on The Blaze.) “I don’t think there’s a fundamental difference in my approach then and now.... Illiberal Education has been baptized into a sort of pathbreaking, sort of sober, respectable book. It was a bomb when I dropped it in 1991!” In other words, he’s always been a fire-starter, and that’s all he’s ever wanted to be.

Certainly, D’Souza has always had a hearty streak of American boosterism—derived, he says, from his own immigrant’s story. He was born in Bombay to a middle-class Catholic family that hailed from the former Portuguese colony of Goa. Sans family, he immigrated to Arizona, where he finished high school and earned a scholarship to Dartmouth. He quickly became disillusioned by the tendency of his fellow classmates to criticize the U.S. and romanticize South Asia. “I said, ‘What do you find particularly liberating about India?’” he asked The Washington Post in 1991. “Is it the caste system? Is it dowry? Is it an arranged marriage?”

He tried to impress upon them what to him was an obvious insight: Life was far better here than it was there. Three decades later, that is the theme of America.

It was also on campus that D’Souza began to hone his provocation skills. He rose to editor of the upstart Dartmouth Review, a mischievous conservative organ that seemed to strive chiefly for political incorrectness. Among the more reviled stunts it undertook with D’Souza as editor was its publication of a list of members of the campus Gay Student Association, which effectively outed a bunch of students. Then there was the anti-affirmative-action screed written in mock Ebonics (“Dis Sho Ain’t No Jive, Bro”) and the interview with a KKK member, accompanied by a photo of a man hanging from a tree. (In his memoir, former Treasury Secretary and fellow Dartmouth grad Timothy Geithner recounts calling D’Souza a “dick” for the outing.)

Through the Review, D’Souza cultivated a network of young conservative politicos who would go on to invade Reagan-era Washington like an all-conservative cast of St. Elmo’s Fire. In college, he dated fellow Review editor and future pundit Laura Ingraham. (“We had a pretty serious relationship, and it became a very complicated one,” D’Souza says. “I’m very fond of her, and we’re still friends, but it just, um, it didn’t work out.”) After he graduated, when he served as an editor for the right-leaning quarterly Policy Review, his group came to include eventual Christian Coalition leader Ralph Reed, and another future pundit named Ann Coulter, whom he also dated. “He had an active social life in the romantic department,” says Adam Meyerson, Policy Review’s then-editor.

At Policy Review, he specialized in sharp, reported essays—one cruelly amusing piece skewered the know-nothing foreign policy of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops—which he parlayed into a brief gig in the Reagan White House, working under domestic policy adviser Gary Bauer on school prayer and abortion, to name a couple of pet topics. But he never planned to stay very long, telling a reporter at the time that he didn’t “want to become an invertebrate Washingtonian or professional bureaucratic type.” Indeed, agrees his former Policy Review colleague, Michael Johns, “I don’t think he’s a person you would turn to as an expert on the intricacies of legislation. ... He’s a very 30,000-foot intellectual.”

Courtesy of a fellowship at the American Enterprise Institute, D’Souza returned to 30,000 feet. His first big book, Illiberal Education, marked his arrival as the enfant terrible of conservative thought. With The End of Racism, in 1995, he pushed the act further, arguing that “black culture,” rather than white racism, was primarily to blame for black poverty. In response, neoconservative economist Glenn Loury and social activist Bob Woodson resigned in protest from AEI.

D’Souza’s reputation hardly suffered. Then-AEI President Christopher DeMuth publicly defended The End of Racism, while Loury says another bigwig-in-residence, the late James Q. Wilson, urged him not to resign and “embarrass” the institute. The New York Review of Books was similarly taken, publishing a glowing review. “He was regarded quite favorably as a promising, articulate, courageous, talented journalist,” Loury recalls, wearily.

Some on the left found a certain sporting quality in D’Souza as well. The Milton scholar and roving public intellectual Stanley Fish, after D’Souza savagely attacked him in Illiberal Education, wound up embarking with him on a campus debating tour. They are now close friends. “There’s an optimism about him that corresponds to that Horatio Alger
tradition in American culture,” Fish says. “He was always coming to me and my wife, saying, ‘Why don’t we get together to do a series of talks and lectures on cruise ships?’ Of course, his ambitions are much greater now.”

The era of good feelings did not last. In 2007, The Enemy at Home was castigated by the Left for its Falwell-esque hypothesis that Hillary, Bill, and the rest of liberal America had incited al-Qaida to attack the U.S., and by Right and Left alike for its surprisingly sympathetic view of fundamentalist Islam.

“Yeah I would rather go to a baseball game or have a drink with Michael Moore than with the grand mufti of Egypt,” reads one sample quote. “But when it comes to core beliefs, I have to confess that I’m closer to the dignified fellow in the long robe and prayer beads than to the slovenly fellow with the baseball cap.” Panning The Enemy at Home in a New York Times Book Review article, the left-leaning Alan Wolfe called for right-wing intellectuals to “distance themselves, quickly and cleanly” from D’Souza; Wolfe was no doubt pleased when National Review ran a symposium that consisted entirely of take-downs. William F. Buckley eventually wrote The Times to defend D’Souza, though he admitted he hadn’t read the book.

“That book had an original argument, and I’m very proud of it,” D’Souza says, but it didn’t help me that there was squabble about it on the right. It would have been better if the Right had lined up behind it, and the Left, see, it is good to have the Left attack my books—because they are the target of my books.”

So he recalibrated his mission, writing the more nakedly partisan Roots of Obama’s Rage. If the goal was to win back elite conservative opinion, though, it failed. The most acerbic review arguably came from The Weekly Standard’s Andrew Ferguson, whose piece, “The Roots of Dinesh D’Souza’s Lunacy,” feasted on D’Souza’s “misstatements of fact, leaps in logic, and pointlessly elaborate argumentation.” Ferguson was among those to point out that the book never proves an ideological link between Obama and his father. Nor does it square D’Souza’s contradictory notion that “anticolonialism” equals anti-Americanism. “People are not always fully conscious of their own motives,” he says when I bring up the first objection. Regarding the inconvenient fact that the “Spirit of ’76,” which D’Souza often invokes, was literally anticolonial, he responds that what matters is “what type of anticolonialism” you’re talking about. The American Revolution was all well and good; the Mau-Mau uprising, not so much.

I ask whether D’Souza sees a parallel between himself and conservative pundits like Tucker Carlson and Charles Krauthammer, who began their careers writing for “little magazines,” only later to trade in a measure of seriousness for popular influence. It’s a fancy way of asking him if he’s sold out.

Just the opposite, he argues. “What happened to all three of us is, we have an entrepreneurial approach.” he says. “We’re able to navigate to new media, and new forms.” For the bomb-throwing free-market champion, the logic career progression is to throw ever bigger and badder bombs, and to score ever fatter paychecks in the process. “We’re not changing the way we are,” he says. “We’re changing the way we express ourselves.”

D’Souza’s latest film, America: Imagine the World Without Her, begins with a Revolutionary War battle scene in which George Washington, riding a horse, is shot and killed by a British sniper hiding in the woods. Then Mount Rushmore crumbles. As does the Statue of Liberty. For the first few minutes, the film seems to be a counterfactual thriller in which we are literally forced to imagine the world without her. Quickly, however, D’Souza appears on screen, gazing at the monuments on the National Mall, and we learn that it is not he who wishes to rewrite American history but a band of leftist activists and intellectuals—Bill Ayers, radical ethnographer Ward Churchill—who insist upon shaming the country for its past indiscretions.

D’Souza likes to boast that unlike Michael Moore, he does not “ambush” his subjects. But D’Souza is more like Moore than he cares to admit. The liberal documentarian’s Flint, Michigan, roots are central to his blue-collar populism; D’Souza uses his immigrant roots to explain his admiration for a different brand of America. As with Moore, he is also the central character in his films, introducing his audience to one ideological pathology after another.

D’Souza shares another crowd-pleasing talent with Moore: He excels at demonizing his opponents, whether it’s Obama in 2016 or the Left writ large in America. Sitting in Ward Churchill’s Colorado home, for instance, he proposes a hypothetical, premised on Churchill’s assessment of the country as an “evil empire.” “If the U.S. had the atomic bomb earlier,” D’Souza posits, “chances are pretty good it would have dropped it on Nazi Germany. And certainly, for a Jew, that would have been a good idea.” So, he asks, “if you could drop a bomb on the United States, would you do it?” Smoking a cigarette, Churchill thinks for a moment and replies: “Well, if it would be justifiable in the context you just described, then by the same logic it would be justifiable here.” QED: The Left wishes to bomb America.

While it’s true that D’Souza does not ambush his targets, that’s partly because some of them are dead and others are fictional. Obama, we learn in America, is one of the “most famous disciples” of Chicago political organizer Saul Alinsky, despite the fact that Alinsky died when Obama was not yet a teenager and was still living in Hawaii. At one point, D’Souza seems to forget that Matt Damon’s character in Good Will Hunting, who praises the left-wing historian Howard Zinn, is not Matt Damon himself. For a like-minded viewer, however, the film is so packed with such suggestive nuggets that it may be hard to resist the idea that a vast left-wing conspiracy is afoot.

America exemplifies the can’t-miss strategy D’Souza discovered with his Obama movie: If your work is premised on the idea that Hollywood and academia and the Democratic Party have colluded to warp the nation’s cultural consciousness, any liberal caviling—or ridicule—implicitly proves your point. The more outrageous D’Souza becomes, the more the establishment rejects him, the more he is embraced by a massive audience that mistrusts the establishment anyway. Sprinkle in some intense anti-Obama sentiment and a balkanized media environment, and D’Souza has devised an unbeatable formula for commercial success. Whatever is said or written about him—including every word of this article—cannot hurt the brand. (Clearly, America’s 8 percent critical rating on Rotten Tomatoes does not seem to have influenced ordinary moviegoers, who rate it at 88 percent.)

D’Souza has mastered the art of turning perceived slights into commercial gain. When Costco pulled America the book a few months ago, citing poor sales, D’Souza claimed that he was being targeted for political reasons. (Costco’s CEO is an Obama
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argument against Dinesh is, he disrespects the gods and corrupts the youth.”

On July 30, D’Souza appeared on NPR’s On Point to debate Mother Jones reporter David Corn about America. The show quickly disintegrated: Corn basically yelled the whole time about D’Souza’s shameless mendacity, and D’Souza lost everyone when he started discussing a link between Alinsky and Lucifer. At the end of the show, host Tom Ashbrook all but apologized for having D’Souza on.

D’Souza couldn’t have been more delighted. After the appearance, he tweeted out a photo with an elected official, since Long’s campaign was hopeless. “She lost by 40 percent,” D’Souza notes, “and her candidacy was, you know, to say it’s uphill was an understatement. My motive was not self-serving in any way. I wasn’t trying to get an appointment. I wasn’t a bundler. I wasn’t looking for an ambassador’s position. It was solely to help a stranded friend.” So why was he pursued by federal prosecutors? It’s political payback, D’Souza says, for his popular assaults on the president. “I deserve to receive the same penalty,” he says, “as any other person who’s not a critic of the Obama administration.”

On Sept. 3, D’Souza submitted a statement to the federal judge presiding over his case. “I cannot believe how stupid I was, how careless, and how irresponsible,” he wrote, asking to get off with community service. “This should not have happened, and I am ashamed and contrite that it did.” Two days later, on Twitter, D’Souza struck a somewhat less remorseful tone. Next to a screen shot of his Facebook page’s 350,000 “likes” he wrote, “The Obama campaign to shut me up: is it working?”

There is, of course, no Obama campaign to shut D’Souza up. But by answering Alan Wolfe’s 2007 call to “distance themselves, quickly and cleanly” from D’Souza, Washington’s establishment players have rendered the idea of it significantly more plausible, and in the process turned him into something of a martyr to his fans. Indeed, D’Souza’s supposed downfall illuminates the vast disconnect between the NPR listeners aghast at his recent On Point debate, and the army of Internet commenters who leaped to his defense. If you’ve ever wondered how it came to be that a guy who makes a critically massacred movie about “anticolonialism” becomes the most popular political filmmaker in the country, it’s because you’re on the other side of that divide. Nobody’s really reading that wry Weekly Standard review or that snide Salon takedown. They’re driving to a movie theater you’ve never been to and buying a $12 ticket to America.

In the dressing room of Glenn Beck’s studios, D’Souza told me the tale of his evolution as a public figure. Around the time Illiberal Education came out, he said, “I remember my publisher, the Free Press, saying, ‘We’re really concerned about The New York Times Book Review.’ They didn’t mind if the book review was negative. But it had to be respectful. It couldn’t be disdainful or dismissive.” Moral of the story: “How far we’ve come! I mean, today if I were to get a disdainful review in The New York Times, a) it has zero impact on me; b) if anything, it’ll only help me.”

At the end of America, D’Souza appears on screen in a prison cell, rubbing his eyes while wearing a set of handcuffs. “I made a mistake,” he says, softly. “I’m not above the law. No one is. But we don’t want to live in a society where Lady Justice has one eye open and winks at her friends, and casts the evil eye at her adversaries. When will it stop?” He may never be incarcerated; his sentence may simply be carried out with community service at the Boys & Girls Club of Greater San Diego. Either way, he can’t lose. “If he goes to jail, you know, will it harm him?” Bellow asks. “Au contraire.”