



20 Questions with Montel Williams

By Betsy Rothstein

Posted: 04/20/09 04:49 PM [ET]

Famed talk show host Montel Williams recently landed a radio show on Air America. He lives in New York City and fishes in Tennessee. One day, he insists, he will “definitely” run for office. In the meantime, you can catch his show between 9 a.m. and noon EST each day.

What do you hope to do from your new perch at Air America?

Well, you know, I’m hoping that this new show can embody what they stand for, which is progressive talk radio. To me, it means hearing voices of multiple opinions and giving them a chance to be heard by the multitudes.

Does this mean conservatives?

Well, experts on different topics.

So no conservatives.

I’m going to talk about the gamut. I happen to be a registered Independent. I was a Republican all my life. I left the Republican Party.

When?

Let’s see — 16 years ago, pre-Clinton. I changed over to be a registered Independent, and it has stayed that way.

So President Bill Clinton made you switch parties?

I came out of the military and I started following things on my own. There is not one leader that can make me jump.

President Obama can’t make you jump?

Obama’s not going to make me jump, but we think similarly on many issues.

Did you contribute to Obama’s presidential campaign?

Yes. [Long pause] I did ... I will tell you, I was a late convert. I was a Hillary Clinton supporter until late in the process.

Will you be heavy on politics?

We’re going to be covering politics every single day. But we’re going to be covering the issues of the day. Today we discussed [Defense] Secretary [Robert] Gates’s decision to reduce the military budget by line-item veto.

Did you ever think we’d see a black president in your lifetime?

If it hadn’t happened before me, it would have been me.

President Williams does have a nice ring to it.

In my high school yearbook, it was predicted that I would be president of the United States. Not that I have an inflated view of myself, but if you are going to complain about the ills of our society, you should step up to the plate.

Did you take your classmates’ prediction seriously?

I was president of my class two years in a row. I did a lot of work in that vein in high school and spent 22 years in the military. The only thing that has stopped me from pursuing a political career is my time in the military.

So you will run at some point?

I definitely will run for a political office in this country, no question. I am not doing a radio show to do that.

Have you met Barack Obama?

We have not met face to face. I'm sure I will someday soon.

What was your feeling on election night when he won?

I was outside of the country. I was in London on Election Day. Flew from London to Israel that night. I went to sleep that night not knowing who our president was. I woke up the next day, and I was awakened by people applauding and celebrating. It was a really ephemeral and visceral experience. It was quite a moving experience. I caught the celebration in Chicago on two-hour delay. It was a tremendously powerful experience.

Why do you think politicians generally get such a bad rap?

'Cause in some ways they deserve it. Look at [former Illinois Gov. Rod] Blagojevich. There is everything from crooks to thieves and perverts and we have them in the halls of Congress.

We do have some perverts in the halls of Congress.

I use it not just with some sexual connotation. You can ignore things under your nose. That's perverted. Corruptness is perversion also.

I saw you on "Oprah" recently discussing your multiple sclerosis. Was that difficult for you to open up about all of that?

It was a tough run. That show ... it was so powerful for me. I gotta tell the truth here. I suffer from MS and I have extreme pain in my extremities all the time. I thought there's nothing that can make me nervous. I look at her [Oprah] with reverence. I have been underneath a 50,000-foot submarine or off coast in the Persian Gulf on an aircraft carrier. I have never been as nervous as I was that day. I felt like I was going to turn into Nitro Man. I could have exploded into flames. It took me two days to recover. I've had to come down off that anxiety.

Did you enjoy hanging out with Dr. Oz?

Dr. Oz is one of the coolest people. I have known him; I have done his radio show. I always walked away from every encounter with him with a smile on my face. That's the God-honest truth. He is one of the nicest guys on this planet. I could see him as that old country doctor, going over to the house. He's the guy you want to tell all your secrets to. I'm glad he's getting his own show.

Do you miss having your own talk show?

I feel like I haven't skipped a beat. This radio show is pretty similar. Television was done with me, although the public has never been done with me on television. I could go back into it. I have "Living Well with Montel" ... it will be bought time. You'll see it pretty soon. You're going to see me so much [that] you're going to get sick of me.

Do you see Rush Limbaugh as a direct competitor?

No, Rush Limbaugh means nothing to me. I don't even want to begin to open up the door.

What political TV shows do you routinely watch?

I watch them all. If there was one problem that I have that I have to admit to, I am a news junkie like a crack addict. I'm sick like that. I have three televisions in my house. The one in the bedroom is on CNN, the living room is between MSNBC and Fox and I get to yell at the screen a little bit [and] the third bedroom is on Headline News but I'm going to move it over to the Bloomberg Network.

Wow.

I can stay up at night until 1 a.m. catching each show.

Where do you like to stay when you visit Washington?

The Willard used to be my absolute favorite, but we stay at the Ritz because it takes pets and Mr. Max goes wherever we go. He's an Italian toy poodle. He was supposed to be a tiny toy, but he weighs almost 12 pounds right now. He's a great little pup, the best guy in the world.