

Why Not Me?: The Inside Story of the Making and Unmaking of the Franken Presidency

by Al Franken (Paperback - Feb 8, 2000)

A Retrospective: The Inside Story of a Future Senator

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Not that I'm a fan of early morning TV, but for whatever reason, The Today Show was on and from the depth of my recliner, I didn't turn it off. Al Franken was the guest. Al Franken is one of the original writers on Saturday Night Live, and for that alone he is a cultural icon. He was interviewed by Matt Lauer to promote his latest book, *Why Not Me?*, a trivial piece of fluff where he fictionally gets elected President but becomes unable to serve because he becomes extremely depressed after a series of inaugural blunders. Rather than tell the truth, his political advisors tell the American people that President Franken developed a severe case of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, but there is no cause for alarm because it is 100% curable. In a heartbeat, he had my attention. Did I hear that right? What was going on? Here I was, slung deeply into the bowels of disease, barely able to reach for the clicker while Al Franken told a national audience that his character got Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, which is really just depression. Ha, Ha, Ha. Not only were those his exact words, but that was the point of the entire book! No kidding, the whole story line hinges on it. Everyone laughed. The usually staid Matt Lauer was in sidesplitting glee, at my expense. All across America they laughed.

Whammo. It's like I was hit with a body blow and couldn't breathe. My head, which was already made of lead, grew five times in size and wanted to burst. I was so angry that I couldn't do anything but hope to settle into a simmer and slow down the exacerbation. Hope. In my mind, over and over, I saw Al Franken, in his thick glasses, staring into the studio lights like a blind man, basking in the laughter and glee. Al Franken, with that silly smile on his face and those little balls of spit in the corners of his mouth. Laughter and cheers.

Commercial.

That night, he did it again on The Late Show with David Letterman, blind man, spit balls and laughter. Chronic Fatigue Syndrome is really depression and that's what makes his book so funny. Ho, Ho, Ho. How do they get away with this?

Who's at fault here? Obviously Franken the writer didn't do his homework. The publisher and proof-readers (Delacorte Press, N.Y. N.Y.), didn't bat an eye, yet invested enough money in this book to put it on the front tables in Barnes & Noble and Borders bookstores across the country. The Today Show staff not only didn't give it a second thought, I doubt there was a first one. So who's at fault? Letterman? Who? Would they joke like this about Polio? Multiple Sclerosis? Can you imagine Al Franken trying to ridicule Richard Prior because of his MS? Obviously not. So who's at fault? I'll tell you who. Have you been listening to me? It goes back to Steven Straus and the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institutes of Health, where, for decades, CFIDS has been trivialized as a fabrication, and discarded as a psychotic derivation among depressed women. I don't understand the motive, but the lack of legitimacy and the foolish name have come home to roost when national television allows this misinformation to be celebrated and millions of Americans, people like me, are forced deeper into the throes of irreversible disease, to boost their ratings.

Its all true, and I cant take it back. For millions of TV viewers, the myth of CFIDS as a psychiatric disorder was confirmed. Imagine those who were sitting on the fence. What if Harriet's mother was watching? See? I told you so. Medicine dispersed by a sloppy comedian has that ring of truth. God Damn it. Yes sir, that Al Franken is one funny funny man. Ha, Ha, Ha. God help us.

I found an address and I wrote him a letter. Apparently I wasn't the only one because I got a letter back, an unsigned photocopied form letter from Al Franken himself.

Dear Sir or Madam,

Thank you for your letter regarding my regrettably confusing and misleading statements about Chronic Fatigue Syndrome on the Today Show and the Late Show with David Letterman. In my book, Why Not Me?, President Franken becomes depressed immediately after taking office. Chronic Fatigue Syndrome is used by the Franken White House as a cover for his/my depression. In no way did I mean to suggest that Chronic Fatigue Syndrome is anything other than a physical disease. Indeed, on page 238 of the book, my press secretary says, "I think if you ask anyone who suffers from Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, they'll tell you it's a very real disease that's physical in nature." However, it is easy to see how someone could have gotten the exact opposite impression from my appearances on Letterman and particularly, the Today Show, where I said, "Well, the second day I get chronic fatigue syndrome, which is really just depression."

What I should have said is something like: "On the second day, the White House says I have chronic fatigue syndrome, but I'm really suffering from a debilitating bout of depression." I'm a writer, and I'm supposed to be precise with words, so there's no excuse for this mistake.

I understand that on certain CFS websites I've been slightly misquoted as saying on the Today Show: "Chronic fatigue syndrome, which we all know is depression." I didn't say that, and it wasn't my intention to communicate that idea, but certainly I can see how someone could draw that conclusion from what I said.

I don't know precisely what I said on Letterman because I don't have a tape or transcript.

I think it probably wasn't as egregious as the Today Show because I haven't heard as much complaint about the Letterman appearance.

I have received a tremendous number of letters and faxes from hurt and angry people who believed I was saying that chronic fatigue syndrome is depression. Again, I completely understand how someone could have drawn this inference from what I said and I'm very sorry and embarrassed. Since my mistake, I have learned more about CFS and understand better than ever that CFS is a very real and often incapacitating disease. The last thing the sufferers of this disease need is the dissemination of misinformation.

I have made sure that in subsequent recountings of the books storyline I have made it clear that CFS and depression are not the same thing. Again, I am very sorry and I ask your forgiveness.

Sincerely,

Al Franken

How weak is that? What he said was, "I get chronic fatigue syndrome, which is really just depression", then complains about being misquoted as saying "chronic fatigue syndrome, which we all know is depression" as if there's a difference. He then suggests an adequate correction would have been to say, "I have chronic fatigue syndrome, but I'm really suffering from a debilitating bout of depression", as if that would eliminate any confusion. Heck, that clears it up for me. How about you?

He just plain doesn't get it. He promised that subsequent recountings of the storyline would make it clear that CFS and depression are not the same thing, but that hasn't happened. If I step out of context here and travel a few years down the road, it still hasn't happened. He appears to be satisfied that a single mailing to just those who complained was enough to counter the damage done when he trashed us on national TV, twice. He didn't do what he promised, which was the lamest of corrections, and yet he asked for forgiveness. We're owed much more. For Christ's sake, he owes himself much more. As a writer he says he's supposed to be precise with words while the very foundation of this absurd little book is rooted in misinformation at the expense of millions. That's not fair.

I submitted the story to the local newspaper and they printed a few paragraphs that implied his apology was written specifically to our group. At least it was something. What was really needed however was a round or two with Katie Couric and Jay Leno.

Al Franken needs to use his popularity, (and now his Senate seat), to step up to the plate and suck down a fat piece of humble pie. Just think of all he could do with his newly found knowledge. He could make a real difference. Imagine if he found a few articulate advocates and addressed the Congress. Hat in hand, he could do what's right and make a substantial difference, make amends. We're owed that. Humble pie is a fabulous marketing tool. But let's not hold our breath. In reality, this hideous error in judgement is long gone. It's water under the bridge and with our faces slapped, we shuffle on.

Nobody ever said it would be easy and nobody ever said it would be fair.