

News from Lake Wobegon: Keillor a Democrat

New book calls Republicans a 'gang of pirates'

By Jeff Baenen
The Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — It may be old news in Lake Wobegon, but famous shy person Garrison Keillor has come out as an unabashed Democrat.

The host of public radio's popular "A Prairie Home Companion" has written "Homegrown Democrat: A Few Plain Thoughts From the Heart of America," a 238-page book explaining why he's a Democrat and excoriating the Republican Party as "a gang of pirates."

Keillor, who's been spoofing President Bush and the GOP on his show for some time, said he's not worried about alienating Republican fans of his show.

"I think that the book is an honest piece of work," he told The Associated Press. "You know what you're buying if you buy this book."

In "Homegrown Democrat," published in July by Viking, Keillor lists "What Do-Goooder Democrats Have Done for You" while lamenting that Republicans have turned away from being "the party of pragmatic Main Street businessmen in steel-rimmed spectacles who decried profligacy and waste."

Keillor said he wanted to write a "simple, thoughtful book, not one that's full of invective and terribly ideolog-

ical." But some passages are rants that may surprise fans who have listened to Keillor spin folksy tales of Lake Wobegon on his radio show over the last three decades.

In one passage, Keillor writes of Republicans, "The party of Lincoln and Liberty was transmogrified into the party of hairy-backed swamp developers and corporate shills, faith-based economists, see-through fundamentalist bullies with Bibles, Christians of convenience, freelance racists, hobby cops, misogynistic frat boys, lizardskin cigar monkeys..." and continues until calling President Bush "their Etch A Sketch president with a voice like a dial tone, who for almost four years has looked as if he were just about to say something smart."

Minnesota Republican Party spokesman Randy Wanke said Keillor risks losing part of his audience with the book's "vitriolic" tone.

"I think there are a number of Republicans out there, and independents, who are going to be turned off by it," Wanke said.

Chicago Sun-Times book editor Henry Kisor called Keillor's book "an Above Average tub-thumper" to rally Democrats, but added, "As a carrot of sweet reason to entice reluctant horses into the barn, it just will not do."

But Keillor doesn't spare Democrats, either.

"We can be weenies, masters of rinky-dink," he writes. "We are capable of doing dumb things in the name of the common good and spon-



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Garrison Keillor discussed his book "Homegrown Democrat: A Few Plain Thoughts From the Heart of America" on July 23 at Bound to Be Read, a St. Paul bookstore. Afterward, he signed copies of his new book, which describes why he became a Democrat.

soring National Self-Awareness Week and print up brochures reminding people not to walk into open manholes."

Keillor has spoken at Democratic functions and was a celebrity figure at the Democratic National Convention in Boston, where he spoke to Minnesota delegates about the Democratic Party as "the last group of people in the country who believe, truly, in the common good." On the air, he leads his audience in singing the satirical "We're All Republicans Now."

Keillor first stunned fans in 2002 when he wrote two scathing columns for Salon.com denouncing Repub-

"We Democrats are deeply flawed people, but we do stick to our guns, and believe in decency and public spiritedness and have refused to hitch our wagon to yahooism and intolerance and have supported government as a necessary force for good ..."

— From the book "Homegrown Democrat"

High School and at the University of Minnesota.

"The University of Minnesota, to me, in 1960 was a charmed place. It's difficult for me to describe what an amazing little community that was," he said. "It was a tiny, amazing metropolis that existed, a sort of little island of people in the midst of the Twin Cities."

Keillor, who turns 62 on Aug. 7, recounts in his book being a freshman hearing John F. Kennedy speak at the university during the 1960 campaign.

Kennedy "had a tremendous effect on a crowd, which I think has been misattributed to his good looks, his wealth, which I think didn't matter so much as this Irish quality of being able to think on his feet

and express himself and to extend his speaking range into something that was rather high-flown and formal," Keillor said.

In his book, Keillor cites the time his daughter, then 4, went into convulsions as an example of how a city of "yellow-dog Democrats" like St. Paul, where Keillor lives, maintains the social contract.

"And in about two minutes the St. Paul fire department paramedics arrived at the door," Keillor writes. "The rescue squad can get to you anywhere in St. Paul in four minutes or less. That is official policy."

"In the suburbs, thanks to Republicans and their code of personal responsibility, the coronary victim will have time to read the entire Gospel of St. Mark before help arrives."

When the material appeared as an op-ed in the Star Tribune, it sparked some angry letters.

Keillor said writing the book purged himself of a need to talk about politics on the radio.

But he still promises satires about John Kerry and Bush when "A Prairie Home Companion" — heard by more than 4 million listeners weekly on over 550 public radio stations — begins a new season this fall. (The first show is scheduled Sept. 25 at the Fitzgerald Theater in downtown St. Paul.)

"Having a serious, passionate political book, I now feel I've gotten that off my chest. And now I can be a silly person, which I would much rather be. Who wouldn't?"