

# Only villain in new late-night war is NBC

It's become the best drama on television lately — the Jay Leno-Conan O'Brien late night fiasco. Battle lines have been drawn, and fans have chosen sides.

And yes, that includes me. Since he's been taking a lot of licks lately, let me take this opportunity to let all of you know that I am firmly on Team Leno. I strongly believe that Leno was trying to do the right thing, and now he's getting crucified for it.

To see what I mean, you have to go back to 1991 when Johnny Carson announced his retirement from "The Tonight Show." The announcement set off an ugly battle between Leno and David Letterman (or more precisely their people) that eventually resulted in Letterman moving to CBS. Leno came out looking like the bad guy who stole "Tonight" and pushed Letterman out the door.

Fast forward to 2004. O'Brien's contract with NBC was ending, and ABC desperately wanted him. The only way NBC could keep O'Brien from leaving was to give him "Tonight." So NBC executives asked Leno to give the

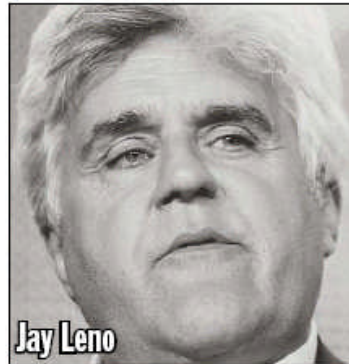


Angela HENDERSON

show up. Wanting to avoid another battle, Leno agreed to hand over the reins of "Tonight" in 2009. This way he could look like the hero and not force O'Brien to go through what he did with Letterman. It seemed like the perfect transition plan.

But something happened in those five years. "Tonight" became more successful and profitable than ever. Leno started showing signs of not wanting to retire. Critics everywhere started to blast the decision to take Leno off the air. NBC could have changed its mind and bought out O'Brien's contract, but they stayed the course despite the criticism.

Faced with the prospect of a disgruntled — yet more popular than ever — Leno going to another network, NBC offered him "The Jay Leno Show." Why he agreed



Jay Leno



Conan O'Brien

Photos by The Associated Press

to it, I don't really understand, but most likely he felt that staying off the air for a year (which he would have had to do if he had gone to another network) would have been detrimental for him and especially his staff. So he stuck with NBC. And maybe he actually thought "Leno" would work.

It hasn't. The ratings have been absolutely dreadful. But more than that, the show has hurt the bottom lines of NBC affiliates (the local stations that carry NBC programming) by dragging down the ratings of their 11 p.m. newscasts — an important source of the affiliates' revenue. And since

O'Brien has been consistently losing to Letterman in the ratings, the lead-out hasn't done the local stations any favors, either. Without Leno to stay up for, you have to wonder if people aren't just going to bed earlier.

NBC continued to offer its support for "Leno," but the affiliates had enough, and they let NBC know it. So NBC caved and announced its plan to return Leno to late night. Speculation is that the looming sale of NBC to Comcast — and NBC's need to have the affiliates support — figured heavily in the decision to pull the trigger now, as opposed

to giving both "Tonight" and "Leno" more time.

Now it is O'Brien who comes off like the hero. Once again, Leno looks like the bad guy who is forcing O'Brien out the door — the very thing Leno hoped to avoid in the first place. But the truth is they are both victims of stupid decision-making by the network. NBC should have never promised O'Brien "Tonight" and just let him go to ABC back in 2004. As badly as O'Brien wanted "Tonight," that was the best decision for everyone involved. I think we can see that clearly now.

However, as much as I adore Leno, I don't want to see him go back to "Tonight" because it wouldn't be the same. He went out on top, but now he's a villain. It took him years to shake that stigma off before. I don't know if he can do it again.

Personally, I would like to see Leno and O'Brien both walk out the door. That way the real villain — NBC — can be punished.

**Angela Henderson is a television enthusiast who writes a TV blog on [www.herald-dispatch.com](http://www.herald-dispatch.com).**