

Joe and Al's immigration road show

By: [Andy Barr](#)

April 28, 2010 09:19 AM EDT

The national debate over immigration is being framed by a deeply personal and long-running argument between two of its most polarizing figures: Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio and the Reverend Al Sharpton.

The two have been fighting for over a year about Arpaio's handling of the sheriff's department — which Sharpton contends is a habitual violator of civil rights laws and the sheriff says is the only force "tough" enough to address Arizona's desperate problems.

The state's new anti-immigration law, signed by GOP Gov. Jan Brewer last Friday, has reignited the rivalry that plays out in dueling cable appearances and competing quotes in news stories.

The pair have made two appearances together this week, on CNN and MSNBC, and more than a dozen individually. Additionally, they have both figured prominently in stories by news outlets, including the Associated Press, New York Times and POLITICO, summarizing the immigration debate.

They are cast as two entrenched enemies on opposite sides of a divisive issue.

While neither represents more than a singular point on a long spectrum on immigration, they were perfectly made for each other, well-known figures with easily explained credentials and opinions who revel in controversy, crave the spotlight and most importantly are always available.

"They've come to personify both extremes of the immigration issue and cable outlets are far more interested in extremists than centrists," said Shanto Iyengar, director of Stanford's Political Communication Lab.

"As for substance, they're both experienced in their respective areas of concern, Sheriff Arpaio in law enforcement, Rev. Sharpton in civil rights, and both have long track records of speaking out on these issues when other public personalities can but won't for fear of alienating one or another constituency," said Don Bates, an associate professor at George Washington University's School of Political Management.

"As for entertainment value, they're both outspoken, unafraid of the media's heat, and lightning rods for left and right," he added. "They're certainly hot stuff for Fox News and MSNBC. Most important to my mind, they don't mince words. For many of us, they're a refreshing antidote to political doublespeak despite their often extreme views."

The rivalry between the two has grown quickly over the last year, since Sharpton called for Arpaio's resignation soon after the Justice Department launched an investigation into the sheriff's department — which has yet to produce an indictment.

Last June, Sharpton flew to Phoenix to meet with Arpaio and ask him to step down.

Like any event the two plan, the meeting was a media circus.

On the morning of their meeting, Sharpton met with activists — in front of cameras — at the Pilgrim Rest Baptist Church in downtown Phoenix. Later that morning, Sharpton did a 30-minute press conference before heading into his meeting with Arpaio.

Following the meeting, the two men squared off on CNN's "Lou Dobbs Tonight," where Arpaio said Sharpton must be "living in fantasyland" to think he would step down.

A year later, Arpaio is still sheriff, Sharpton is still calling for his job, and both relish any opportunity to take a shot at the other.

"Discourse these days is about archetypes, cast characters and clear narratives," said Eric Dezenhall, the co-founder of communications firm Dezenhall Resources. "There are no nuances with cable, only cartoons where you can pretty much just look at the characters and get a nice tidy summary of who they are and what they believe. Arpaio and Sharpton fit the bill perfectly."

Following Sharpton's initial call for Arpaio's job, Arpaio fired back a sharply worded letter that was provided to the press and has been a primer for each of their cable slugfests since.

"Your public proclamation leads me to the conclusion [that] not only do you not understand Arizona, you also do not understand democracy," Arpaio wrote to Sharpton. "While your public outcries are colorful, there are several instances where you have inserted yourself into other people's affairs without knowing any of the facts. Poor judgment has caused you plenty of trouble in the past and promises to do so again."

Appearing with Sharpton Monday night on CNN's "Larry King Live," Arpaio quickly diverted the segment's topic away from the Arizona law to the battle between him and the reverend.

After briefly answering the first question, Arpaio wanted to "get back to Al."

"Al, you came here in June. Actually, we met in my office. You called me Bull Connor," Arpaio said, directly his conversation at Sharpton rather than King, the host. "You asked for my resignation. You encourage activists to follow my deputies around. I'm really sad that now you're trying to perpetuate more violence if there's going to be violence in dissent over this new law."

Sharpton was happy to dive into the feud.

"I'm a little confused. I'm a little surprised at you. You said I was there three times. None of the times was there violence. And then did I perpetrate violence. I asked you to resign because people there are making complaints," Sharpton responded. "But this is really not about you. This is about the Constitution of the United States."

"You're the one that is butting into our business here, Al," Arpaio snapped back. "I know you get paid for it. But that's your business. But you don't even know what you're talking about."

The rest of the segment degenerated — as many appearances with the two do — to a

back and forth exchange of accusations and wildly thrown punches that were only barely connected to the supposed topic: immigration.

But that's exactly why they were on Larry King in the first place, explained former CNN producer Kimberly Abbott.

"They are known quantities, easy and quick to book and the producers know exactly what they will get when they put them on air together," said Abbott who now works for the International Crisis Group. "There's no guessing, no learning curve."

"It isn't about advancing the issue or finding nuanced points of view in a three-minute segment. It's about creating 'good' television, and unfortunately, that's what the industry says it is today," she said. "Bookers book guests off of newspapers and blogs, so once the debate drivers have appeared in one or two publications, they will start getting calls from the cables, it's a cycle."

"When the issue comes up again, guess who gets the first call?"