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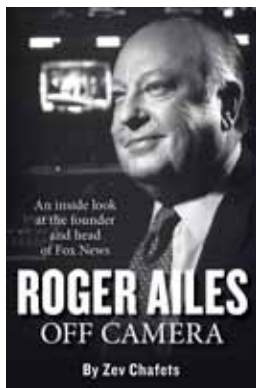
Roger Ailes, Fox News, and the future of journalism

BY JIM SLEEPER

WHEN I PUBLISHED *LIBERAL RACISM* in 1997 (with a chapter on how *The New York Times* was misrepresenting racial politics under editorial-page editor Howell Raines), I was interviewed on Fox News, which I'd barely heard of, by Bill O'Reilly, whom I hadn't heard of at all. The encounter was anodyne, but before long I noticed that the network was not. Under its president Roger Ailes, who had pitched his vision of Fox to a receptive Rupert Murdoch only a year before I met O'Reilly, it was rapidly becoming what Zev Chafets calls "transformational" in American-media and political culture. By treating journalism as if it's all about ratings and show, Fox actually makes a profoundly political statement by eviscerating what democratic politics really stands for.

The price we're paying shows up clearly in Chafets's hastily added election-night epilogue to *Roger Ailes Off Camera* (the rest of the book reads as if the 2012 election is yet to come). He shows us Ailes, 71, and Murdoch reacting impassively at Fox headquarters to early indications of the Obama victory—a humiliating setback for its political commentators O'Reilly, Karl Rove, Dick Morris, and Sean Hannity, who've spent the evening, as they have most of the campaign, insisting a Republican victory is imminent.

But Chafets doesn't mention what for journalists was arguably the most



Roger Ailes Off Camera: An inside look at the founder and head of Fox News

By Zev Chafets

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important question of the night, Fox anchor Megyn Kelly's exasperated query to Rove: "Is this just math that you do as a Republican to make yourself feel better, or is this real?"

What counts as "real" at Fox News? It can be hard to tell. Upheavals in American news reporting have been driven not only by digitization, globalization, and the concurrent fragmentation of news-consuming publics and their coordinates, but also, and perhaps even more so, by Ailes's perverse marketing genius, which has given the fear

and anger in American politics new and dangerous forms of expression. It also introduces a new ideological spin, to offset "liberal" influence in mainstream media: "Fox may or may not be internally balanced," Chafets writes, "but Ailes is right when he says, 'Sometimes we are the balance.'"

Although Fox ratings have dropped since the election, they'll rebound if fear and anger rise and if Ailes keeps at it. "I don't see a true liberal answer to Fox on the horizon, although MSNBC tries hard," Mark Danner tells Chafets, and MSNBC's own Rachel Maddow agrees: "Roger took some charisma and great ideas for shows and worked magic.... I feel that he has won. If the media were left of center before, they aren't now."

TO SUPPORT HIS CLAIM THAT FOX'S coverage of the election returns was "dispassionate and professional," Chafets mentions Megyn Kelly's election-night, on-camera march over to the Fox Decision Desk after she's listened to Rove repeatedly challenge its decision to call Ohio for Obama. But according to Jonathan Alter in *The Center Holds*, it was Ailes who called from home and ordered the march to rescue some credibility for Fox News. Chafets spins a Pew Center finding that Fox's coverage of President Obama was eight times more negative than positive by explaining that Ailes, who once shielded Richard Nixon from critical interviewers, "understood perfectly well why [Obama] had preferred chatting with Whoopi Goldberg... to a session with Bill O'Reilly." He adds that "MSNBC, Fox's chief cable rival, was far more partisan—only 3 percent of its Romney coverage was positive, 71 percent negative, a ratio of 23-1."

Such schoolyard excuses—"The other guy did it, too!"—pop up often in this book, as does Ailes's and Chafets's penchant for accusing others pre-emptively of whatever Fox is guilty of, so that the mainstream media will report an equivalence. But this doesn't explain Fox's lopsidedly negative news coverage of Obama or MSNBC's retaliatory efforts to fight Fox's fire with its own.

The fire started at Fox when Ailes sensed, as demagogues (and their producers) throughout history have always done, that anyone with enough

money, cleverness, and showmanship to unleash passions that good politics should channel constructively can ride them to power and profit. That's what Cleon did in Thucydides's account of the Athenians' Mytilenian debate; it's what Huey Long, Joe McCarthy, and recent Fox contributors Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin have done by carrying legitimate grievances into brilliant performances that eventually curdle and collapse, tragically or catastrophically, on their own ignorance and lies.

"In television, technology changes," Ailes insists. "The one constant is content. There has to be a show.... Getting ratings is how you get paid"—and a producer tells Chafets that Ailes will "do anything to get ratings." As Neil Cavuto, a Fox anchor and Ailes acolyte, tells Chafets, before Ailes, "Our thought was, Is the story important? not who will watch it." Ailes "forced people to get out of the ivory tower," as Chafets puts it. Cavuto observes that, "You can make a story out of anything," and that Ailes "has imbued an entire generation of producers with his vision."

But the press is the only industry the Constitution exempts from regulation, because its real purpose is to strengthen citizens' public life by helping them uphold public virtues—such as the inclination and ability to deliberate rationally to make sound decisions—that, as you may have noticed, neither the liberal state nor the markets have done much lately to nourish or defend.

That leaves journalism (and other institutions of civil society, like liberal arts colleges) with a big responsibility. Chafets demonstrates that Ailes twists the news reporting and accountability a republic needs by turning its means of survival into its end, using "flashy graphics, bumper music, constant controversies, and nonstop promotion."

But Fox surrenders, or re-targets, journalism not only to entertain but also to stoke and channel rivulets of public anger and fear into torrents of political power. While Chafets touts Ailes, incessantly, as a P. T. Barnum and apostle of profits, those are only two legs of his tripod. The third is his political agenda: more austerity, more pugilism in foreign policy, more rollbacks of public regulation and of labor unions.

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Ailes drives it all home with lots of blame-shifting. Fox pundits and Rush Limbaugh—who doesn't work there, but has been mentored by Ailes since 1991 and was profiled by Chafets in *Rush Limbaugh: An Army of One*—accuse liberals of fomenting the class war that Ailes and Limbaugh themselves promote by hyping viewers' working-class resentments and diverting attention from their real causes toward professors, elite journalists, and public regulators.

Casting them as the enemy works for a while, but by election night Fox had become the victim of its own success at blaming liberals for public disasters—the failures in Iraq, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, in the wild

financialization and deregulation that caused the economic meltdown—which most voters realized liberal Democrats hadn't caused, even when liberals had gone along with them.

CHAFETS TELLS US ENOUGH ABOUT Ailes's small-town, Ohio boyhood—as a hemophiliac who was sometimes close to death, with a father who nevertheless beat him—and about his continuing ill health and unhappy personal life (three marriages, the third producing Ailes's only child when he was 59) to suggest the roots of his vision that Chafets doesn't try to untangle and that I won't here.

He tells us that Ailes spent many years as a political consultant, advising Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George H. W. Bush, among others (Ailes crafted Bush's infamous Willie Horton ads), before leaving the business in the early 1990s. "I hated politics," Ailes recalls realizing. But his move back to television—to CNBC before selling Murdoch on the idea of Fox—heralded not his liberation from politics but his audacious politicization of TV news.

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Chafets's vignettes of Ailes's friendships and charitable gestures don't persuade me that Ailes sees humanity as anything but customers at a circus and fodder for political rampages. Ailes knows that people also yearn for dignity, or at least for escapes from indignity. But when you're as good as he is at using "news" to grope and goose viewers whom your sponsors are ensnaring in coils of corporate fine print and degraded messaging, a lot of them will fall for Fox's characteristic blame-shifting to Obama the socialist and to the liberal mega-financier George Soros, whom Glenn Beck called "The Puppet Master" in a three-part Fox series whose chillingly close parallels to anti-Semitic conspiracy mongering stunned viewers with a sense of history.

Arianna Huffington confronted Ailes about Beck's Soros story when he accepted an invitation from Barbara Walters to appear on ABC. (He seldom goes on TV, but "a friend is a friend," Chafets explains.) "It's not about the word police," Huffington admonished, "It's about something deeper... the paranoid style [used by Beck] is dangerous when there's real pain out there." Ailes promptly accused Huffington of doing the same thing by citing a little known, unpaid Huffington Post blogger who'd written that Ailes looks like J. Edgar Hoover and has a face like a fist.

But Huffington came as close anyone has to warning Ailes before a large audience that he's playing with fire: When you've run out of socialists and terrorists to blame, one of your operatives will always find a few real capitalists—perhaps Jewish ones, like Soros—to split off from the rest, who remain protected.

Chafets understands this danger, perhaps a little too well: After growing up as William Chafets in Pontiac, MI, and at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, he moved to Israel, served in its army, and was Prime Minister Menachem Begin's press officer. Back in the U.S. after 2000, he wrote New York *Daily News* columns with titles like "How the Israelis Are Helping US Fight Terror War" and "Arafat's 'Womb Bomb' Just Another Delusion."

Although he recently told WNYC's Brian Lehrer that he profiled Limbaugh

and Ailes because he likes "people who change the culture or go against the grain, and people who are contrarians at least within their own profession," surely the fact that Fox is "behind [Israel] all the way," as Ailes puts it, with Limbaugh not far behind, also explains Chafets's eagerness to justify each of them at book length. I think he's also trying to take out some insurance against anti-Semitism as Ailes's "vision" gets scarier. Chafets finesses the story by noting that Ailes has eased Beck out of Fox; he also notes that CNN founder Ted Turner and others liken Murdoch to Hitler—"which would make Roger Ailes a reincarnation of Goebbels," Chafets adds cheekily. But does that *reductio ad absurdum* really end this story?

Chafets seems to think so, making much of Ailes's "friendships" with elite liberals whom he also happens to employ, including sons of Robert Kennedy and Mario Cuomo and the daughter of Jesse Jackson. (Cuomo's son, Chris, left Fox for CNN this year.) He seems to hire them not only for protective coloration but to have them complicit in turning news into a game of money, power, and public relations. Ailes is playing a longer, slower game than most demagogues do.

That leaves high and dry any "ivory tower" liberals who remain thoughtful enough to pose serious questions and find answers that could work if demagoguery didn't eviscerate their legitimacy and funding. The more that that savaging sells, the more that journalists who don't emulate it are left high and dry, too. As Cleon's ancient interlocutor Diodotus lamented, even those with the public interest at heart must appeal to fear and rage to be heard.

Mephistopheles always comes on with a smile, a wink, and promises of shining victories. Ailes and his apologists, like Chafets, have employed and enjoyed these, but they're in for unhappy surprises, and they've got more than a few of us with them on the same slippery slope. **CJR**

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