

VOX FOX

How Roger Ailes and Fox News are changing cable news.

BY KEN AULETTA

One morning not long ago, the co-hosts of "Fox & Friends," the Fox News network's raucous and right-leaning version of the "Today" show, were promoting Fox-branded merchandise such as baseball caps and soap-on-a-rope when Steve Doocy, a co-anchor, turned to his partner, E. D. Hill, and said, "You know who's really jealous about our merchandising?" Doocy, who doubles as the weatherman, answered his own question: "My dentist is so jealous. You've seen him on TV—Aaron Brown. You know, the guy on CNN—he does that show at night? He just works nights over there. But during the day he's our dentist. Do we have a picture?"

Up popped a grim photograph of CNN's principal nighttime anchor, Aaron Brown. "That man looks just like a dentist, doesn't he?" Doocy said, and soon he and Hill were chatting about whether Brown was a good dentist and what he charged for a cleaning. Brown's picture lingered on the screen for a full minute, over bold, block-lettered captions: "AARON BROWN DDS," followed by "MOLAR MAN," followed by "ARROGANT BROWN."

That bit of intramural japey, which aired on December 13, 2001, was choreographed by Roger Ailes, the chairman and C.E.O. of the sometimes raucous and right-leaning Fox News. Ailes was trying to strike back at Brown for publicly "putting us down," he says. "I don't ignore anything. Somebody gets in my face, I get in their face." Ailes requires enemies the way a tank requires fuel, and as he contemplated retaliation he kept thinking, I know someone who looks like Aaron Brown. Then it came to him. He telephoned Doocy, telling him, "Steve, just say that Aaron's your dentist. Then have your co-anchor say, 'He's not a dentist. He's on CNN!'" Ailes, a man of Falstaffian girth, roared with laughter, and continued, "I said, 'Doocy, no matter what happens, even if they torture you,

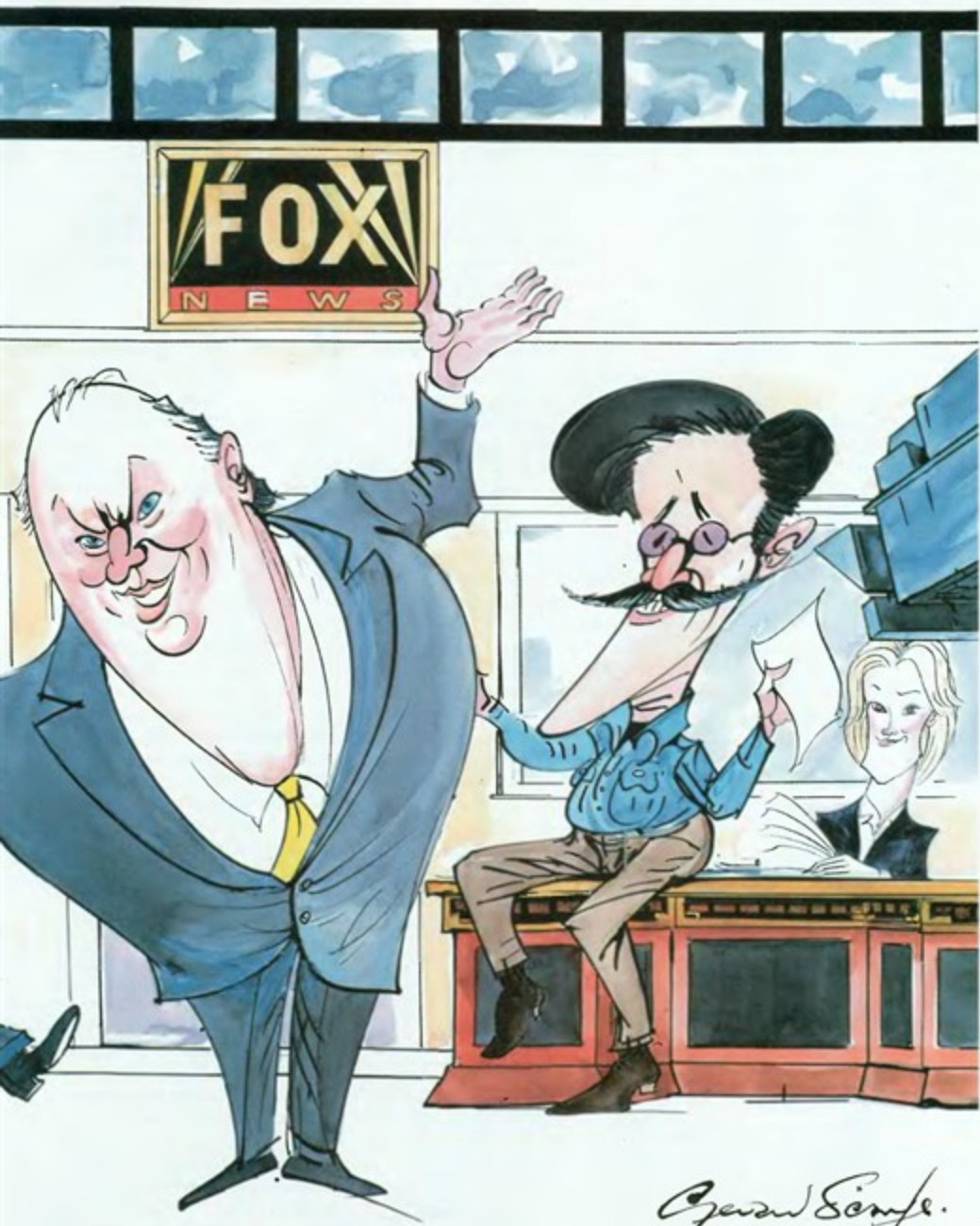
say he's your dentist!'" For two days, Doocy followed this script, and for two days, Ailes recalled fondly, "I'm sitting here laughing my ass off."

Aaron Brown, for his part, was not laughing his ass off. "I thought it was sort of juvenile," he said. "This is a little game they play. It's Roger's game. Roger seeks to define his political or journalistic opponents and destroy them."

There have been many such memories for Ailes, some playful, some brutal, all purposeful. In March, when antiwar protesters blocked traffic on Fifth Avenue and paraded in front of the Fox News offices on Sixth Avenue between Forty-seventh and Forty-eighth Streets, the electronic news ticker that wraps around the building suspended Iraq-war headlines to respond: "ATTENTION PROTESTERS: THE MICHAEL MOORE FAN CLUB MEETS THURSDAY AT A PHONE BOOTH AT SIXTH AVENUE AND 50TH STREET." Marvin Himelfarb, a former sitcom writer, wrote the ticker copy, but Ailes was his happy abettor. Of the announcements, Ailes says, "I helped with a couple." Paula Zahn recalls that when she told Ailes she was moving to CNN in 2001, "he made it very clear to me that he was not going to make life easy for me. He told me I was allowing myself to be drawn into what he called a holy war between CNN and Fox News, and that I was going to have to pay a price for that." (Ailes brought a lawsuit charging that Zahn's agent interfered with Fox's contract; it was dismissed by two state courts.) Subsequently, "Fox & Friends" disparaged Zahn, whose "American Morning" aired at the same time. Mancow Muller, the Chicago-based radio shock jock who appears regularly on the morning show, said of Zahn—screamed, actually—"I kick your ass, Paula! You take on us, we'll kill you, Paula! We'll kill you! *We will kill you, Paula!*" Walter Isaacson, who was then CNN chairman, acknowledges that Ailes's approach "constrains your ac-



Ailes, center, says of his aggressively competitive



behavior that "half of it is because people let their heads be played with and half of it is just my sense of humor."

tion. You wake up aware of Roger. He's always on the attack." Ailes doesn't deny that he tries to intimidate people: "I'd say half of it is because people let their heads be played with and half of it is just my sense of humor."

Ailes is sixty-three and does not look immediately fearsome. He says he is five feet nine inches tall and weighs two hundred and twenty-five pounds; his jaws droop over his collar. With his pallor and barely perceptible eyebrows, Ailes looks like someone who has spent a lifetime under fluorescent lights. In many ways, he is a throwback—to the fifties, perhaps. He slathers a morning bagel with butter and cream cheese; he often wears white shirts with French cuffs and a tie clip. Nine years ago, on the Don Imus radio program, he referred to Mary Matalin and Jane Wallace, then the co-hosts of a CNBC show, as "girls who, if you went into a bar around seven, you wouldn't pay a lot of attention, but get to be 10s around closing time."

Roger Ailes is also a television pioneer, someone who had no background in news and yet created something different in the TV news business. In large part because of Ailes, Fox News, in its short life—it debuted on October 7, 1996—has established an unmistakable identity: it is opinionated and conservative, and its news is delivered by people who themselves are often unabashedly

opinionated and conservative. When Ted Turner launched the Cable News Network in 1980, CNN took the idea of all-news radio and transferred it to television. The Fox News idea was to make another sort of transition: to bring the heated, sometimes confrontational atmosphere of talk radio into the television studio.

The rise of Fox News has been swift. By 2002, it had overtaken CNN as the leader in cable news ratings. The audience for the four other cable news networks—CNN, MSNBC, CNBC, and CNN's *Headline News*—was generally flat last year, but Fox's expanded by more than forty per cent over the previous year.

The trend has been particularly troubling to CNN, which has always claimed that during major events viewers turn in greater numbers to CNN, which calls itself "the most trusted name" in cable news. But on March 19th, the first night of the Iraq war, Fox News bested CNN in the ratings, and did so every day for the duration of the war, according to Nielsen Media Research. On most nights, Fox's top-rated show—"The O'Reilly Factor"—attracts almost as many viewers (around three million) as all its cable-news competitors combined. On its best night during the war in Iraq, the O'Reilly show reached seven million viewers. For the first time ever in a crisis, the audience for the network newscasts on CBS and ABC dropped—two and a half per

cent for ABC, nine per cent for CBS (NBC's rose slightly)—while the five cable news networks climbed by more than three hundred and fifty per cent. Fox News set the pace. Last October, when Fox's business anchor Neil Cavuto asked the chairman and C.E.O. of General Electric, Jeffrey Immelt, how he planned to improve his own cable news network—MSNBC—Immelt replied, "I think the standard right now is Fox. And I want to be as interesting and as edgy as you guys are."

Roger Ailes went to Fox from NBC, which he joined in 1993, to run CNBC, its business-news channel. Journalists at NBC had worried that Ailes would be too partisan; he was, after all, a former Republican media consultant (for Richard Nixon in 1968, Ronald Reagan in 1984, and George H. W. Bush in 1988), and was known for producing Rush Limbaugh's television show. But over the next two and a half years Ailes won over many dispirited employees who had been banished to the dreary CNBC headquarters in Fort Lee, New Jersey. He placed a neon sign on the building, ordered fresh coats of paint and new furniture. He treated business news as a sport. He placed the reporter Maria Bartiromo on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, and she became known as the Money Honey. He helped make Ron Insana a star. Jack Welch, who was then the chairman and C.E.O. of G.E., says, "He made the network a combination of ESPN and the New York Post." On a second NBC cable channel, America's Talking, he programmed fourteen live hours a day of mostly talk shows. By 1995, CNBC alone was generating profits of about a hundred million dollars annually.

Ailes, however, did not thrive in NBC's corporate culture. He was overweight. He was profane. Welch remembers that after he had bypass surgery he instructed the G.E. executive dining room to produce healthful meals. Ailes demurred. "I'm not eating this crap!" he announced, and ordered a double cheeseburger and French fries. "Everyone wanted a cheeseburger, but he was the only one with the guts to ask for it," Welch says.

Although America's Talking went on the air in July of 1994, and Ailes signed a



"What'll it be, Mrs. Waltham—stolid workmanship or nervy brilliance?"

new contract in June of 1995, Bob Wright, the C.E.O. of NBC, had another idea: he decided to parlay America's Talking into a new cable network, MSNBC, and he wanted the new network (a collaboration between NBC and Microsoft, which paid half the startup cost) to report to the president of NBC News, Andrew Lack. Ailes thought that he had lost a power struggle to bureaucrats who "probably doubted my ability to run a business." NBC officials thought he was too volatile—not, it was said, a team player. Ailes quit.

Thinking about what to do next, Ailes phoned Rupert Murdoch, the chairman and C.E.O. of News Corp. A secretary called back to say that Murdoch was arriving in New York that afternoon and could see Ailes at five. At News Corp.'s office on Sixth Avenue, Murdoch told Ailes that he was impressed by his record at CNBC and confessed that he was frustrated. "I've been trying to get a news channel started," Ailes recalls Murdoch saying. "I've had a bunch of guys try." The two men shared a conservative political viewpoint; when Murdoch brought up CNN, Ailes agreed, "It's too liberal." Ailes explains, "I think the mainstream media thinks liberalism is the center of the road. I really think that they don't understand that there are serious people in America who don't necessarily agree with everything they hear on the Upper East Side of Manhattan." Murdoch, too, believed that CNN and the other networks and major newspapers were strongly biased.

News Corp. saw an opportunity. The Fox entertainment network, with programming like "The Simpsons" and "Married... with Children," had competed successfully with the broadcast networks, and Fox also owned the world's most extensive satellite distribution system. But News Corp., which owns more than a hundred and seventy-five newspapers on three continents, including the New York *Post*, had neither a network news operation nor a cable news division. Despite Murdoch's business triumphs, few took the idea of Fox News seriously. But when Murdoch told Ailes he had a business plan to start the Fox News network in eighteen months, Ailes said that was too slow: MSNBC would debut before then, and Fox News ought to be on the air by the end of 1996.



"I've got to admit I'm not crazy about the freeway."

Ailes realized that the assignment was difficult. "We had no studios," Ailes later told me. "No programs. No talent. No ideas. No news-gathering capabilities, weak stations in news, no history of news. And we had two—and looking like three—very tough competitors, with a generic product. So it was daunting when you looked at it. And we had no distribution."

Ailes had always thought that if he was running a local news station he would run ads that said, "We may not always be first. But we will always be fair." He explains, "There is an undeserved market in news. . . . What I meant was 'fair and balanced.' I think I can create a market for the news." He believed that, "up until the Fox News channel, if any conservative or even libertarian got his opinion on the air, it was viewed as right wing." To Ailes, "the elimination of anybody's point of view is biased." Friends later worried that Ailes would be accused of blatantly promoting right-wing viewpoints, and he responded, "Good! That'll drive my ratings up!"

In retrospect, it was a perfect joining of politics and business; a more conservative news channel would create another niche in a fragmented marketplace. At a 1998 Sun Valley management retreat, Peter Chernin, the president and chief operating officer of News Corp., declared that media companies have "to seize the edge,

because the most dangerous thing in the anti-bland world is to play it safe. And it must leap out with brand identity."

On January 30, 1996, Ailes stood next to Murdoch at the public announcement of a Fox News channel and was introduced as its chairman and C.E.O. "I told Wright in 1996," Jack Welch remembers, "We'll rue the day we let Roger and Rupert team up."

MSNBC hurried to create a news channel that they said would harness technology and "revolutionize" news coverage. Ted Turner vowed that CNN would squish Murdoch "like a bug." CNN's corporate parent, Time Warner, then the second-largest cable company in America, at first denied Fox News any access to its cable system, provoking a Murdoch lawsuit. Ailes fought back, and eventually eighty-two employees left NBC for Fox; when an NBC lawyer phoned to suggest that by recruiting its employees Ailes was tampering, Ailes responded, "You don't know the difference between recruitment and a jailbreak."

The promotional tag lines that Ailes wrote were as snappy as any he had designed for a candidate: "Fox News. Fair and Balanced" and "We report. You decide." Ailes borrowed one other technique common to political campaigns: he lowered expectations. Five days before Fox's scheduled debut, he called fifteen

executives to a staff meeting at 4 A.M. He wanted to jolt them, one Fox executive recalled, and "he wanted the world to think, Hey, Fox may not launch in five days."

It was not an auspicious launch. Fox News had access to seventeen million homes; CNN had seventy million, and MSNBC twenty-two million. There were embarrassing glitches. To inaugurate the news channel, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu agreed to an interview, but midway through the segment Fox lost the feed from Israel.

From the start, Ailes and his team say they knew what Fox News would look and feel like. America's Talking was the idea, acknowledges Jack Abernathy, who worked for Ailes at NBC and joined Fox News as chief financial officer. "I knew we could come in here and create a credible news service at a fraction of the cost that people had expected," he said. Ailes, too, acknowledged that his model had been America's Talking, but that's not what he told the *Los Angeles Times* in October, 1996: "We're going to be basically a hard-news network," providing "straight, factual information to the American people so that they can make up their own minds, with less 'spin' and less 'face time' for anchors." Neil Cavuto, a business anchor at CNBC, had been among the first to sign on. "A lot of people thought I was a little crazy leaving all that," he said. "NBC and CNBC matched the money. But I really thought the opportunity was great here and I really like Roger. I felt he was an exciting guy to work for. And he was a funny guy to work for." Cavuto added, "I don't worry about things like 'Will I have a job or job security?' I have multiple sclerosis. I've had cancer. . . . If I'm living, I wake up in the morning and I'm still breathing, that's a good start." John Moody, who had spent fourteen years at *Time* and seven years overseas for U.P.I., signed on, too, as vice-president in charge of news. Moody is usually as understated as Ailes is brash. But he had come to believe that *Time*, like other media outlets, had succumbed to an unconscious but powerful liberal bias. Another important hire was Brit Hume, who was for years the White House correspondent for ABC and became Fox News's Washington editor.

Ailes also recruited Bill O'Reilly, a former CBS and ABC correspondent who was the anchor for the gossipy syn-

dedicated show "Inside Edition." O'Reilly had left the show and was studying for a master's degree in public administration at Harvard's Kennedy School. Ailes, who liked O'Reilly's style and his directness on camera, is very clear about what he believes works on television. In his hybrid memoir, "You Are the Message: Getting What You Want by Being Who You Are," he writes that a key lesson is to be a "proactive—not a reactive—communicator." It takes seven seconds to make an impression on others, he calculates, so the passive communicator will fail. Often, Ailes writes, when he was evaluating talk-show hosts as a broadcasting consultant, he would watch television with the sound off. "If there was nothing happening on the screen in the way the host looked or moved that made me interested enough to stand up and turn the sound up, then I knew that the host was not a great television performer."

Ailes's—and Fox's—moment came more than a year later, in early 1998. In much the way that the O. J. Simpson trial helped to create an audience for Court TV, Fox News found its perfect story in President Clinton's affair with a White House intern, Monica Lewinsky. A few months earlier, Ailes had told Brit Hume that he wanted him to anchor a political hour at 6 P.M. When the scandal broke, Kim Hume, who is the Washington bureau chief, told her husband that they should get the show on the road. The Humes consulted Ailes, who startled them by saying, "We'll do it tonight!" That night, Ailes moved Bill O'Reilly, who until then had conducted an interview program with relatively weak ratings, to 8 P.M. Thus began "The O'Reilly Factor."

This was a significant moment, NBC's Bob Wright says. "Talk radio shows started to go crazy with it"—the widespread resentment at Clinton's misdeeds. "We were not paying as much attention

to it at NBC News. And MSNBC wasn't. CNN wasn't. And what Fox did was say, 'Gee, this is a way for us to distinguish ourselves. We're going to grab this pent-up anger—shouting—that we're seeing on talk radio and put it onto television.'"

Ailes insists, "We covered impeachment 'fair and balanced.'" But the Clinton impeachment tapped into a core conservative base. "Here is the issue we faced when we started," Brit Hume says. "There were a certain number of people out there that had given up on network news, because they just couldn't take it. . . . What we needed was a story they simply couldn't take their eyes off." More important than the Lewinsky scandal, he believes, the 2000 election and the Florida recount were "of such pressing, passionate interest that people couldn't stop watching. It was a little like the [1991 Gulf] war for CNN. It would change two or three times a day, and be reversed three hours later. We immediately put our top political correspondents in Florida—we took them away from the candidates and put them in Florida and went after that story as hard as we could with the best people we could." Fox News was the first network to declare George W. Bush the victor.

By then, Ailes had many reasons to be pleased. He had got married for the third time—to Beth Tilson, who had been the vice-president of programming at America's Talking—and in January, 2000, they had a son, his first child. At about the time of the 2000 election, Fox News was in fifty-five million homes and had broken even, much earlier than expected. Ailes got a new three-year contract from Murdoch. By the spring of 2001, Fox News often bested CNN in both the morning and the evening ratings.

The Clinton scandals helped Fox to find its political base, but the attacks of September 11th had a more profound effect: Fox, far more than any other television enterprise, went to war. And in doing so it defined itself. To be sure, news coverage in wartime tends to be less reflective, more emotional; in the aftermath of the deadliest attack on American soil, this was particularly so. But Ailes and Fox News went further. Geraldo Rivera, whom Ailes had recruited from CNBC to be a war correspondent, armed himself



LITTLE APOCALYPSE

The butterfly's out on noon patrol,
 dragoning down to the rapt flower heads.
The ground shudders beneath the ant's hoof.
Under cover of sunlight, the dung beetle bores through his summer dreams.
High up, in another world,
 the clouds assemble and mumble their messages.
Sedate, avaricious life.

The earthworm huddles in darkness,
 the robin, great warrior, above,
Reworking across the shattered graves of his fathers.
The grass, in its green time, bows to whatever moves it.
Afternoon's ready to shove its spade
 deep in the dirt,
Coffins and sugar bones awash in the sudden sun.

Inside the basements of the world,
 the clear-out's begun,
Lightning around the thunder-throat of the underearth,
A drop of fire and a drop of fire,
Bright bandages of fog
 starting to comfort the aftermath.
Then, from the black horizon, four horses heave up, flash on their faces.

—Charles Wright

with a pistol and proclaimed that he would be honored to kill Osama bin Laden. Fox anchors and reporters spoke not of "United States troops" but of "our troops." Fox graphics identified the captured American Taliban recruit John Walker Lindh as "Jihad Johnny." Ailes wrote to the President, urging him to strike back hard. Fox News dramatized its presentation with whooshing sounds heralding new headlines and flashing titles—"Breaking News" or "News Alert." (In February, when the United States raised the terror-alert level from yellow to orange, every cable news network used the bottom of the screen to warn viewers of a "Terror Alert High" and a "News Alert." On a visit to New York, Laura Bush scolded the networks for "frightening people.")

A former correspondent told me that it was common to hear Fox producers whisper, "We have to feed the core." In an interview last December with the *New York Observer*, Al Gore described Fox as a virtual arm of the Republican Party. "Something will start at the Republican National Committee, inside the

building, and it will explode the next day on the right-wing talk-show network and on Fox News and in the newspapers that play this game," Gore said. "And pretty soon they'll start baiting the mainstream media for allegedly ignoring the story they've pushed into the zeitgeist." Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, a Fox News commentator, refers to CNN as "the Clinton News Network"; he describes his employer as if it were a closed circuit to fellow-insiders: "If I go on the Fox network, no question that people in the Administration see that. If there's one channel on in a Washington office that I visit, it will usually be Fox."

By the fall of 2001, Ailes was already fighting a private war. In response to Paula Zahn's defection to CNN, he hired CNN's Greta Van Susteren to host a nightly talk show. He also accused CNN of being overly solicitous to America's enemies. "Suddenly," Ailes told Jim Rutenberg, of the *Times*, "our competition has discovered 'fair and balanced,' but only when it's radical terrorism versus the United States." His criticism was

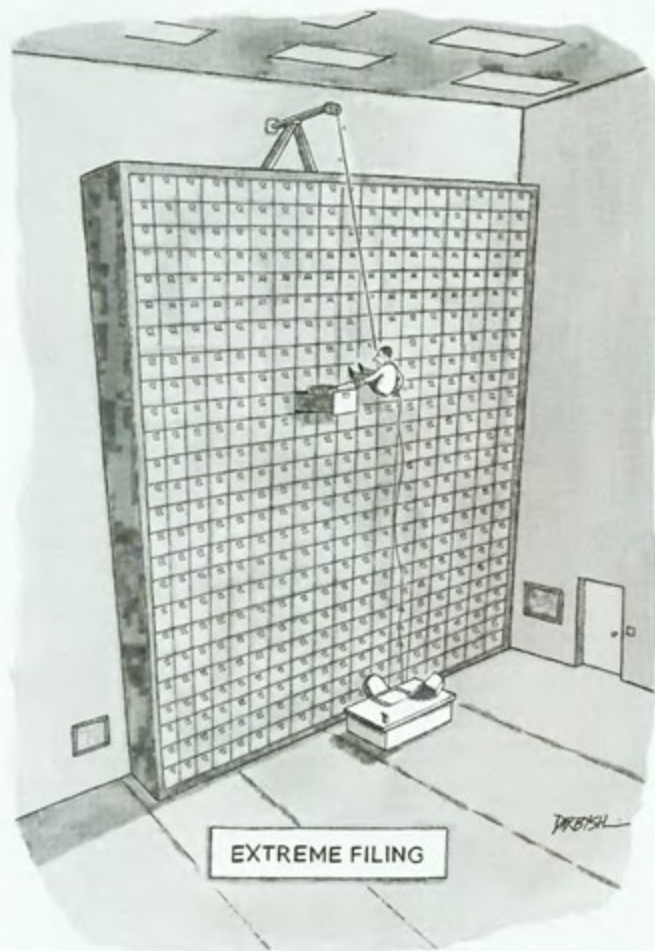
aimed at all the other networks, although CNN remained his primary target. Ailes's fervor attracted more viewers to Fox News, and he made clear to his own troops that one bias was acceptable: "The one thing I say to our folks is 'This is a pretty good country. Before you make the conclusion that America's wrong first, always leave an open mind that there might be something good here.'"

Many journalists resented the insinuation that journalistic independence—reporting, say, on Afghan civilian deaths or military mistakes—was somehow unpatriotic. "Coming out of 9/11, something happened that made people feel that if you questioned anything you were liable to be labelled unpatriotic," Marcy McGinnis, CBS's senior vice-president for news coverage, says. "It was kind of scary to me." The ABC News president, David Westin, says, "I like 'We report. You decide.' It's a wonderful slogan. Too often, I don't think that's what's going on at Fox. Too often, they step over the line and try and help people decide what is right and wrong."

In a survey by the Pew Research Center, forty per cent of CNN and forty-six per cent of Fox News viewers regarded themselves as "conservative." What is different at Fox, according to Andrew Kohut, the director of Pew Research, is the "intensity" of its viewership. Nielsen Media Research does not dissect political views when measuring audiences, but it did find that, typically, Fox viewers between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-four watched seventy per cent more news than CNN viewers. Ailes insists that people watched not because they were conservative but because Fox was the "most interesting" network.

To be sure, when one considers the entire television audience, the share that belongs to Fox and its cable cohorts is minuscule. Prior to the war in Iraq, on a typical weekday the thirty-minute evening newscasts on NBC, ABC, and CBS reached more than thirty million viewers—twelve times the audience at that hour of the five cable news networks combined.

Viewers of Fox News quickly discover a Niagara of opinion, which is consistent with Ailes's view. "Cable is an edge business," he explains, alluding not just to attitude or opinion but also to Fox's faster



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pace. "Brian Williams has no edge, so he sits there and mumbles in his nice shirts and can't get through." According to Ailes, cable disdains "pompousness" and values sharp opinions. Such opinions come regularly from the hosts of "Fox & Friends," which drew a bigger cable audience from 7 to 9 A.M. in 2002 than CNN's Paula Zahn or MSNBC's simulcast of the Imus radio show. From 9 A.M. to 3 P.M., Fox features stories and reports from its bureaus and covers government press conferences. (Fox, to its credit, devotes more time to the workings of government than its rivals do.)

Unlike its competitors, however, Fox lets its daytime anchors intrude with opinion—usually opinions consonant with the Bush Administration's. Fox News became a magnet for conservatives much as Al Jazeera, the Qatar-based satellite station, did for its more than thirty million Arab viewers. On January 27th, John Gibson, an afternoon anchor, described a war protest in Davos, Switzerland, as composed of "hundreds of knuckleheads." On February 11th, Steve Doocy talked about those in Congress who favor some exceptions to strictures on immigration—

for instance, for the families of victims of the September 11th attacks. "Guess who's giving sympathy to illegal immigrants linked to terrorists," he said, and showed a video of Senator Hillary Clinton: "You're looking at her." On February 23rd, when it was clear that France would oppose an American resolution at the U.N., the anchor Bob Sellers described France as a member of the "axis of weasels." This phrase, first published in the *New York Post*, became a refrain on Fox News; it often appeared in a banner at the bottom of the screen. (Asked if he approved, Ailes told me, "We shouldn't have done that, if we did. I would call that bad journalism." The practice didn't stop.)

In the weeks leading up to the war, Fox anchors kept announcing, "The coalition of the willing continues to grow," saying that some thirty countries now supported the United States, but rarely noting that this was a distinct minority of the world's nations. (On CNN, the senior White House correspondent, John King, pointed out that the coalition of the willing essentially consisted of the three nations whose troops were engaged in combat—the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia.) Fox placed the conservative talk-radio host Oliver North with a Marine unit as an embedded correspondent. On the eve of war, North passed along to Fox viewers "rumors" that French officials at the Embassy in Baghdad were destroying documents proving French complicity in Iraq's chemical- and biological-weapons programs. These "rumors" proved false, and a spokeswoman for Fox, Irena Steffen, described North to the *Times* as "a military contributor to Fox. He is neither a reporter nor a correspondent." When Fox anchors assured viewers that images of Saddam Hussein's statue falling would let the Arab world see America as a liberator, the correspondent Simon Marks, in Amman, Jordan, warned that "the Arab street" was angry, and that it would take diplomacy to convince people that this was not "an American war of occupation." This prompted the anchor David Asman, a former *Wall Street Journal* editorial writer, to say, "There's a certain ridiculousness to that point of view!" Neil Cavuto ended an interview with Republican House Majority Leader Tom DeLay this way:

"You know, a lot of your loyal fans, Mr. Majority Leader, say, That has a nice ring to it, but they like 'President DeLay.' You interested?"

As Fox News has pulled farther away from the cable competition in the ratings race, no one piles up higher ratings than—or outshouts—Bill O'Reilly, who announces that his program is a "no-spin zone." When I met with him recently, in his office on the seventeenth floor of the News Corp. building, O'Reilly, who is six feet four, was sitting at a small desk cluttered with clippings and research material. Besides his weeknight Fox program, he has a syndicated radio show and a newspaper column. He sees himself as a victim of stereotype, surrounded by a press corps that is seventy per cent hostile and "vicious." O'Reilly delights in deprecating the "elite" press. "These people, not only in the print press but other network people, and some powerful people in board rooms, are basically frightened of the Fox News channel," he said. "They understand that the power has shifted into an organization that is right center."

O'Reilly did a little spinning himself when I asked if he was often rude on the air. "If you count the times I've shouted in the last six months—maybe ten," he said. He turned the question around: "I have six minutes per segment. If you don't answer the question, I think that's rude."

Asked why Fox does so well, O'Reilly had a ready answer: "Because we're daring. Because we're entertaining and interesting and different—stimulating." The other networks, he went on, are "too timid and hide-behind"—CNN: "We're the journalists." Oh, bullshit. O'Reilly called Connie Chung's cancelled program "a tabloid show that rivals what I did at 'Inside Edition'—I mean, we were tougher, we did investigative stuff on 'Inside Edition.'"

O'Reilly says that Fox owes much to Ailes. "Roger Ailes is the general, and the general sets the tone of the army. Our army is very George Pattonesque. We charge. We roll. The other armies that we're competing against are very Omar Bradleyesque. They're defensive players. They're cautious. They don't go into uncharted territories. They don't outflank. They play it the way it's been played for forty years. Those days are

over." O'Reilly did not spin *Advertising Age*. Asked whether a more accurate tag line for Fox might be "We report. We decide," he replied, "Well, you're probably right."

Roger Eugene Ailes, who was born on May 15, 1940, comes from Warren, Ohio, a tiny factory town near Youngstown. He was one of three children, with an older brother and a younger sister. His father worked at first as a laborer at Packard Electric, which made wiring for General Motors; his mother was a housewife who embroidered handkerchiefs and dispatched Roger, at age ten, to sell them door to door. During high school and college, Roger worked summers for the state highway department, sometimes digging ditches. His mother would tell him, he remembers, "You always have to have goals." My mother in some ways was sort of difficult. Because my brother was such a good student, she was always on my ass because I didn't love school. If I got a B, she'd say, 'Why didn't you get an A?' ... If I got an A-plus, she'd say, 'Did you get the highest grade in the class?' You couldn't please her." He adds, "My mother would have been a C.E.O. of a corporation in today's world."

When Roger was eight, he was hit by a car and hospitalized. During his convalescence, he had to learn to use his legs again. His father would take him to a track to practice. Once, he fell and landed in a pile of horse manure. His father had no patience. "Don't fall down and you won't get that crap on you!" he said. Roger has another vivid boyhood memory of his father. "I used to see college boys"—he spits out the words—"give my dad orders in the shop in an inappropriate manner." He once asked his father why he let them talk to him like that. After a long pause, his father said, "Son, because of you, your brother, and your sister. I need the job, and you kids have got to go to college so you don't ever have to put up with this."

Roger enrolled at Ohio University, in Athens. He spent four years at the college radio station, as a disk jockey and a sportscaster, and dreamed of making a living that way. He was nineteen when his parents telephoned to announce that they were getting a divorce. It was

abrupt. "I went home and everything was gone," he said. "My house wasn't there. My room wasn't there. My stuff wasn't there. ... I never found my shit!" He rarely went home on holidays or in the summer, volunteering to work "the holiday shifts" at school. His mother soon moved to San Francisco and remarried. His father eventually remarried, too. Roger talked to his parents on the phone but lost touch with his home town. "Their attitude was, when you get to be eighteen, you go to college and you're on your own," Ailes said matter-of-factly. Around the time of his parents' divorce, he married a classmate, a marriage that lasted fifteen years.

When Ailes was a senior, he had a job interview with the program manager of a Cleveland television station. The manager, Chet Collier, remembers him as a slender, self-confident young man. "I was impressed with his enthusiasm, his willingness to think in different ways," Collier recalls. Collier was helping to launch a local talk-variety show, "The Mike Douglas Show," on KYW-TV, and hired Roger as a production assistant at sixty-four dollars a week. The show caught on, and was soon syndicated nationally. One of Roger's chores was to meet guests at the airport—celebrities like Jack Benny, Bob Hope, and Pearl Bailey—and drive them to the studio. Soon he was writing the cue cards for Douglas, which was much the same as posing the questions.

Collier now works from his home in Florida but remains close to Ailes; he was the second person Ailes recruited to devise programming for America's Talking, and was a key programmer at Fox News. "Standing there, he looked like most people," Collier recalls. "Then he talked, and he got you excited." Sometimes Ailes got too excited. Once, he threw a bullying advertiser off the loading dock into the snow. And once he slammed the executive producer up against a wall. In both cases, Ailes says, he erupted because someone "had abused little people." To this day, he says, he follows this code: "Don't mistreat people who work for you." (He doesn't *always* follow it, observes a Fox executive who knows him well. "He can be really mean. ... He yells at 'little people' unnecessarily.") Three years after Collier hired him, Ailes became the

executive producer of "The Mike Douglas Show," which had by then moved to Philadelphia.

Richard Nixon entered Ailes's life in 1967, when Nixon was booked to appear on the Douglas show. Any prominent figure passing through town might be invited onto the show, and it fell to Ailes to come up with a good mix. Nixon hated being on television. Ailes knew that he didn't want the former Vice-President sitting in the greenroom with Little Egypt, a belly dancer who performed with a boa constrictor, so he put Nixon in his own office. When Nixon learned that he was to follow Little Egypt, he said, "It's a shame a man has to use gimmicks like this to get elected."

"Television is not a gimmick," Ailes, who was then twenty-seven years old, replied. Furthermore, he said, the candidate who mastered television would win. They discussed this for about ten minutes, and a few days later Nixon's staff invited Ailes to New York. They met for three hours on a Sunday. Ailes, who describes his father as a "Taft Republican," says, "I never thought too much about politics." When he was invited to join the campaign, what appealed to him was the challenge. "Everyone said the man could never get elected because of television," Ailes says. "The challenge was more to me—it had nothing to do with politics. In fact, all my work with Nixon had nothing to do with politics. It was a media problem. It wasn't a political problem."

The first writer to get inside a modern media campaign for President was Joe McGinniss, at the time a columnist for the Philadelphia *Inquirer*. His 1969 book "The Selling of the President" quotes Ailes on his thinking at the time: "Let's face it, a lot of people think Nixon is dull. Think he's a bore, a pain in the ass. They look at him as the kind of kid who always carried a bookbag. Who was forty-two years old the day he was born. . . . Now you put him on television, you've got a problem right away. He's a funny-looking guy. He looks like somebody hung him in a closet overnight and he jumps out in the morning with his suit all bunched up and starts running around saying, 'I want to be President.'" Ailes's task was clear: "To make them forget all that." He created a "man in the

arena concept," in which Nixon didn't have to read from a teleprompter or stand at a podium but instead fielded questions from what looked like a wide range of citizens but was, in fact, a prescreened audience. He did not believe it was possible for viewers to warm to Nixon. This format allowed people, Ailes says, "to respect him by showing that he was smart."

Nixon was already President when the McGinniss book was published, but he was appalled that a reporter had infiltrated his campaign. McGinniss says that Nixon's aides all denied that they had cooperated with him, except Ailes. Not surprisingly, Ailes was not invited to mastermind Nixon's 1972 reelection effort.

Ailes says that he respected Nixon's intelligence and many of his policies, but adds, "I felt sort of sorry for him. He was socially uncomfortable." If Nixon were a candidate today, Ailes adds, "he would be allowed to go on Oprah and plead that he was an abused child. And the liberals would have to love him!"

After Nixon's victory, Ailes formed Ailes Communications, and consulted with corporations and Republican candidates. He co-produced Broadway and Off Broadway plays, among them "Hot L. Baltimore," and television specials. He was a commentator on the "Today" show. Ailes returned to Presidential politics in 1984, when he was brought in to coach Reagan for his second debate with Walter Mondale.

In 1988, Ailes signed on for Vice-President Bush's effort to succeed Reagan and helped to orchestrate one of the nastiest media campaigns ever. Ailes agreed with Bush's campaign manager, the late Lee Atwater, that Bush needed to overcome his "wimp" image and do more than lower his own negatives in the polls; he had to raise the negatives of his Democratic opponent, Michael Dukakis. One night, according to an account by Peter Goldman and Tom Mathews, of *Newsweek*, Ailes had a dream about a recent disastrous campaign appearance in which Dukakis had been filmed riding in a tank. Ailes got up, jotted the word "tank" on a pad, and went back to sleep. Within two days he had started production of a spot with a voice-over enumerating the defense-spending programs that the Governor



COUNTRY LIVING BY DUDLEY REED

of Massachusetts opposed. As the voice cited the programs, one saw Dukakis's head sticking out of the turret of a tank and capped by a helmet with headphones that looked like Mickey Mouse ears. Dukakis became the wimp—a liberal elitist who was pro-taxes, pro-crime, pro-defense cuts, and even pro-polluter. Ailes "has two speeds," *Atwater* told *Time*. "Attack and destroy."

Ailes knew that he had muddied his own reputation. His adversaries, he said, tried "to smear me with racism" for devising anti-Dukakis television spots that featured a black felon, Willie Horton. Ailes denies responsibility for those ads. By 1991, he had quit working with political clients. He says he was tired of the travel and of the political game. "I hated politics. The candidates were getting weaker and younger and dumber, and I was getting older and wiser." He did take on more corporate clients, and some overseas political clients, including Jacques Chirac, who was then the mayor of Paris. When NBC recruited Ailes, in 1993, he eagerly turned the consulting business over to his partner, Jon Kraushar.

Fox News has alarmed its competitors. In 2001, Jamie Kellner, who helped Barry Diller launch the Fox broadcast network in the mid-eighties and later designed the youth-oriented WB network, became chairman and C.E.O. of Turner Broadcasting. Kellner says that his charge was to focus "on television presentation and promotion skills" and to build more "stars," though "without in any way changing the journalism." More people watched CNN, he says, but the people who watched Fox continued to stay tuned for longer periods.

CNN copied Fox's whoosh sound to introduce breaking news; it explored the idea of talk shows featuring the conservatives Rush Limbaugh and Pat Buchanan and the liberal Phil Donahue—then worried that this might dilute the CNN brand. Rather than successive newscasts that once filled an estimated seventy per cent of CNN's schedule, the network moved toward programs like Zahn's "American Morning," "Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer," "Talk Back Live," and Connie Chung's 8 P.M. interview

show. CNN correspondents complained that it was harder to get airtime for actual news. Walter Isaacson, the CNN chairman, disputed this, and said that what CNN was doing differed from what Fox did: "You make the programs dependent on news, not the opinion of the host."

By 2002, morale at CNN was down. Ailes not only put a movable Fox billboard in front of Zahn's studio on the day of her debut but bought a large billboard across from CNN's Atlanta headquarters. "I heard it was available and that everyone who walks in the building has to look at it," Ailes explained. When Greta Van Susteren's 10 P.M. Fox show went ahead of Aaron Brown, or "Fox & Friends" got better numbers than "American Morning," Ailes put a fresh message on the billboard to remind CNN. Kellner could see the billboard from his office. "It's not nice," he says. "You're in the news business. It should be a higher playing field." (Nevertheless, CNN bought a billboard on Sixth Avenue across from Fox News to tout Zahn's show.)

Morale was also hurt by budget cuts and by the sharp drop in the valuation of AOL Time Warner stock. Allan Dodds Frank, who is fifty-five, had been a CNN correspondent for eight years, and before that he was a correspondent for ABC, *Forbes*, and the *Washington Star*. He was the investigative correspondent for "Moneyline," and won the Gerald R. Loeb Award in 2002. He was laid off last December, as was Brooks Jackson, an expert on campaign contributions and influence peddling in Washington. "They are overreacting to Fox and deciding that everything has to be live, no matter how little sense it makes," Frank says. "The first rule of zoology—or journalism—is: You can't out-ape the monkey."

There was a growing sense that CNN was doing just that—imitating Fox but not getting it right. There were complaints about the perceived superficiality of Connie Chung's program; the most hurtful of these came from Ted Turner himself, who told a reporter that Chung's show was "just awful." Privately, CNN correspondents complained that Lou Dobbs, on "Moneyline," was issuing conservative opinions. ("Isn't it time someone said something straightfor-

wardly?" he said on February 11th, before denouncing France as "obstructionist.")

Ailes believes that CNN faltered because it got too comfortable: "I don't think they trained for competition. They also built a huge bureaucracy. They're still operating on four times the number of people that I have. Yet I don't see a lot going on up on their screen that we're not doing at least as well. They have a little more coverage in various locations, but they have a lot of people sitting around playing checkers, waiting for something to happen."

It is a measure of CNN's strategic confusion that in March of 2002 Isaacson held a full-day retreat in Atlanta, inviting about forty senior CNN executives. Isaacson told me that the proposals discussed came down to two options: reduce the network's forty-two bureaus and move toward an opinionated talk format, or keep the emphasis on news. The consensus was to stay with news. To all this, Kellner said, "You're right. You have to go with your strength and stay a classy network." Isaacson added, "MSNBC went the Fox way. CNN reacted slowly—too slowly—but we did go the other way."

Nevertheless, in early 2003, Kellner resigned and Isaacson accepted an offer to head the international Aspen Institute. Isaacson says of the television business, there was "not much time to pause and reflect and look ahead. I like knowing what the third paragraph will be." Isaacson was replaced by his deputy, Jim Walton, who had joined CNN a year after it went on the air. The journalists at CNN would be pleased to hear Walton say, as he did to me, "We want to be accurate and timely. . . . Notice that I didn't say I wanted to be first." He also said, "It's not enough to have higher ratings" if CNN "dumbs down" to get them.

Fox News seemed also to rattle MSNBC. When MSNBC went on the air, in July of 1996, three months before Fox, it relied on NBC News talent, it drew upon its rich video library, and it recruited a great many on-air commentators. Then it switched formats. It promoted an hour-long newscast anchored by Tom Brokaw's designated heir, Brian Williams, then switched his program to CNN. It promoted Ashleigh Banfield, a relatively inexperienced reporter, sent her



to Afghanistan, then gave her a nightly program, which was later cancelled. Phil Donahue's hour-long show was cancelled, although it was their top-rated program. Asked if there were too many formats and changes at MSNBC, Bob Wright, the C.E.O. of NBC, concedes, "That certainly is true recently. Probably in the last two and a half years. That's a criticism, and it's a fair one." MSNBC's president and general manager, Erik Sorenson, who oversaw these changes, says, "I think we've lacked directional consistency. We over-experimented." MSNBC's ratings today are about a third of Fox's and half of CNN's.

The president of NBC News, Neal Shapiro, who has nineteen television monitors in his office, appears to see the competition as one between the hedgehog and the fox, with Fox as the hedgehog. Shapiro praises Fox for "sticking to a few things," while noting that MSNBC did not. He said he now planned to put more NBC News talent on its cable network and build up its identification with the network. "By day it will be much more association with NBC. By night it will be smart analysis"—led by Chris Matthews and a new roster of talk-show hosts, including former Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura and such conservative commentators as former Congressman Joe Scarborough and former House Majority Leader Dick Army. "The premise of all these people is that our people don't just talk—they know what they're talking about," Shapiro said. He did not mention the right-wing radio talk-show host Michael Savage, who recently got a weekly show and does "just talk"—so intemperately that Procter & Gamble and Dell withdrew their advertising. "Cable news," Ailes says, "is beginning to change the agenda of what is news."

As for allegations of partisan coverage, Ailes will not admit that Fox is "right center," and insists, "I think I've forced the entire world to deal with 'fair and balanced.'" He portrays himself as nothing less

than a high-minded news executive: "I'm not saying I'm the answer. But . . . there hasn't even been a story where we've been accused of tipping some big story to the right in seven years. Why hasn't it happened? Because we're honestly trying to do a good job."

CNN executives and others believe that Fox tips right all the time. In a thinly disguised slap at Fox, a marketing slogan touted CNN as "News. Not Noise." Dan Rather, of CBS, concedes that he doesn't watch much Fox News, but he thinks Fox is a reflection of Rupert Murdoch's political views. "Mr. Murdoch has a business, a huge worldwide conglomerate business," Rather says. "He finds it to his benefit to have media outlets, press outlets, that serve his business interests. There's nothing wrong with this. It's a free country. It's not an indictable offense. But by any clear analysis the bias is towards his own personal, political, partisan agenda . . . primarily because it fits his commercial interests."

Neal Shapiro believes that the networks are now more sensitive to any ingrained liberal bias. "We talk about it constantly," he says. "I think it's sensitized newsrooms, and that's a good thing." It is widely supposed—and hard to document—that reporters at major news organizations tend to be more liberal, which inevitably influences coverage. "I think the traditional broadcast

media does have a slightly left-of-center bias," concedes Paul Friedman, who has produced NBC's and ABC's evening newscasts and was most recently the executive vice-president of ABC News. "It's not so much in what is said. It's in the choice of what to cover." The networks, he went on, tend to choose "social-agenda stories"—AIDS, poverty—"rather than stories about the flag or religion."

Some conservatives believe that liberals deliberately promote an agenda. Brit Hume's view is that the alleged liberal bias in mainstream media is unconscious. "My sense is that very few reporters, if any, that I've ever known are closet political activists or actually have agendas," he says. "There is, however, a very widely shared set of assumptions and values. It's very unusual to find reporters who are pro-life. It's unusual to find reporters who don't think more gun control is a good idea. It's not common to find reporters who are enthusiastic about the idea of a tax cut."

Todd Gitlin, of the Columbia Journalism School, frames it somewhat differently. He believes that Fox and the conservatives have bullied a "lazy" and servile press into submission. Of Ailes, Gitlin observes, "I think that his talent is percussive. Fox News has a tone. The tone is what it delivers. The tone is urgency—crashing noise. Occasionally, this



"Let's update our will and go on vacation."

entails interesting debate. More likely, it entails bluster. . . . Fox certainly accelerated the sense of panic at CNN." Fox's greatest influence, he says, is "felt in Washington. I find it hard to believe many Fox viewers believe Bill O'Reilly is a 'no-spin zone,' or 'We report. You decide.' It's a joke. In Washington it reinforces the impression of 'we happy few who are members of the club.' It emboldens the right wing to feel justified and confident they can promote their policies."

Certainly the success of Fox has permitted Rupert Murdoch to promote his own agenda. When New York Governor George Pataki denounced proposed new state taxes, the April 30th front page of the *Post* read like an editorial: "AT LAST, A LEADER WITH GUTS." Last year, Murdoch wanted the Bush Administration to block, on antitrust grounds, the merger of the two largest satellite operators, which the Administration did. This let Murdoch reenter negotiations to buy America's largest satellite operator, DirecTV, a deal that went through in April (it awaits the approval of the Bush Administration). Murdoch also wanted the Administration to lift the cap on the percentage of American households that one company's TV stations can reach;

earlier this month, the staff of the Federal Communications Commission proposed the change.

In part because of the success of Fox News, Murdoch—with DirecTV, British Sky Broadcasting, Star in Asia, and satellite systems in Latin America—has created a worldwide competitor to CNN and the BBC. Jack Welch, for one, is deeply impressed: "If Rupert gets DirecTV, his whole position in the communications arena changes. He now has all the distribution. He has programming assets. And his options are now as big as his appetites."

For Ailes, a typical day begins when he is chauffeured from his northern New Jersey home to his office, arriving before 8 A.M., having already read the *Post*, the *Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. Ailes's office on the second floor has seven TV monitors, but few personal items; there are no pictures of his wife or their three-year-old son—in fact, there are no photographs at all. On the wall opposite his desk is a picture of George Washington's Valley Forge headquarters. The windows provide an unobstructed view of Sixth Avenue, but to the north the venetian blinds are drawn so that he won't have to look toward the elec-

tric CNN and NBC signs two blocks away. A huge open file cabinet is dedicated to "evidence" Ailes has collected of the press's liberal bias. His curved cherry-wood desk is free of papers, and his "in" box is usually empty. Buttons on his phone connect him to various news executives, including the news chief, John Moody, who says that a long beep is "not my favorite sound." Also on his desk are two Bibles—"They're old friends," he says.

The first meeting of Ailes's day is usually the 8 A.M. news meeting, which he hosts in his office. Moody puts together a list of the stories to be pursued and is accompanied by a team of news executives; they were joined on February 25th by Brit Hume, on the speaker phone. Ailes hung up his suit jacket and sat at his desk. He listened as Moody started with an overview of the big news stories. Moody mentioned that British Prime Minister Tony Blair had dismissed the French resolution before the U.N. to extend the arms inspectors' deadline. "It's a scam," Ailes said, and added that he was looking at some numbers last night showing that France, Russia, and China had major trade ties with Iraq. "We ought to look at the import-export situation there."

Geraldo is in Turkey, Moody said.

"Do you have him under control, so he's not going to do any hotdogging?" Ailes asked.

"Under control is a relative term," Moody replied.

"He has understood that any wild moves over there can get our other guys killed, right? Have we made it very clear?" Ailes asked. "Geraldo is a good journalist and he's a team player, but you do have to speak to him very directly." He added, "Just tell him no hotdogging."

Moody said that, in an interview to air that night on CBS, Saddam Hussein told Dan Rather that he would not destroy the missiles that U.N. inspectors said he must. Ailes asked if Rather was required to turn his tape over to the Iraqis and let them edit it. Although the answer was unclear, Ailes worked himself into a lather. Voice rising, he said, "Did they have pre-look at his questions? . . . Was anybody in the room with a weapon?" He added, "I have less of a problem in getting in a room with Sad-

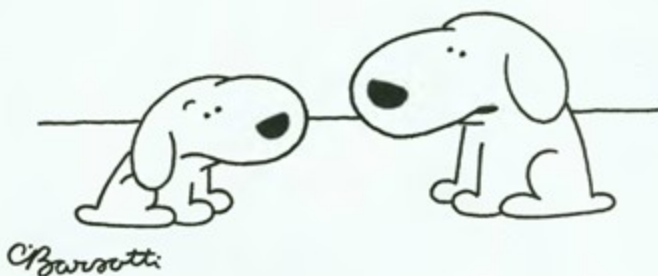


"Damn it, gentlemen, these are medieval times. They demand medieval ideas."

dam Hussein with ground rules as long as those ground rules are disclosed." He complained that *Time* did not disclose the ground rules of what he called an "anti-American interview" with Jacques Chirac that it carried that week, and said it was "a total setup." He went on, "Nowhere in the *Time* magazine interview do they say, 'Mr. Chirac, do you have any business dealings with Iraq? Mr. Chirac, is there a one-hundred-and-twenty-billion-dollar oil contract with Iraq? Mr. Chirac, weren't you the guy that went over and set up a nuclear reactor? . . . How about the seven million Muslims down the street that are going to blow up the Eiffel Tower? Does that bother you?' There are a few other questions that a few other good journalists would work into the interview."

Ailes discussed coverage of the tension between the United States and North Korea and its implications for Asia. Throughout the meeting, Ailes would interrupt with something he had read or heard, in a style that was part oracle and part standup comic. He mentioned that he'd heard that MSNBC had allegedly set up a small team to seek out more conservative, populist stories. "They'll fuck it all up," he said. He couldn't believe, he told me after the meeting, that MSNBC had failed with Chris Matthews. Ailes hired Matthews at America's Talking, but thinks he talks too much: "If Chris Matthews worked for me, he'd be doing better. . . . I wouldn't let him answer everybody's question for them. He asks the question. Then he answers it. Then he asks you what you think of his answer. Then he goes on to another question. At some point, he's got to let the guest answer. I'd say, 'Chris, if you don't shut the fuck up I'm going to fire you!'"

Later that day, someone told Ailes that MSNBC had just fired Phil Donahue, and Ailes was pleased to learn that his senior vice-president for corporate communications, Brian Lewis, was prepared to attack. "We're putting it out that Donahue's numbers were higher than Matthews," Lewis said. To the news that MSNBC had lined up Jesse Ventura and Joe Scarborough, Ailes said, "It's their attempt to move right." Ailes said that Chris Matthews, in MSNBC's 7 P.M. slot, often does monologues. "The last guy to do a good monologue



"Yes, they are crazy, but they can open the fridge."

on TV was Fulton J. Sheen," he said.

"And he had a good writer," an executive said.

"Yeah—God!" Ailes said.

Fox News is capable of solid work and straightforward reporting, as when it covered the devastation caused by the recent tornadoes in the Midwest. In Iraq, Rick Leventhal and Greg Kelly, embedded war correspondents, broke more than their share of exclusives from the front and provided vivid pictures. Brit Hume asks acute questions, listens to the answers, and usually tries to be balanced. Correspondents like Eric Shawn and Jim Angle, at the White House, are industrious. And although the culture at Fox is partial to the Bush Administration, it was Fox News that broke the story on the eve of the election that George W. Bush had once been arrested for drunk driving. "I knew it would hurt him," Ailes said. "They said we should hold it. We ran it. We're in the news business and we do what's news." During the murder trial of Michael Skakel, the correspondent Eric Shawn recalls that Fox titled one of his pieces "Kennedy Cousin Trial." Ailes "thought it wasn't fair," so he called the control room and had it changed to "Skakel Trial." On other occasions, Ailes says, he killed a story about Al Gore's son getting a speeding ticket—he thought a teen-ager deserved some privacy—and a story in 1998 exploring how Bill Clinton, as governor, had used state troopers to do more than protect him, which Ailes thought was "piling on."

At the same time, CNN, which once called itself "the world's news leader," saw the Iraq war largely through Amer-

ican eyes. And MSNBC, like Fox and the Bush Administration, called the war "Operation Iraqi Freedom" and duplicated Fox's display of an American flag in a corner of its screen. In mid-April, the MSNBC anchor Natalie Morales read a report that said the French Foreign Minister had cautioned the United States not to start a war in Syria, saying, "We have to concentrate on giving the Iraqi people the victory they deserve." Morales then looked into the camera and seemed to ad-lib: "The Minister might want to save 'we' for countries that actually fought to give Iraqis their freedom!" Watching this, Ailes called out, "They've gone right wing!"

MSNBC had a major embarrassment in late March, when Peter Arnett, a correspondent for "National Geographic Explorer," who doubled as NBC and MSNBC's eyes in Baghdad, let himself be interviewed by Iraqi television, saying that America's "first war plan has failed because of Iraqi resistance" and that "our reports about civilian casualties" and Iraqi resistance help "those who oppose the war." Fox feasted on Arnett's bad judgment, and Arnett was quickly fired. Around the same time, Geraldo Rivera, who was embedded, drew for his viewers a diagram in the sand, letting them know where his unit was and how it planned to attack an Iraqi position. That gave MSNBC the chance to report that the military was furious and planned to expel Rivera. At first, Rivera denied that he had been ordered out of the country, but later said that he would be relocating to Kuwait. When MSNBC produced a promotional ad declaring that it would never "compromise military security or



"I'm trying to put my priorities behind me."

jeopardize a single American life," Fox ran an ad, approved by Ailes, attacking Peter Arnett: "He spoke out against America's armed forces. He said America's war against terrorism had failed. He even vilified America's leadership. And he worked for MSNBC." It didn't matter that none of it was true. Ailes says he pulled the ad after it aired once because the spat was unseemly.

For the Iraq war, Fox News had twelve hundred and fifty full-time and freelance employees and seventeen bureaus, only six of them overseas, and operating costs of about two hundred and fifty million dollars. Last year, a senior Fox News executive told me, its revenues were three hundred and twenty-five million dollars and its profits were seventy million dollars. (This year, the profits are expected to double.) By contrast, CNN had four thousand employees and forty-two bureaus, thirty-one of them overseas, and total news costs of about eight hundred million dollars. Its revenues, according to a senior executive, climbed above a billion dollars last year, and its profits totalled two hundred and fifty million dollars. MSNBC, according to Bob Wright, essentially breaks even; CNBC, with its business audience and its cable-subscriber fees, generated profits last year

of about three hundred million dollars.

Neal Shapiro, of NBC News, saw the war in Iraq as an opportunity to rebrand MSNBC by benefiting from its pool of NBC News stars. Shapiro dispatched a hundred and twenty-five journalists and crew members to the region; CBS sent a team of a hundred, and at one point ABC had twice as many in the region. The BBC also sent two hundred people to the Gulf.

Ailes knew that Fox had to rely on only fifteen correspondents in the region. "We don't have the resources overseas that CNN and other networks have," said Rick Leventhal, who was with the 1st Marine Light Armor Reconnaissance unit. "We're going in with less money and equipment and people, and trying to do the same job. You might call it smoke and mirrors, but it's working." CNN had forty-nine correspondents in the region, eighteen of them embedded with American troops. Ailes told his financial staff that the challenge is "not to let this war be a win for CNN. If I have to, I'll go upstairs and argue for extra money. I'm not going to let these sons of bitches beat us!" He wanted the financial people to understand that a war with Iraq was also a war between Fox and CNN.

This degree of involvement reflects Ailes's enormous competitiveness. Rick

Leventhal described a Christmas party at the home of Shepard Smith, who anchors the 3 P.M. and 7 P.M. news hours. Smith has an eight-foot pool table at his loft on the Lower East Side, and he and Leventhal, who are skilled players, attempted to hustle Ailes. "I haven't played in twenty years," Ailes said. A crowd of about forty Fox News employees gathered to watch the boss get taken by two pool sharks. Ailes says he was "pissed off," and remembered the time he and his brother challenged their father to a race home. Their father let them get ahead and tire, and then he sped past them. By the time they got home, he was sitting on the grass, laughing. "You know the difference between an average horse and a champion?" he asked his sons. "A champion always has something left when it comes around the last turn."

Of the pool-table challenge, Ailes said, "They had no understanding of how important that game of pool suddenly became to me." When it was his turn to shoot, Leventhal recalled, Ailes proceeded "to make a series of ridiculous shots and to win the game." Ailes said, "Every time someone thinks I'm beat, I always have something left."

My four-month immersion in Fox News left me skeptical of its claims of "fair and balanced." When I asked Ailes about what seemed one-note coverage and the disproportionate number of conservative commentators, he said that he beseeched his staff to "book Democrats," but they told him, "They won't come on. They're hiding." Fox does have a stable of liberal commentators, including Sean Hannity's partner, Alan Colmes, and NPR's Mara Liasson, who appears with Hume, but they are often overpowered by the conservatives around them. And there is Susan Estrich, who was Michael Dukakis's campaign manager. Ailes likes her but calls her "hard core," a term he does not apply to right-wing Republicans.

Looking back on Fox's coverage of the war, Ailes acknowledged that mistakes were made, and blamed many of them on fatigue and on the speed it takes to produce a hundred and sixty-eight hours a week of live television, which inevitably leads to "sloppiness." He said that he played a watchdog role during the war, and would call the control room or news desk at any time of day or night to

insure balance. "If I see bias of the left or right, I will complain about it," he says. It is possible that this was one of the rare times in his sixty-three years that no one was listening to Roger Ailes.

Ailes's contract is up at the end of this year, and a source close to him says that it wasn't until early April that his lawyer was approached about a new one. Ailes and Murdoch have an easy rapport, but Fox executives say that his relationship with the chief operating officer, Lachlan Murdoch, is not so relaxed. Ailes battles often with Fox's owned-and-operated broadcast-station group over when and how to air Fox News, and this group reports to Lachlan Murdoch. Friends say that Ailes sometimes fears he will grow stale and should try something new, such as running a television entertainment division or even a network. In recent weeks, negotiations between Ailes's lawyer and News Corp. have accelerated.

Ailes is a wary man, but not in the way most journalists are wary. "Roger's sort of thesis of the world is that they're out to get us," Brit Hume says. "It makes him the most alert competitor you've ever seen. He's not always right about that, but he's always alert. And it makes him very hard to sneak up on—it's very hard to do anything that Roger hasn't already anticipated." What surprises colleagues is that Ailes appears actually to disdain journalism; Ailes says that he detests what he thinks of as "elite" journalists with "a pick up their ass" who treat journalism as "a from-the-Mount profession." Some senior executives at Fox express private puzzlement that Ailes seems, in the words of one, to "hate journalists so much. . . I've never seen him use the word 'journalism' and smile at the same time."

Over lunch one day, I suggested to Ailes that although he bristles at being stereotyped as a former political operative, he stereotypes others—"Thirty per cent of New York City teachers are too stupid to teach!" he told me. And he stereotypes journalists. "I do," he replied, ripping a hunk of bread from a loaf and spreading butter on it. "And it's unfair, because they're not all like that. . . There are some journalists I will talk to, there are other journalists I won't talk to." He insisted, "If I hated journalism that much, or had that little confidence in journalism, or thought that it had made that little contribution to the republic, I frankly would walk away

from it and ignore it and make money and say, 'Screw it. You can't fix it.'" Asked to identify his journalistic heroes, Ailes paused for several seconds, before saying, "I've never thought of journalists as heroes. I think of journalists as very bright people with enormous responsibilities that they often don't live up to. Now that I'm doing this job, I can't live up to it every day, either, because I have ratings pressure, financial pressure—all the things that I have. But there are certain things that I just won't do."

I asked if he would have published the Pentagon Papers, and his response revealed not only an aversion to the press but an uncharacteristic uncertainty: "I won't do anything that will jeopardize national security. . . Does that mean I will cover up for America? No." Reminded that the papers were, essentially, the Pentagon's own history of the Vietnam War, he said, "I never thought there was a huge problem with the Pentagon Papers," and he conceded that the Nixon Administration was paranoid about the press. Finally, he said, "Maybe the story should have been reported, and Ellsberg"—Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the papers—"should have had the shit beat out of him for stealing. Of course, the press would never beat the shit out of him for stealing, and that's sometimes why the press lacks morals. The end justifies the means, as long as the end justifies their political view."

At the core of Ailes's journalistic philosophy, he says, is a belief that the press should "seek to be watchdogs, not attack dogs." He says he dislikes journalists who are "gratuitous brutalizers"—an odd sort of fastidiousness from the man who sponsors such verbal gunslingers as Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity. "I try to force Bill to be more fair," Ailes says. "I try to force all my people to be fair." But to Ailes fairness doesn't mean selecting the

stories or the amount of time devoted to the victims; it means giving them airtime. Ailes says, "If anybody has a complaint, we put them back on another show to have their say. But we are in a time medium that depends on outgoing, aggressive talent to get ratings."

Although he has never worked as a journalist, Ailes believes that his campaign-consulting work and his years as a producer prepared him to run Fox News. "You learn the issues from everybody's point of view, left and right," he said. "I actually have a broader and deeper knowledge of most issues than probably some news guys, because I've actually read position papers on a lot of this stuff, both left and right. I've learned you don't move Election Day back, but I knew that from broadcasting—in other words, whatever you do, you better make your decision and get it done, you better get your show on the air . . . because you don't get any second chances."

Seated behind his clean desk, the television monitors silently running, Ailes sounded less like the man who created a fierce, right-leaning news network than like someone who sadly bears the burdens of a journalistic reformer. "The hardest part of my job is now to maintain any kind of journalistic standards, because they're being weakened all over the country by newspapers and magazines," he says. Once more, he brought up the *Time* interview with Chirac, then moved on to other targets: "*Newsweek* is just an anti-Bush publication put out by the D.N.C. every week. . . Dan Rather is over there letting Iraq edit the tape. At some point, you've got to say, 'What are we doing here?'"

Aaron Brown, whose face is on the CNN billboard outside Ailes's window, believes that he understands what Fox is doing. "I honestly think they do something quite different from what we do," he says. "I hesitate to say this, because I don't want to create a sense that they're in the same business we're in. . . They've done a very good job with marketing slogans. They came up with two good slogans. To me, they lead with their opinions. There's room for conservative talk radio on television. But I don't think anyone ought to pretend it's the New York *Times* or CNN." It would not make Roger Ailes happy to know that his "dentist" got the last word. ♦

