

THE MAKING OF THE FOX NEWS WHITE HOUSE

Fox News has always been partisan. But has it become propaganda?

By Jane Mayer March 4, 2019



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In January, during the longest government shutdown in America's history, President Donald Trump rode in a motorcade through Hidalgo County, Texas, eventually stopping on a grassy bluff overlooking the Rio Grande. The White House wanted to dramatize what Trump was portraying as a national emergency: the need to build a wall along the Mexican border. The presence of armored vehicles, bales of confiscated marijuana, and federal agents in flak jackets underscored the message.

But the photo op dramatized something else about the Administration. After members of the press pool got out of vans and headed over to where the President was about to speak, they noticed that Sean Hannity, the Fox News host, was already on location. Unlike them, he hadn't been confined by the Secret Service, and was mingling with Administration officials, at one point hugging Kirstjen Nielsen, the Secretary of Homeland Security. The pool report noted that Hannity was seen "huddling" with the White House communications director, Bill Shine. After the photo op, Hannity had an exclusive on-air interview with Trump. Politico later reported that it was Hannity's seventh interview with the President, and Fox's forty-second. Since then, Trump has given Fox two more. He has granted only ten to the three other main television networks combined, and none to CNN, which he denounces as "fake news."

Hannity was treated in Texas like a member of the Administration because he virtually is one. The same can be said of Fox's chairman, Rupert Murdoch. Fox has long been a bane of liberals, but in the past two years many people who watch the network closely, including some Fox alumni, say that it has evolved into something that hasn't existed before in the United States. Nicole Hemmer, an assistant professor of Presidential studies at the University of Virginia's Miller Center and the author of "Messengers of the Right," a history of the conservative media's impact on American politics, says of Fox, "It's the closest we've come to having state TV."

Hemmer argues that Fox—which, as the most watched cable news network, generates about \$2.7 billion a year for its parent company, 21st Century Fox—acts as a force multiplier for Trump, solidifying his hold over the Republican Party and intensifying his support. "Fox is not just taking the temperature of the base—it's raising the temperature," she says. "It's a radicalization model." For both Trump and Fox, "fear is a business strategy—it keeps people watching." As the President has been beset by scandals, congressional hearings, and even talk of impeachment, Fox has been both his shield and his sword. The White House and Fox interact so seamlessly that it can be hard to determine, during a particular news cycle, which one is following the other's lead. All day long, Trump retweets claims made on the network; his press secretary, Sarah Sanders, has largely stopped holding press conferences, but she has made some thirty appearances on such shows as "Fox & Friends" and "Hannity." Trump, Hemmer says, has "almost become a programmer."

Fox's defenders view such criticism as unfounded and politically biased. Ken LaCorte, who was in senior management at Fox News for nearly twenty years, until 2016, and recently started his own news service, told me, "The people at Fox said the same thing about the press and Obama." Fox's public-relations department offers numerous examples of its reporters and talk-show hosts challenging the Administration. Chris Wallace, a tough-minded and ecumenical interviewer, recently grilled Stephen Miller, a senior Trump adviser, on the need for a border wall, given that virtually all drugs seized at the border are discovered at checkpoints. Trump is not the first President to have a favorite media organization; James Madison and Andrew Jackson were each boosted by partisan newspapers. But many people who

have watched and worked with Fox over the years, including some leading conservatives, regard Fox's deepening Trump orthodoxy with alarm. Bill Kristol, who was a paid contributor to Fox News until 2012 and is a prominent Never Trumper, said of the network, "It's changed a lot. Before, it was conservative, but it wasn't crazy. Now it's just propaganda." Joe Peyronnin, a professor of journalism at N.Y.U., was an early president of Fox News, in the mid-nineties. "I've never seen anything like it before," he says of Fox. "It's as if the President had his own press organization. It's not healthy."

Nothing has formalized the partnership between Fox and Trump more than the appointment, in July, 2018, of Bill Shine, the former co-president of Fox News, as director of communications and deputy chief of staff at the White House. Kristol says of Shine, "When I first met him, he was producing Hannity's show at Fox, and the two were incredibly close." Both come from white working-class families on Long Island, and they are so close to each other's children that they are referred to as "Uncle Bill" and "Uncle Sean." Another former colleague says, "They spend their vacations together." A third recalls, "I was rarely in Shine's office when Sean didn't call. And I was in Shine's office a lot. They talked all the time—many times a day."

Shine led Fox News' programming division for a dozen years, overseeing the morning and evening opinion shows, which collectively get the biggest ratings and define the network's conservative brand. Straight news was not within his purview. In July, 2016, Roger Ailes, the co-founder and C.E.O. of Fox, was fired in the face of numerous allegations of chronic sexual harassment, and Shine became co-president. But within a year he, too, had been forced out, amid a second wave of sexual-harassment allegations, some of them against Fox's biggest star at the time, Bill O'Reilly. Shine wasn't personally accused of sexual harassment, but several lawsuits named him as complicit in a workplace culture of coverups, payoffs, and victim intimidation.

Shine, who has denied any wrongdoing, has kept a low profile at the White House, and rejects interview requests, including one from this magazine. But Kristol

contends that Shine's White House appointment is a scandal. "It's been wildly under-covered," he said. "It's astounding that Shine—the guy who covered up Ailes's horrible behavior—is the deputy chief of staff!"

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

Robert Mueller on Whether Trump Could be Indicted

The Washington *Post* columnist Jennifer Rubin, another conservative Never Trumper, used to appear on the network, but wouldn't do so now. "Fox was begun as a good-faith effort to counter bias, but it's morphed into something that is not even news," she says. "It's simply a mouthpiece for the President, repeating what the President says, no matter how false or contradictory." The feedback loop is so strong, she notes, that Trump "will even pick up an error made by Fox," as when he promoted on Twitter a bogus Fox story claiming that South Africa was "seizing land from white farmers." Rubin told me, "It's funny that Bill Shine went over to the White House. He could have stayed in his old job. The only difference is payroll."

With Shine, the Fox and White House payrolls actually do overlap. The *Hollywood*

Reporter obtained financial-disclosure forms revealing that Fox has been paying Shine millions of dollars since he joined the Administration. Last year, he collected the first half of a seven-million-dollar bonus that he was owed after resigning from Fox; this year, he will collect the remainder. That sum is in addition to an \$8.4-million severance payment that he received upon leaving the network. In December, four Democratic senators sent a letter to the White House counsel's office, demanding proof that Fox's payments to Shine don't violate federal ethics and conflict-of-interest statutes.

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Shine is only the most recent Fox News alumnus to join the Trump Administration. Among others, Trump appointed the former Fox contributor Ben Carson to be his Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, the former Fox commentator John Bolton to be his national-security adviser, and the former Fox commentator K. T. McFarland to be his deputy national-security adviser. (McFarland resigned after four months.) Trump recently picked the former Fox News anchor Heather Nauert to be

the Ambassador to the United Nations, but she soon withdrew herself from consideration, reportedly because her nanny, an immigrant, lacked a work permit. The White House door swings both ways: Hope Hicks, Shine's predecessor in the communications job, is now slated to be the top public-relations officer at Fox Corporation. Several others who have left the Trump White House, including Sebastian Gorka, a former adviser on national security, regularly appear on Fox. Gorka recently insisted, on Fox Business, that one of Trump's biggest setbacks—retreating from the shutdown without securing border-wall funds—was actually a “masterstroke.”

Other former Fox News celebrities have practically become part of the Trump family. Kimberly Guilfoyle, a former co-host of “The Five,” left Fox in July; she is now working on Trump's reelection campaign and dating Donald Trump, Jr. (Guilfoyle left the network mid-contract, after a former Fox employee threatened to sue the network for harassment and accused Guilfoyle of sharing lewd images, among other misconduct; Fox and the former employee reached a multimillion-dollar settlement. A lawyer who represents Guilfoyle said that “any suggestion” that she “engaged in misconduct at Fox is patently false.”) Pete Hegseth, the Fox News host, and Lou Dobbs, the Fox Business host, have each been patched into Oval Office meetings, by speakerphone, to offer policy advice. Sean Hannity has told colleagues that he speaks to the President virtually every night, after his show ends, at 10 P.M. According to the *Washington Post*, White House advisers have taken to calling Hannity the Shadow Chief of Staff. A Republican political expert who has a paid contract with Fox News told me that Hannity has essentially become a “West Wing adviser,” attributing this development, in part, to the “utter breakdown of any normal decision-making in the White House.” The expert added, “The place has gone off the rails. There is no ordinary policy-development system.” As a result, he said, Fox's on-air personalities “are filling the vacuum.”

Axios recently reported that sixty per cent of Trump's day is spent in unstructured “executive time,” much of it filled by television. Charlie Black, a longtime Republican lobbyist in Washington, whose former firm, Black, Manafort & Stone, advised Trump in the eighties and nineties, told me, “Trump gets up and watches ‘Fox &

Friends' and thinks these are his friends. He thinks anything on Fox is friendly. But the problem is he gets unvetted ideas." Trump has told confidants that he has ranked the loyalty of many reporters, on a scale of 1 to 10. Bret Baier, Fox News' chief political anchor, is a 6; Hannity a solid 10. Steve Doocy, the co-host of "Fox & Friends," is so adoring that Trump gives him a 12.

It is hardly unprecedented for American media barons to go beyond their pages to try to influence the course of politics. At the 1960 Democratic National Convention, Philip Graham, the co-owner of the *Washington Post*, helped broker a deal in which John F. Kennedy selected Lyndon Johnson as his running mate. But now a direct pipeline has been established between the Oval Office and the office of Rupert Murdoch, the Australian-born billionaire who founded News Corp and 21st Century Fox. Multiple sources told me that Murdoch and Trump often talk on the phone. A former aide to Trump, who has been in the Oval Office when Murdoch has called, says, "It's two men who've known each other for a very long time having frank conversations. The President certainly doesn't kowtow to Murdoch, but Murdoch also doesn't to him. He speaks to him the same way he would have five years ago." According to Michael Wolff's 2018 book, "Fire and Fury," Murdoch derided Trump as "a fucking idiot" after a conversation about immigration. The aide says Trump knows that Murdoch has denigrated him behind his back, but "it doesn't seem to matter" that much. Several sources confirmed to me that Murdoch regales friends with Trump's latest inanities. But Murdoch, arguably the most powerful media mogul in the world, is an invaluable ally to any politician. Having Murdoch's—and Fox's—support is essential for Trump, the aide says: "It's very important for the base."

Murdoch may be even closer to Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner. Well-informed sources say that Kushner, an increasingly valued White House adviser, has worked hard to win over Murdoch, showing him respect and asking him for advice. Kushner has regularly assured Murdoch that the White House is a smooth-running operation, despite many reports suggesting that it is chaotic. Kushner now has an almost filial status with Murdoch, who turns eighty-eight this month, and numerous sources told me that they communicate frequently. "Like, every day," one said.

Murdoch has cultivated heads of state in Australia and Great Britain, and someone close to him says that “he’s always wanted to have a relationship with a President—he’s a businessman and he sees benefits of having a chief of state doing your bidding.” Murdoch has met every American President since Kennedy, but, the close associate says, “until now a relationship has eluded him.” Still, Murdoch’s coziness with Trump may come at a cost. Roger Ailes, during his final days at Fox, apparently warned Murdoch of the perils. According to Gabriel Sherman, a biographer of Ailes who has written about Fox for *New York* and *Vanity Fair*, Ailes told Murdoch, “Trump gets great ratings, but if you’re not careful he’s going to end up totally controlling Fox News.”

T rump became famous, in no small part, because of Rupert Murdoch. After Murdoch bought the *New York Post*, in 1976, he was introduced to Trump through a mutual acquaintance, Roy Cohn, the infamous legal fixer, who, as a young man, was Senator Joseph McCarthy’s chief counsel. Cohn saw the potential for tabloid synergy: Trump could attain celebrity in the pages of the *Post* as a playboy mogul, and Murdoch could sell papers by chronicling Trump’s exploits.

In private, Murdoch regarded Trump with disdain, seeing him as a real-estate huckster and a shady casino operator. But, for all their differences, the two men had key traits in common. They both inherited and expanded family enterprises—an Australian newspaper; an outer-borough New York City real-estate firm—but felt looked down upon by people who were richer and closer to the centers of power. As Edward Luce, of the *Financial Times*, has noted, both men have tapped into anti-élite resentment to connect with the public and to increase their fortunes. Trump and Murdoch also share a transactional approach to politics, devoid of almost any ideology besides self-interest.

Murdoch could not have foreseen that Trump would become President, but he was a visionary about the niche audience that became Trump’s base. In 1994, Murdoch laid out an audacious plan to Reed Hundt, the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission under President Bill Clinton. Murdoch, who had been a U.S. citizen for less than a decade, invited Hundt to his Benedict Canyon estate for dinner. After the

meal, Murdoch led him outside to take in the glittering view of the Los Angeles Basin, and confided that he planned to launch a radical new television network. Unlike the three established networks, which vied for the same centrist viewers, his creation would follow the unapologetically lowbrow model of the tabloids that he published in Australia and England, and appeal to a narrow audience that would be entirely his. His core viewers, he said, would be football fans; with this aim in mind, he had just bought the rights to broadcast N.F.L. games. Hundt told me, “What he was really saying was that he was going after a working-class audience. He was going to carve out a base—what would become the Trump base.”

Hundt recalled the conversation as “overwhelming.” He said, “I was at this house more expensive than any I could ever imagine. This person’s made a huge mark in two other countries, and he had entered our country and was saying, ‘I’m going to break up the three-party oligopoly that has governed the most important medium of communication for politics and policy in this country since the Second World War.’ It was like a scene from ‘Faust.’ What came to mind was Mephistopheles.”

Blair Levin, at that time the chief of staff at the F.C.C. and now a fellow at the Brookings Institution, says, “Fox’s great insight wasn’t necessarily that there was a great desire for a conservative point of view.” More erudite conservatives, he says, such as William F. Buckley, Jr., and Bill Kristol, couldn’t have succeeded as Fox has. Levin observes, “The genius was seeing that there’s an attraction to fear-based, anger-based politics that has to do with class and race.”

In 1996, Murdoch hired Roger Ailes to create a conservative TV news outlet. Ailes, who died in 2017, was a master of attack politics and wedge issues, having been a media consultant on several of America’s dirtiest and most divisive campaigns, including those of Richard Nixon. Ailes invented programming, Levin argues, “that confirmed all your worst instincts—Fox News’ fundamental business model is driving fear.” The formula worked spectacularly well. By 2002, Fox had displaced CNN as the highest-rated cable news network, and it has remained on top ever since.

In 2011, at Ailes's invitation, Trump began making weekly guest appearances on the morning show "Fox & Friends." In a trial run of his campaign tactics, he used the channel as a platform to exploit racist suspicions about President Barack Obama, spreading doubt about whether he was born in America. (In one segment, Trump suggested that Obama's "family doesn't even know what hospital he was born in!") As Hundt sees it, "Murdoch didn't invent Trump, but he invented the audience. Murdoch was going to make a Trump exist. Then Trump comes along, sees all these people, and says, 'I'll be the ringmaster in your circus!'"

Trump's arrival marked an important shift in tone at Fox. Until then, the network had largely mocked birtherism as a conspiracy theory. O'Reilly called its promoters "unhinged," and Glenn Beck, who at the time also hosted a Fox show, called them "idiots." But Trump gave birtherism national exposure, and, in a sign of things to come, Hannity fanned the flames. Hannity began saying that, although he *thought* that Obama had been born in the United States, the circumstances surrounding his birth certificate were "odd."

Fox's hostility toward the Obama Administration grew increasingly extreme. Its coverage of the Benghazi debacle—a tragic embassy ambush not unlike others that had claimed American lives in previous Administrations—devolved into a relentless attack on Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. In certain instances, however, Fox executives enforced journalistic limits. The network cancelled Beck's show, in 2011, because his paranoid rants had become too embarrassing. (Among other things, Beck accused the White House science adviser of having proposed stemming population growth through forced abortions and "sterilants" in the water.) At the height of the Tea Party rebellion, Ailes reprimanded Hannity for violating the line between journalism and politics. Hannity had arranged to tape his evening Fox show at a Tea Party fund-raiser in Ohio. When Ailes learned of the plan, only hours before the event, he demanded that Hannity cancel his appearance. According to a former Fox executive, Ailes then blew up at Bill Shine, who had authorized Hannity's trip. "Roger was livid, and ripped the shit out of Shine," the former executive says, recalling that Ailes yelled, "No one at Fox is shilling for the Tea Party!" Afterward, Shine released a statement criticizing Hannity's actions. And

Murdoch, at a panel about the news, expressed a similar view, saying, “I don’t think we should be supporting the Tea Party or any other party.”

Such niceties no longer apply. In November, Hannity joined Trump onstage at a climactic rally for the midterm elections. Afterward, Fox issued a limp statement saying that it didn’t “condone any talent participating in campaign events” and that the “unfortunate distraction” had “been addressed.” Many Fox News reporters were angry, and provided critical anonymous quotes to the media, but Hannity didn’t apologize, saying that he had been “surprised yet honored” when Trump called him up onstage. This response was dubious: before the rally, Trump’s campaign had advertised Hannity as a “special guest.” When Hannity joined Trump, he not only praised him for “promises kept”; he also echoed the President’s attacks on the press, castigating the rest of the media covering the rally as “fake news.” The evening ended with a high five between Hannity and Shine, who had recently started working at the White House.

For Greta Van Susteren, a host on Fox between 2002 and 2016, Hannity’s rally appearance illustrates the difference at Fox since Ailes’s departure. For all of Ailes’s faults, Van Susteren argues, he exerted a modicum of restraint. She believes that he would have insisted on at least some distance from President Trump, if only to preserve the appearance of journalistic respectability embodied in the motto Ailes devised for Fox: “Fair and Balanced.” (That motto was retired in 2017.) Van Susteren says, “‘Hannity’ is an opinion show, but when he went onstage with Trump he became part of the campaign. That was an egregious mistake. It was way over the line.”

Although Ailes paid occasional lip service to journalistic integrity, Fox News was hardly fair and balanced under his leadership. Gabriel Sherman, in his biography, “The Loudest Voice in the Room,” reports that Ailes was so obsessed with bringing down Obama in 2012 that he declared to colleagues, “I *want* to elect the next President.”

Yet, during the 2016 campaign, Fox executives were initially uneasy about Trump’s

candidacy. Murdoch tweeted that Trump was “embarrassing his friends” and “the whole country.” An editorial in the *Wall Street Journal*, Murdoch’s flagship newspaper, called Trump’s candidacy a “catastrophe.” Murdoch, an immigrant himself, bridled at Trump’s xenophobia. In 2015, when Trump claimed that most immigrants coming from Mexico were criminals and rapists, Murdoch corrected him on Twitter, noting that “Mexican immigrants, as with all immigrants, have much lower crime rates than native born.” He also tweeted that El Paso was “the safest city” in America.

Murdoch’s views could scarcely be more at odds with Fox’s current diatribes about hordes of “illegal aliens” who are “invading” the U.S. and killing innocent Americans, leaving behind grieving “Angel Moms” and “Angel Dads.” Van Susteren told me that she wasn’t surprised by this rhetorical turn. “Don’t kid yourself about his support for immigration,” she said of Murdoch. “Rupert is first about the bottom line. They’re all going out to play to their crowd, whether it’s Fox or MSNBC.” (After leaving Fox, Van Susteren was for a short time a host on MSNBC.) Fox’s mile-by-mile coverage of the so-called “migrant caravan” was an enormous hit: ratings in October, 2018, exceeded those of October, 2016—the height of the Presidential campaign.

Fox’s embrace of Trumpism took some time. Sherman has reported that, when the network hosted the first Republican Presidential debate, in August, 2015, in Cleveland, Murdoch advised Ailes to make sure that the moderators hit Trump hard. This put Ailes in an awkward position. Trump drew tremendous ratings and had fervent supporters, and Ailes was afraid of losing that audience to rival media outlets. Breitbart, the alt-right Web site led by Stephen K. Bannon, was generating huge traffic by championing Trump. What’s more, Ailes and Trump were friendly. “They spoke all the time,” a former Fox executive says. They had lunch shortly before Trump announced his candidacy, and Ailes gave Trump political tips during the primaries. Ken LaCorte contends that Ailes took note of “Trump’s crazy behavior”; but Trump’s growing political strength was also obvious. According to the former Fox executive, Trump made Ailes “nervous”: “He thought Trump was a wild card. Someone Ailes could not bully or intimidate.”

Anthony Scaramucci, a former Fox Business host who was fleetingly President Trump's communications director, told me in 2016 that the network's executives "made a business decision" to give on-air stars "slack" to choose their candidates. Hannity was an early Trump supporter; O'Reilly was neutral; Megyn Kelly remained skeptical. Trump had hung up on Kelly after she ran a segment about his 1992 divorce from Ivana Trump, which noted that Ivana had signed an affidavit claiming that Trump had raped her. (Ivana later insisted that she hadn't meant rape in the "criminal" sense.)

Against this strained backdrop, at the debate in Cleveland, Kelly asked Trump a famously tough question. "You've called women you don't like 'fat pigs,' 'dogs,' 'slobs,' and 'disgusting animals,' " she said. Trump interrupted her with a snide quip: "Only Rosie O'Donnell!" The hall burst into laughter and applause.

Kelly kept pressing Trump: "You once told a contestant on 'Celebrity Apprentice' it would be a pretty picture to see her on her knees. Does that sound to you like the temperament of a man we should elect President?" But he'd already won over Republican viewers. (Fox received a flood of e-mails, almost all of them anti-Kelly.) The showdown helped shape Trump's image as shamelessly unsinkable. It also kicked off a feud between Trump and Fox, in which Trump briefly boycotted the channel, hurting its ratings and forcing Ailes to grovel. Four days after the debate, Trump tweeted that Ailes had "just called" and "assures me that 'Trump' will be treated fairly."

Trump has made the debate a point of pride. He recently boasted to the *Times* that he'd won it despite being a novice, and despite the "crazy Megyn Kelly question." Fox, however, may have given Trump a little help. A pair of Fox insiders and a source close to Trump believe that Ailes informed the Trump campaign about Kelly's question. Two of those sources say that they know of the tipoff from a purported eyewitness. In addition, a former Trump campaign aide says that a Fox contact gave him advance notice of a different debate question, which asked the candidates whether they would support the Republican nominee, regardless of who won. The former aide says that the heads-up was passed on to Trump, who was the only

candidate who said that he wouldn't automatically support the Party's nominee—a position that burnished his image as an outsider.

These claims are hard to evaluate: Ailes is dead, and they conflict with substantial reporting suggesting that the rift between Trump and Fox was bitter. A former campaign aide is adamant that Trump was genuinely surprised and infuriated by Kelly's question. A Fox spokesperson strongly denied the allegations, and declined requests for interviews with employees involved in the debate.

Kelly also declined to comment, but she broached the subject in her 2016 memoir, "Settle for More." She wrote that the day before the debate Trump called Fox executives to complain, saying he'd heard that Kelly planned to ask "a very pointed question directed at him." She noted, "Folks were starting to worry about Trump—his level of agitation did not match the circumstances." When this passage stirred controversy, Kelly tweeted that her book "does not suggest Trump had any debate Qs in advance, nor do I believe that he did." Yet her account does suggest that Trump had enough forewarning to be upset, and that he contacted Fox before the debate.

Later in the campaign, WikiLeaks posted stolen e-mails from Donna Brazile, then the interim chair of the Democratic National Committee and a CNN contributor. Without CNN's knowledge, she had alerted Hillary Clinton's campaign about questions that the network planned to ask during a televised event. CNN fired Brazile, and Trump has cited the incident as evidence that CNN is "a total fake." Last April, in an interview on "Fox & Friends," he said, "Can you imagine, by the way, if you gave *me* the questions to a debate? They would have you out of business."

In the summer of 2016, two weeks before Trump secured the Republican nomination, Gretchen Carlson, the former co-host of "Fox & Friends," sued Ailes for sexual harassment. Her suit alleged that he had propositioned her during a meeting, and that he'd spoken of having the power to "make anything happen" if she "understood" him, and that they "should have had a sexual relationship a long time ago." Within weeks, Fox had forced Ailes out, giving him a forty-million-dollar severance package. The network apologized to Carlson, and paid her a twenty-

million-dollar settlement.

Murdoch was slow to see the gravity of the sexual-harassment issue, but his two sons—James, the C.E.O. of 21st Century Fox, and Lachlan, its executive chairman—were more responsive. At a board meeting held after the news of Carlson’s suit broke, James, the more politically independent of the two, pushed for an outside legal investigation. His demand forced the company to take action, since the notes of the meeting created a public paper trail. Fox’s outside law firm, Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison, began an inquiry, and exposed an appalling culture of sexual harassment, intimidation, payoffs, and coverups at Fox.

Ailes, meanwhile, joined Trump’s debate team, further erasing the line between Fox and conservative politicians. Ailes also began developing a plan to go into business with Trump. The Sunday before the election, Ailes called Steve Bannon, Trump’s campaign chairman, and said that he’d been talking with Trump about launching Trump TV, a nationalist competitor to Fox. Ailes was so excited that he was willing to forfeit his severance payment from Fox, which was attached to a non-compete agreement. He asked Bannon to join the venture and to start planning it as soon as Trump lost the election.

“What are you talking about?” Bannon recalls replying. “We’re going to win.”

“Stop the bullshit,” Ailes responded. “It’s going to be a blowout. It’ll be over by eight o’clock.”

Any hopes that Fox would clean house after Ailes’s departure vanished on August 12, 2016, when Fox named two Ailes loyalists as co-presidents: Jack Abernethy, an executive who managed Fox’s local stations, and Bill Shine. The opinion side of Fox News, which Shine had run, had won out, as had his friend Sean Hannity.

For years, Ailes had been the focus of liberal complaints, and so when Fox pushed him out many people thought that the channel would change. They were right. The problem, Fox’s critics say, is that it’s become a platform for Trump’s authoritarianism.

“I know Roger Ailes was reviled,” Charlie Black, the lobbyist, said. “But he did produce debates of both sides. Now Fox is just Trump, Trump, Trump.” Murdoch may find this development untroubling: in 1995, he told this magazine, “The truth is—and we Americans don’t like to admit it—that authoritarian societies can work.”

Greta Van Susteren believes that Ailes’s departure posed a huge challenge for his successors: “It’s like what happens when a dictator falls. If you look historically, when you get rid of a Saddam in Iraq, or a Qaddafi in Libya, the place falls apart.” The celebrity opinion-show hosts who drive the ratings became unbridled and unopposed. Hannity, as the network’s highest-rated and highest-paid star, was especially empowered—and, with him, so was Trump.

After Ailes was ousted, Murdoch, then eighty-five, assumed the title of acting C.E.O. of Fox News, and moved into Ailes’s corner office on the second floor of News Corp’s Manhattan headquarters. Lachlan and James wanted their father to hire an outsider with journalistic experience to run the channel, but Murdoch, who still thinks of himself as a newsman at heart, couldn’t resist filling the top slot himself.

The following winter, Murdoch slipped while on Lachlan’s yacht, seriously injuring his back. For months, people close to the family say, he was in very bad shape, convalescing at home in L.A. Ken LaCorte, the former Fox executive, says that Murdoch shouldn’t be discounted because of his age: “He’s definitely got all his marbles, and is one hundred per cent sharp. When it came to numbers, like ratings, revenues, G.D.P. growth—you name it—he’s like a savant. If you made a mistake with a number, he’d usually catch and correct it.” But a Fox insider told me that Murdoch “was gone a lot,” adding, “He’s old. He likes the idea that he’s running it, but the lunatics took over the asylum.”

When Shine assumed command at Fox, the 2016 campaign was nearing its end, and Trump and Clinton were all but tied. That fall, a FoxNews.com reporter had a story that put the network’s journalistic integrity to the test. Diana Falzone, who often covered the entertainment industry, had obtained proof that

Trump had engaged in a sexual relationship in 2006 with a pornographic film actress calling herself Stormy Daniels. Falzone had worked on the story since March, and by October she had confirmed it with Daniels through her manager at the time, Gina Rodriguez, and with Daniels's former husband, Mike Moz, who described multiple calls from Trump. Falzone had also amassed e-mails between Daniels's attorney and Trump's lawyer Michael Cohen, detailing a proposed cash settlement, accompanied by a nondisclosure agreement. Falzone had even seen the contract.

But Falzone's story didn't run—it kept being passed off from one editor to the next. After getting one noncommittal answer after another from her editors, Falzone at last heard from LaCorte, who was then the head of FoxNews.com. Falzone told colleagues that LaCorte said to her, “Good reporting, kiddo. But Rupert wants Donald Trump to win. So just let it go.” LaCorte denies telling Falzone this, but one of Falzone's colleagues confirms having heard her account at the time.

Despite the discouragement, Falzone kept investigating, and discovered that Daniels had discussed a “catch and kill” deal with the National Enquirer, in partnership with Trump, in which the paper would buy the exclusive rights to her story in order to bury it. Falzone pitched this story to Fox, too, but it went nowhere. News of Trump's payoff to silence Daniels, and Cohen's criminal attempts to conceal them as legal fees, remained unknown to the public until the *Wall Street Journal* broke the story, a year after Trump became President.

In January, 2017, Fox demoted Falzone without explanation. That May, she sued the network. Her attorney, Nancy Erika Smith, declined to comment but acknowledged that a settlement has been reached; it includes a nondisclosure agreement that bars Falzone from talking about her work at Fox.

After the *Journal* story broke, Oliver Darcy, a senior media reporter for CNN, published a piece revealing that Fox had killed a Stormy Daniels story. LaCorte, who by then had left Fox but was still being paid by the company, told Mediaite that he'd made the call without talking to superiors. The story simply hadn't “passed muster,” he claimed, adding, “I didn't do it to protect Donald Trump.” Nik Richie, a blogger

who had broken the first story about Daniels, tweeted, “This is complete bullshit. Ken you are such a LIAR. This story got killed by @FoxNews at the highest level. I know, because I was one of your sources.”

Richie told me, “Fox News was culpable. I voted for Trump, and I like Fox, but they did their own ‘catch and kill’ on the story to protect him.” He said that he’d worked closely with Falzone on the article, and that “she did her homework—she had it.” He says he warned her that Fox would never run it, but “when they killed it she was devastated.” Richie believes that the story “would have swayed the election.”

Shine was liked by most of the on-air stars he managed; they describe him as well organized and forthright. Shine, who is tough-looking, with a doughy, dented face, is the son of a New York City policeman. After a brief period working at a Long Island television station, he went on to be Hannity’s producer and rode his coattails at Fox, becoming Ailes’s deputy, enabler, and enforcer. Colleagues say that Shine knew how to coach talent to look good on TV, and how to drive ratings. In 2001, he put psychics on Fox shows to offer opinions about unsolved murders, and in 2007 he defended Fox against what he called “false racism accusations,” after O’Reilly expressed amazement, on the air, that people in Harlem dined at nice restaurants without “any kind of craziness,” just like in “an all-white suburb.”

Angelo Carusone, the president of Media Matters for America, a liberal watchdog group that routinely criticizes Fox News, says that Shine became “an expert in collecting and enforcing soft power,” adding, “He was responsible for on-air contributors to programs, so ultimately you were auditioning for Bill Shine. He was the one who would give you the lucrative contract. He controlled the narrative that way.” Nevertheless, some people at Fox called him Bill the Butler, because he was so subservient to Ailes. A former Fox co-host says, “He’s perfect for the White House job. He’s a yes-man.” Another Fox alumnus said, “His only talent was following orders, sucking up to power, and covering up for people.”

On the fourteenth floor of the network’s headquarters, the former Fox executive told me, Ailes had a “Black Ops” room, where he and others collected dirt on perceived

enemies. They allegedly compiled a dossier on Gabriel Sherman as he worked on his Ailes biography, and obtained the phone records of another journalist, Joe Strupp, in an effort to find out who was leaking to him.

Separately, Ailes and a small group kept a close eye on internal talent. “We had a file on pretty much everyone,” the former Fox executive said, adding that Ailes talked about “putting hits” in the media on anyone who “got out of line.” If a woman complained about being sexually harassed, he said, Shine or other supervisors intimidated her into silence, reduced her air time, or discontinued her contract. The former executive recalls, “Shine would talk to the woman with a velvet glove, saying, ‘Don’t worry about it’—and, if that didn’t work, he’d warn her it would ruin her career.”

Shine’s defenders maintain that he was unfairly tarnished by Ailes’s harassment scandals. “He was a victim of sexual McCarthyism,” LaCorte told me. Van Susteren notes that Shine “was never accused of compromising behavior—he was accused of looking the other way.” She adds, “He’s one of those people in management who put out fires. These people often get burned themselves.”

But at least four civil lawsuits against Fox have named Shine as a defendant for enabling workplace harassment. One of these cases, a stockholder lawsuit that Fox settled in 2017, for ninety million dollars, claimed that Ailes had “sexually harassed female employees and contributors with impunity for at least a decade” by surrounding himself “with loyalists”—including Shine. The suit faults Fox for spending fifty-five million dollars to settle such claims out of court.

The use of company funds for payoffs prompted a criminal investigation by the U.S. Attorney’s office in Manhattan. In 2017, Shine was subpoenaed to appear before a grand jury, but instead he agreed to be interviewed by prosecutors. The criminal investigation seems to have been dropped after Ailes’s death, but Judd Burstein, an attorney whose client was interviewed by prosecutors, told me, “I don’t think someone can be a serial sexual abuser in a large organization without enablers like Shine.”

In 2011, Fox paid a news booker named Laurie Luhn \$3.15 million to keep silent about two decades of sexual mistreatment by Ailes. A copy of the confidentiality agreement shows that Shine co-signed it. The day that Ailes left Fox, Luhn broke her silence. She had sexually serviced Ailes for years, she said, in part because he had blackmailed her with compromising videotapes. According to the stockholder suit, Ailes was abetted by “the direct involvement of Shine,” who scheduled the encounters as work meetings. After Luhn suffered a “mental breakdown,” the suit says, Shine sought a psychiatrist for her. During this period of distress, Luhn claimed, Ailes’s deputies booked her into a New York hotel; Luhn has said that she was required to forward all her e-mails to Shine, for monitoring. A spokesperson for Shine has denied this account, and has said that Shine was unaware that Ailes and Luhn had a sexual relationship. The former Fox executive is dubious that Shine didn’t know, and recalls Shine rolling his eyes and saying, “Laurie Luhn—*she’s* a problem.”

Fox News struggled under Shine’s leadership. In January, 2017, NBC lured away Megyn Kelly. (She has since left NBC.) Three months later, the *Times* revealed that 21st Century Fox and Bill O’Reilly had paid a total of thirteen million dollars to five female employees who had accused him of sexual harassment or inappropriate behavior. At the time, O’Reilly was negotiating a thirty-two-million-dollar payment to a sixth accuser. (He has dismissed all the accusations as “crap.”) The news sparked advertiser boycotts and street demonstrations, and Fox fired O’Reilly. Shine soon followed him out the door.

Hannity had warned that it would be “the total end” of Fox News if his friend Shine were ousted. But, with O’Reilly and Kelly gone, Hannity was in his strongest position yet: he was now Fox’s top-rated star, and Trump’s highest-profile promoter. He’d taken Kelly’s 9 P.M. slot and was getting even higher ratings—some three million viewers a night. Two months after Shine left Fox, Hannity became a matchmaker, arranging a dinner with the President at the White House, attended by himself, Shine, and Scaramucci, at that time Trump’s communications director. Hannity proposed Shine as a top communications official, or even as a deputy chief of staff. A year later, Shine was both.

By the time Trump was elected, Murdoch had adeptly improved ties with him. In the summer of 2016, he and his fourth wife, Jerry Hall, joined Trump for a visit to Trump's golf club in Scotland. Murdoch appears to have been wise in securing a rapprochement. Telecommunications is a highly regulated industry, and under Trump the government has consistently furthered Murdoch's business interests, to the detriment of his rivals. Hundt, the former F.C.C. chairman, told me that "there have been three moves that have taken place in the regulatory and antitrust world" involving telecommunications "that are extremely unusual, and the only way to explain them is that they're pro-Fox, pro-Fox, and pro-Fox."

Last June, after only six months of deliberation, the Trump Administration approved Fox's bid to sell most of its entertainment assets to Disney, for seventy-one billion dollars. The Murdoch family will receive more than two billion dollars in the deal, and will become a major stockholder in the combined company. The Justice Department expressed no serious antitrust concerns, even though the combined company will reportedly account for half the box-office revenue in America. Trump publicly congratulated Murdoch even before the Justice Department signed off on the deal, and claimed that it would create jobs. In fact, the consolidation is projected to result in thousands of layoffs.

In July, the F.C.C. blocked Sinclair Broadcast Group, a conservative rival to Fox, from combining with the Tribune Media Company. The F.C.C. argued that the deal would violate limits on the number of TV stations one entity can own, upending Sinclair's hope of becoming the next Fox.

The Justice Department, meanwhile, went to court in an effort to stop A. T. & T.'s acquisition of Time Warner, which owns CNN. Time Warner saw the deal as essential to its survival at a time when the media business is increasingly dominated by giant competitors such as Google and Facebook. Murdoch understood this impulse: in 2014, 21st Century Fox had tried, unsuccessfully, to buy Time Warner. For him, opposing his rivals' deal was a matter of shrewd business. Trump also opposed the deal, but many people suspected that his objection was a matter of petty retaliation against CNN. Although Presidents have traditionally avoided expressing

opinions about legal matters pending before the judicial branch, Trump has bluntly criticized the plan. The day after the Justice Department filed suit to stop it, he declared the proposed merger “not good for the country.” Trump also claimed that he was “not going to get involved,” and the Justice Department has repeatedly assured the public that he hasn’t done so.

However, in the late summer of 2017, a few months before the Justice Department filed suit, Trump ordered Gary Cohn, then the director of the National Economic Council, to pressure the Justice Department to intervene. According to a well-informed source, Trump called Cohn into the Oval Office along with John Kelly, who had just become the chief of staff, and said in exasperation to Kelly, “I’ve been telling Cohn to get this lawsuit filed and nothing’s happened! I’ve mentioned it fifty times. And nothing’s happened. I want to make sure it’s filed. I want that deal blocked!”

Cohn, a former president of Goldman Sachs, evidently understood that it would be highly improper for a President to use the Justice Department to undermine two of the most powerful companies in the country as punishment for unfavorable news coverage, and as a reward for a competing news organization that boosted him. According to the source, as Cohn walked out of the meeting he told Kelly, “Don’t you fucking dare call the Justice Department. We are not going to do business that way.”

A spokesperson for Cohn declined to comment, and Kelly did not respond to inquiries from *The New Yorker*, but a former White House official confirmed that Trump often “vented” in “frustration” about wanting to block the A. T. & T.-Time Warner merger. “The President does not understand the nuances of antitrust law or policy,” the former official says. “But he wanted to bring down the hammer.” (Last month, a federal court ruled against the Justice Department.)

Trump Administration officials say that political considerations did not guide the government’s actions on the three deals. Blair Levin, the former F.C.C. official, told me, “There may be innocent explanations.” But, he adds, “Trump famously said

you're going to get sick and tired of winning, and that may not be true for the rest of America, but it sure is true of Murdoch." He says of Murdoch, "He's an incredibly cunning political player. He leaves no fingerprints. He's been in the game of influencing government behavior to his benefit longer than most of us have been alive."

David Axelrod, who was Barack Obama's chief strategist, believes that Murdoch has long put his business interests above any political concerns. He recalls attending a dinner where Murdoch pushed him to move ahead on immigration reform. Axelrod suggested that it would help if Fox stopped fanning nativist hysteria, and he says that Murdoch responded, "You'll have to talk to Roger about that," as if he had no sway over Fox. Axelrod says, "There are probably a lot of aspects of Trumpism that he's uncomfortable with. But ultimately he's a businessman. And it's useful to have a friend who's the President, particularly if there are close regulatory calls, and a President who is untroubled by the rules and norms in that regard."

During a recent dinner with reporters, the incendiary right-wing commentator Ann Coulter, who has been feuding with Trump over his immigration policy, said that the President told her that "Murdoch calls me every day." She recalled that, "back when Trump was still speaking to me," she complained to him that Fox was no longer inviting her to appear. She said that Trump told her, "Do you want me to call Murdoch and tell him to put you on?" Coulter accepted Trump's offer. He may have called Hannity, not Murdoch, she says, but in any case she was invited back on Fox "within twelve hours."

As Murdoch's relations with the White House have warmed, so has Fox's coverage of Trump. During the Obama years, Fox's attacks on the President could be seen as reflecting the adversarial role traditionally played by the press. With Trump's election, the network's hosts went from questioning power to defending it. Yochai Benkler, a Harvard Law School professor who co-directs the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society, says, "Fox's most important role since the election has been to keep Trump supporters in line." The network has provided a non-stop counternarrative in which the only collusion is between Hillary Clinton and Russia;

Robert Mueller, the special counsel, is perpetrating a “coup” by the “deep state”; Trump and his associates aren’t corrupt, but America’s law-enforcement officials and courts are; illegal immigration isn’t at a fifteen-year low, it’s “an invasion”; and news organizations that offer different perspectives are “enemies of the American people.”

Benkler’s assessment is based on an analysis of millions of American news stories that he and two co-authors, Robert Faris and Hal Roberts, undertook for their 2018 book, “Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation and Radicalization in American Politics.” Benkler told me that he and his co-authors had expected to find “symmetric polarization” in the left-leaning and the right-leaning media outlets. Instead, they discovered that the two poles of America’s media ecosystem function very differently. “It’s not the right versus the left,” Benkler says. “It’s the right versus the rest.”

Most American news outlets try to adhere to facts. When something proves erroneous, they run corrections, or, as Benkler and his co-authors write, “they check each other.” Far-left Web sites post as many bogus stories as far-right ones do, but mainstream and liberal news organizations tend to ignore suspiciously extreme material. Conservative media outlets, however, focus more intently on confirming their audience’s biases, and are much more susceptible to disinformation, propaganda, and outright falsehoods (as judged by neutral fact-checking organizations such as PolitiFact). Case studies conducted by the authors show that lies and distortions on the right spread easily from extremist Web sites to mass-media outlets such as Fox, and only occasionally get corrected.

When falsehoods are exposed, core viewers often react angrily. According to Media Matters, Fox hosts used the word “invasion” thirty-three times in the thirty days before the midterm elections. After Shepard Smith, the Fox News anchor, contradicted Trump’s scaremongering about immigrants—declaring, “There is no invasion, no one is coming to get you”—viewers lashed out at him on social media.

Sometimes such pushback has a salutary effect. Recently, Chris Wallace told Sarah Sanders that her claim that “nearly four thousand known or suspected terrorists

come into our country illegally” every year was wildly inaccurate. Showing Fox’s clout, the White House has dropped the talking point.

Such breaks with the Trump narrative on Fox are rare, though. Unlike Glenn Beck, Hannity has been allowed to spew baseless conspiracy theories with impunity. For more than a year, Hannity and other hosts spread the lie that the hacking of Democratic Party e-mails during the 2016 campaign was an inside job. Hannity claimed that the hacking had been committed not by Russian cyber-warfare agents, as the U.S. intelligence community concluded, but by a Democratic staffer named Seth Rich, who had been murdered by unknown assailants on a D.C. street. Benkler and his co-authors studied Fox’s coverage, and found that not only did the channel give the Seth Rich lie a national platform; it also used the conspiracy story as a distraction, deploying it as a competing narrative when developments in Mueller’s investigation showed Trump in a bad light. In 2017, after Rich’s parents demanded an apology and advertisers began shunning the network, Fox finally ran a retraction, and Hannity dropped the story.

By then, Fox hosts had begun pushing a different conspiracy: the “Uranium One” story, which Hannity called “the biggest scandal ever involving Russia.” On an October, 2017, broadcast, Hannity claimed that Hillary Clinton, when she was Secretary of State, had given “to Vladimir Putin and Russia twenty per cent of America’s uranium, which is the foundational material to make nuclear weapons.” Ostensibly, the deal was in exchange for giant payments to the Clinton Foundation. Hannity also claimed that “the corrupt, lying mainstream media” was withholding this “bombshell” from Americans, because it was “complicit” in a “huge coverup.” More than a year earlier, the *Times* had run a front-page story about the deal, based on the right-wing book “Clinton Cash.” But the story had gone cold, because other reporting had poked holes in it, revealing that multiple government agencies had approved the deal, and that the quantity of uranium was insignificant. Yet Fox kept flogging it as the real national-security scandal involving Russia. On “Hannity,” the former Trump White House adviser Sebastian Gorka argued that the Clintons’ crime was equivalent to the Cold War treason of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg—and reminded viewers that the Rosenbergs were executed. Within two days, Trump

picked up Fox's story, tweeting, "Uranium deal to Russia, with Clinton help and Obama Administration knowledge, is the biggest story that Fake Media doesn't want to follow!"

Alisyn Camerota was a co-host on "Fox & Friends" for years before joining CNN, in 2014. She says that Fox has solid news reporters, but she became so troubled by the lack of standards on "Fox & Friends" that she wrote a thinly veiled novel, "Amanda Wakes Up," about the blurring of journalistic lines at a cable morning show. " 'Fox & Friends' was a fun show, but it was not a news show," she says. "It regularly broke the rules of journalism. It was basically Roger's id on TV. He'd wake up in the morning with some bee in his bonnet, spout it off to Bill Shine, and Shine would tell us to put it on TV." She says that the show's producers would "cull far-right, crackpot Web sites" for content, and adds, "Never did I hear anyone worry about getting a second source. The single phrase I heard over and over was 'This is going to outrage the audience!' You inflame the viewers so that no one will turn away. *Those* were the standards."

To the astonishment of colleagues, the Fox co-host Kimberly Guilfoyle often prepared for "The Five" by relying on information provided to her by an avid fan: a viewer from Georgia named David Townsend, who had no affiliation either with Fox News or with journalism. She'd share the day's planned topics with Townsend, and then he'd e-mail her suggested content. A former colleague of Guilfoyle's says, "It was a joke among the production assistants—they were, like, 'Wait till you hear this!' She actually got research from him! It was the subject of hilarity."

Townsend is a frequent contributor to the fringe social-media site Gab, which *Wired* has called a "haven for the far right." (He has promoted the idea that "physically weak men" are "more likely to be socialists," and has argued that it is not anti-Semitic to observe that "the most powerful political moneybags in American politics are Zionists.") The server company that hosts Gab removed it from the Internet temporarily after it was revealed to have posted hate-filled rants by Robert Bowers, the gunman who killed eleven people at a Pittsburgh synagogue, last October.

When I asked Townsend about his e-mails to Guilfoyle, he said, “Mind your own business. I’m just a Fox fan. I’m a keyboard warrior. I’m a nobody.” He said, “I’ve sent stuff to various people at Fox for years, and I don’t get a penny for it,” and added, “I don’t know what tree you’re barking up but you better be careful.”

Given Fox’s status as a dominant source of information for Trump, some people argue that the network should be especially vigilant about outside influence. Aki Peritz, a former C.I.A. analyst who is an adjunct professor at American University, has written that Fox News has become an inviting target for foreign spy agencies, because “it’s what the President sees.” But a source who spoke to me about Guilfoyle and Townsend says, “It’s even worse than a conspiracy of the dark Web, or something trying to manipulate Fox. It was just a guy in his underwear in Georgia who had influence over Fox News! And Fox News influences the President!”

Officially, Trump’s day begins at 11 A.M., with his national-security briefing. But Matt Gertz, a senior fellow at Media Matters, who has spent more than a year tracking how closely Trump’s tweets correspond to Fox News, told me that “the real briefing is on ‘Fox & Friends,’ four hours earlier.” Judging from the timing of Trump’s tweets, Gertz believes that the President records “Fox & Friends” and views it from the beginning, often with a slight delay. As Trump watches, he frequently posts about points that he agrees with. Since August, 2018, Media Matters has tallied more than two hundred instances of Trump disseminating Fox News items to his fifty-eight million Twitter followers. “Trump serves as a carnival barker for Fox,” Levin says, giving invaluable promotional help to the channel.

Fox hosts sometimes reverse their opinions in order to toe the Trump line: Hannity, who in the Obama era called negotiations with North Korea “disturbing,” now calls such efforts a “huge foreign-policy win.” But Gertz has come to believe that Fox drives Trump more than Trump drives Fox. During the recent standoff with Congress over funding for a border wall, Fox anchors and guests repeatedly pushed Trump to reject compromises favored by Republicans in Congress and by his own staff, and to pursue instead an extreme path favored by Fox’s core viewers.

White House aides confirm that Trump has repeatedly walked away from compromises at the last moment because Fox hosts and guests opposed the deals. Last March, Trump was widely expected to sign an omnibus appropriations bill, thus avoiding a government shutdown. Both Mick Mulvaney, his budget director at the time, and Vice-President Mike Pence had described it as a done deal. But on March 22nd Trump became agitated, a former top aide told me, when the evening hosts at Fox “lit him up,” and the next morning, on “Fox & Friends,” one of the President’s most reliable supporters, Pete Hegseth, “ripped him.” At 8:55 A.M., Trump tweeted that he might veto the bill, because it lacked funding for the “BORDER WALL.” The former top aide said of Trump’s sudden reversal, “It was all Fox.”

Trump’s tweet caused panic in Washington: many members of Congress had left town, and it wasn’t clear that enough were present to pass a stopgap spending bill. Defense Secretary James Mattis rushed to the White House and explained to Trump that, if he vetoed the bill, funding for U.S. troops would run out at midnight. That afternoon, Trump relented and signed the bill.

Mattis prevailed in this instance, but former White House aides and other political players in Washington believe that Trump is more influenced by Fox pundits and guests than by his staff, or by the intelligence experts who brief him. Marc Short, who was formerly in charge of congressional relations for the White House, tried to counter the effect by enlisting Republican allies in the House to go on Fox.

According to a Senate staffer, one high-profile Republican senator claims that his preferred way of getting the President’s ear is by going on Fox. He calls a friendly host and offers to appear on the air; usually, before he’s taken his makeup off in the greenroom Trump is calling him. “It’s the way to get into his head,” the Senate staffer says.

Gertz is not alone in believing that Fox hosts played a key part in driving Trump’s recent shutdown of the government and his declaration of a national emergency on the southern border. Hannity and Dobbs urged Trump nightly on their shows to make these moves; according to press reports, they also advised Trump personally to do so.

On December 19th, with Republicans still in control of both houses of Congress, Trump's staff indicated that he would sign a spending bill with \$1.6 billion earmarked for border security. That night, Ann Coulter and Rush Limbaugh assailed the deal, and the next morning Fox pounded Trump. Representative Mark Meadows, of North Carolina, a member of the far-right Freedom Caucus, appeared on "Fox & Friends," calling the bill not a "punt" but a "fumble," and warning Trump not to "cave." At 7:33 A.M., Hegseth tweeted at Trump, "Don't listen to squish advisers. . . . No WALL = SHUT IT DOWN." By the next day, Trump had refused to sign the spending bill, forcing much of the government to shut down. For the next thirty-five days, Hannity and the other Fox hosts kept cheering Trump on, even as polls showed that the American public was increasingly opposed to the shutdown. Oliver Darcy, of CNN, says that Democrats, rather than negotiating with Trump, "might as well call Sean Hannity and get him on the phone," adding, "It seems we sort of elected Sean Hannity when we elected Trump."

Gertz, of Media Matters, argues, "The President's world view is being specifically shaped by what he sees on Fox News, but Fox's goals are ratings and money, which they get by maximizing rage. It's not a message that is going to serve the rest of the country." Blair Levin, the former F.C.C. official, says that Trump and Fox are employing the same risky model: inflaming the base and intensifying its support, rather than building a broader coalition. Narrowcasting may generate billions of dollars for a cable channel, but as a governing strategy it inevitably alienates the majority. The problem for Trump, as one former Fox host puts it, is that "he can't afford to lose Fox, because it's all he's got."

Similarly, Fox has a financial incentive to make Trump look good. Cable ratings at both Fox and MSNBC dip when the news is bad for their audience's side. Van Susteren likens the phenomenon to audiences turning away when their sports team is losing. During the Bush Administration's disastrous handling of Hurricane Katrina, Fox's ratings slumped so badly, a former Fox producer told me, that he was told to stop covering it. Since the midterms, in which the Republicans lost the House, the Nielsen ratings for Fox's evening lineup—Hannity, Tucker Carlson, and Laura Ingraham—have fallen by twenty per cent. Few things cause ratings to spike

like an exclusive Presidential interview, however, and on February 28th Hannity landed yet another one, during the President's meeting in Hanoi with Kim Jong Un. At one point in the interview, Hannity addressed the week's biggest news—Michael Cohen's testimony before Congress—and assured viewers that, even if Stormy Daniels had been paid off before the 2016 election, the President was innocent of criminal wrongdoing. Cohen, he told Trump, had “said to me at least a dozen times that *he* made the decision on the payments, and he didn't tell you.”

“Yeah,” Trump said.

When Hannity lamented that the Cohen hearings had upstaged Trump's diplomatic effort, intoning, “I thought politics stopped at the water's edge in America,” Trump called the timing “really inappropriate.”

At the White House, Bill Shine, just as he did at Fox, defers to the man he calls “the boss.” When Trump became irritated by the White House press corps, Shine acted as his enforcer. Disregarding the norms protecting press freedom, he tried to strip the aggressive CNN White House correspondent Jim Acosta of his White House pass; he also attempted to “disinvite” the CNN correspondent Kaitlan Collins from covering a Rose Garden event. She had annoyed the President earlier that day with a question about Michael Cohen.

Shine also berated Peter Baker, the chief White House correspondent for the *Times*, after hearing—inaccurately—that Baker, at a summit in Buenos Aires, had laughed when Japan's Prime Minister, Shinzō Abe, congratulated Trump on his “historic victory” in the midterm elections. Baker declined to comment, but a colleague of his witnessed Shine pulling Baker aside from the press pool. Shine poked a finger in his face and demanded to know if he'd laughed at Trump. The incident was settled amicably after Baker sent Shine an audio recording proving that the accusation was false. But Shine's attempt to police a veteran reporter was reminiscent of the culture of intimidation at Fox News.

A source close to Trump says that the President has been complaining that Shine hasn't been aggressive enough. Late last year, Trump told the source, “Shine

promised me my press coverage would get better, but it's gotten worse." The source says, "Trump thought he was getting Roger Ailes but instead he got Roger Ailes's gofer."

In recent months, Shine has practically ended White House press briefings. Trump prefers to be his own spokesman. "He always thought he did it the best," a former senior White House official says. "But the problem is that you lose deniability. It's become a trapeze act with no net, 24/7. The shutdown messaging was a crisis. There was no exit strategy."

As Trump has been condemning reporters as "enemies of the people," Fox News, too, has been cracking down on dissenting voices. Van Susteren was replaced by Tucker Carlson, and under the leadership of Fox's current C.E.O., Suzanne Scott, a longtime deputy of Shine's, the prime-time lineup has become more one-sided than ever. Fox has become Trump's safe space in times of stress. When he was alone in the White House on New Year's Eve, he called in to Pete Hegseth's live broadcast and wished him a happy New Year. A few weeks later, when Trump was humiliated by the news that the F.B.I. had considered launching a counterintelligence investigation of him, he called the Fox host Jeanine Pirro for on-air reassurance. Conservative critics of Trump who used to appear on Fox, such as Stephen Hayes and George Will, have largely vanished; Will told the *Washington Post* that Fox discontinued his contract, in 2017, without explanation. It's almost shocking to recall that, as recently as 2009, Fox balanced Hannity with a liberal co-host, Alan Colmes.

Simon Rosenberg, a Democratic veteran of Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign, went on Fox regularly for more than ten years. In November, 2017, he had a heated on-air exchange with a Fox host, Melissa Francis, about the Republican tax bill. When Francis hectored him, accusing him of merely repeating talking points, he vowed on the air never to return. "It was always clear that this wasn't just another news organization," Rosenberg told me. "But when Ailes departed, and Trump was elected, the network changed. They became more combative, and started treating me like an enemy, not an opponent." With Shine joining Trump at the White House, he said, "it's as if the on-air talent at Fox now have two masters—the White House and

the audience.” In his view, the network has grown so allied with the White House in the demonization of Trump’s critics that “Fox is no longer conservative—it’s anti-democratic.”

After Fox completes the spinoff of its entertainment properties to Disney, the news channel will be part of a much smaller company, under the day-to-day supervision of Lachlan Murdoch. Like Rupert, Lachlan is a conservative, but there’s talk around Fox that he may want to bring the news network closer to the center-right. The biggest test yet of Fox’s journalistic standards is the impending showdown over Mueller’s findings. For two years, the network has been priming its viewers to respond with extraordinary anger should the country’s law-enforcement authorities close in on the President. According to Media Matters, in the first year after Mueller was appointed Hannity alone aired four hundred and eighty-six segments attacking the federal criminal investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election; thirty-eight per cent of those segments claimed that law-enforcement officials had broken the law. In recent weeks, Hannity has spoken of “a coup,” and a guest on Laura Ingraham’s program, the lawyer Joseph diGenova, declared, “It’s going to be total war. And, as I say to my friends, I do two things—I vote and I buy guns.”

Jerry Taylor, the co-founder of the Niskanen Center, a think tank in Washington for moderates, says, “In a hypothetical world without Fox News, if President Trump were to be hit hard by the Mueller report, it would be the end of him. But, with Fox News covering his back with the Republican base, he has a fighting chance, because he has something no other President in American history has ever had at his disposal—a servile propaganda operation.” ♦

An earlier version of this article inaccurately characterized a “catch and kill” offer involving Stormy Daniels. The article also incorrectly said that Sean Hannity was godfather to Bill Shine’s children and misstated the job functions of Hope Hicks, Pete Hegseth, and Shepard Smith.

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*Jane Mayer has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 1995. [Read more »](#)*

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