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Nixon, the New Right, and the  
Education of Roger Ailes:  
The Origins of Conservative Television

By

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## Introduction

June 8, 1971. City Hall. Downtown Los Angeles. An aspiring political consultant is struggling to establish his place within the annals of political power by way of joining a network of prominent GOP advisors. Hoping to make a name for himself, he delivers a speech titled “Candidate + Money + Media = Votes” which not only makes a case for his services but also for what he sees as the future of electoral politics:

The *core* of our society, which is *our political system*, has undergone a complete upheaval in the past decade. This was brought about by the introduction into politics of that much talked about and much maligned, but little understood medium, television... It has changed who we elect, how we elect and even why we elect someone... Being deeply interested in and involved in television and politics, I find it difficult to divorce the two from the rest of our life. Therefore, today I'd like to talk about the process of getting elected to an office in the government which is responsible for our future, about the biggest problem we face as a nation, and about how business is "missing the boat" in helping to insure the continuation of the American way of life... In 1963 television bypassed newspapers as the people's major source of news and has been widening the gap since. This year over 59% of those polled said they relied on television as their major news source and about one-third of the people said they relied on TV as their only news source. You might be interested to note that this year TV was rated by 49% of the people as our most believable medium. That is higher than newspapers, radio and magazines combined... The biggest problem today [in light of the chaotic late-1960s], I believe, is communication on all levels. Before print and before radio and television there was some excuse for this failure. Today there is none. And the self-perpetuating symptom of this disease is a completely negative attitude about ourselves and our system. America has a cancer... our national life depends on our ability to use our technical knowledge to cure the ills in our country and upon our refusal to be caught up in this negative attitude about our system.

In a decade known for its cynicism, distrust of President Nixon, and searches for authenticity, this thirty-one-year-old political media consultant was embracing exactly those things which many of his peers would later lament. A former television executive producer now focused on a career in political consulting, he perceived the broad desire and impact a telegenic conservative figure (e.g., Ronald Reagan) could utilize for settling the cultural divisions of the late 1960s closer to what partisan conservatives saw as favorable conditions. And although he acknowledged that there was indeed a crisis in American society, a conclusion everyone agreed upon after 1968, albeit for different reasons, this image-maker believed that the predicament was the consequence of counterculture activists and the liberal slant of the big three television

networks which had encouraged reform of traditional institutions. For this conservative consultant, critics of American infallibility were directly responsible for the distrust in the political and business establishment – the true leaders of American society. Therefore, he believed, the conservative power centers desperately needed to harness the power of television to not only restore their prestige among the public but to reduce the political opposition through a reduction of the influence spewed forth from the cultural fountainheads of American liberalism (universities, activists, and the media entities which had, in the view of his partisan peers, coddled them). This essay will explore how this ambitious conservative consultant, Roger E. Ailes, struggled in the 1970s to realize this goal whilst he worked towards a lucrative commanding post within the cultural-political conflict taking place between the country's activists, politicians, and institutions.

As this study illustrates, the seventies were a difficult yet consequential decade for Ailes. On one hand, he continuously fought an uphill battle simply to stay relevant among conservative politicians. However, the Nixon and Ford years also taught him the lessons which proved instrumental for success in his political career, financial security, and significantly, the future of conservative television. Our journey will prove this claim by following Roger Ailes during his time in the television industry, Richard Nixon's comeback and in the pre-Watergate administration, and finally, efforts by the New Right to reframe the television news Americans consumed. Throughout this period (1967-1976), Ailes was both learning from and contributing to the most powerful conservative forces in the nation. This list starts with Richard Nixon and continues on with luminaries of the New Right such as Joseph Coors and Paul Weyrich. Nor is it a coincidence that the most significant figure of recent conservative media intersected with each of these figures during the 1970s. Nor should we ignore the fact that Ailes's political baptism

began with aiding Nixon in the tumultuous election of 1968. It is worth keeping in mind, that 1969 was the same year in which leading conservatives and majorities of the American public responded to a seemingly anarchic crescendo of assassinations, riots, and racial animosity with calls for “law and order.” Rick Perlstein described this landscape as Nixonland because of the figure’s natural fit as the leader of the burgeoning anti-liberal, anti-hippie, anti-activist sentiment. Consequently, I focus on the early career of Roger Ailes because I believe it to be the best vehicle from which we can discern the motives and strategies of key conservative political figures in their struggle to control the long seventies’ predominant medium of information. As a result of this examination of Roger Ailes and his early political work, I demonstrate that the origins of conservative television began in the 1970s as a broader rightwing effort to influence public opinion. Throughout the manuscript, I argue that the 1970s was the period of gestation of not only of the New Right, the rise of the Sun Belt, or the conservative realignment of the white working class, but also the decade in which television became the ideal tool to fight against liberal forces within American culture. As we will see, leading figures within the Nixon administration and the New Right spent considerable time contemplating conservative television in efforts which Roger Ailes participated in, and learned from. Therefore, Ailes’s political education was greatly influenced by Nixonian assumptions. These assumptions, most importantly, included the view that politics was downstream from culture as well as the realization that conservatism *had* to be on television to win electorally. The 1970s also proved informative in other ways for the future CEO of Fox News. For example, Ailes enthusiastically noted the kind of unapologetic, conservative populism which resonated with the sensibilities of blue-collar Americans in Martha Mitchell. This feminine, yet brash “Mouth of the South” became the archetypal media personality he would seek to promote years later. Lastly, I analyze

how leaders of the New Right affected the future structure of conservative television news as a consequence of hiring Ailes and charging him with the responsibility of turning around a struggling news service created to supplant objectivist television news.

In writing this paper, I hope to contribute to a body of literature which discusses the factors, influences, and history of the political realignment that took place during this tumultuous period. One particularly important book is historian Robert O. Self's *All in the Family* which discusses the era's great political shifts in terms of the New Deal's "breadwinner liberalism" being replaced by "breadwinner conservatism." According to Self, this process took place as a consequence of rising black masculinity, Vietnam-induced self-doubt of America's strength, and the success of minority groups to define their citizenship (in terms of both positive and negative rights). Other historians have taken more thematic approaches which are biographical, yet still comprehensive in their retelling of the events that lead to the realignment. For example, in *Nixonland* by Rick Perlstein, we are given a superb account of Richard Nixon's rise and fall. As a result, we are treated with a detailed and grim volume on how the instability of the Democratic Party in 1968 and the silent majority provided a paranoid president with an extraordinary opportunity to wage warfare upon his critics. Additionally, Perlstein demonstrates how the 37<sup>th</sup> president exacerbated divisions as a consequence of his zero-sum political calculus as well as efforts to bring about Republican hegemony through the electoral promise of the Sun Belt, popular resentment, and politically fatal, paranoid maneuvers. Conversely, other historians like Gary Gerstle, William Chafe, Robert Mason, and Iwan Morgan have variously posited in one way or another that the liberal consensus of the 1950s was a simplification of history which placed entire peoples and regions – such as the South and the Black struggle for freedom – at the margins of American historical scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Still, other scholars have attempted to fix this

simplification through creative use of the biographical framework with broader themes about race, war, and white patriarchy. In *The Shattering*, Kevin Boyle argues that white families experienced a loss of confidence in the nation as the result of the cultural-political divisions surrounding: (1) Vietnam, (2) racial divisions and the campaigns for civil rights, and (3) the battles over reproduction. While these historians and others have offered bountiful amounts of scholarship which examines the political realignment that took place between 1968 to 1972, the story of conservative efforts to control television, the medium America relied upon to witness this period of history, remains largely untold.

Yet if we look at the value Nixon and the New Right placed on corralling and taming the medium, it appears they regarded television as the arena in which the era's political-cultural warfare was to be settled. Many within the Nixon brain trust had come to believe that the public arena had become synonymous with the cultural struggle between the forces of traditionalism and those of the counterculture. Patrick Moynihan, the only Harvard-educated Democrat considered to be loyal and "one of us"<sup>2</sup> by the Nixon inner circle, spoke for the president when he determined that "You now have an almost fully politicized culture on your hands."<sup>3</sup> Expanding his thoughts in an earlier memo Moynihan had written "Since about 1840 the cultural elite in America have pretty generally rejected the values and activities of the larger society" until the crises of the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War had enabled a fragile truce to be established. Viewing the 1960s as a reestablishment of cultural conflict, Moynihan continued, "That, I fear, is now over. The leading cultural figures are going – have gone – into opposition once again."<sup>4</sup> Even more troubling, "The culture is now centered in the Universities" which was now "act[ing] like any other majority political party" with their ability to marshal support among the middle class and young people. According to top officials within the

administration, Moynihan's memorandums – with their long essay-like structure – were considered “the kind of incisive and stimulating analysis” worthy of being “constantly... brought to the attention of policymakers.”<sup>5</sup> Even more troubling for the Harvard professor and his presidential audience was the concern that “the culture can do some things the other political parties cannot” such as publishing books, music, or “produc[ing] a mob that will fight in the streets.” Comparing the cultural output of the GOP to counterculture in 1970 seemed utterly laughable to Moynihan, who joked: “Try to think of a Republican National Committee movie anyone would pay to see. Or a Republican mob.”

As this paper will discuss, within Nixonian circles the worrying lack of cultural influence from the “straight,” “traditional,” “squares” of the American polity seemed untenable if the GOP was going to even have a chance to succeed politically. Therefore, throughout the decade, Nixon, his advisors (among whom we find Roger Ailes was present) and the New Right began to conceptualize television as *the* arena which would determine the fate of American political culture. By trying to uncover some of this history, my work expands upon the already existing body of literature detailing the multitude of political changes that occurred during this period of the late sixties and seventies. This literature itself can be dated back to the period with Kevin Phillips's *The Silent Majority* and Richard Viguerie's *We are Ready to Lead*. More recently, *White Flight* by Kevin Kruse and *Right Star* by Laura Kalman have also bequeath to the field even more superb accounts of how the postwar conservative political phenomenon developed the language, policies, and rhetoric which we associate with Reagan Republicanism. Lastly, this manuscript should be seen as lending historical specifics to a body of literature – beginning in the 1960s – which, probably due to its abstract nature, goes unmentioned by contemporary by

many contemporary scholars of political media (i.e., *The Image* by Daniel Boorstin and *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* by Marshal McLuhan).

When we view the body of work that deals with either Roger Ailes through a biographical lens (*Loudest Voice in the Room* by Gabriel Sherman) or his influence on the Republican Party (*The Brainwashing of My Dad* by Jen Senko), claims about the former Fox CEO's impact upon the Nixon administration tend to be somewhat hyperbolic. Consequently, I have written this paper, in part, to demonstrate that Ailes's approach to television is *Nixonian* in its content and purpose. Rather than Ailes having taught Nixon how to conduct political television, it was the Nixonian media strategy that initiated the young television producer into the world of political media, and even taught him how to conduct a war against liberals. This path was not easy for Ailes, as books on Ailes – such as *Dark Genius* by Kerwin Swint or *Loudest Voice* – suggest.

In brief, this study aims to bolster the overall picture that current scholarship has provided through illustrations of how conservative image consultants and politicians contemplated and exercised the art of image-making in the late 1960s and 1970s. While this is an ambitious task, this story becomes possible as a result of Ailes's interactions with prominent conservative figures similarly obsessed with the task of controlling the visual content that the mass of the American public consumed. Moreover, Ailes's early career serves as a historically important throughline from which we can better understand and interpret the machinations of the conservative movement. This method contributes a different scope of focus heretofore sidelined in scholarship in the 1970s while still maintaining a horizontal slice of the picture due to Ailes's connections and relationships to prominent conservatives in the 1970s like Richard Nixon, H.R. Haldeman, Joseph Coors, Paul Weyrich, and Jack Wilson. While David Greenberg's *Nixon's*

*Shadow* examines how specific groups shaped their interpretations of Nixon's legacy, I seek to understand how conservative figures from presidents to activists to wealthy donors dealt with and attempted to manage the medium. Unlike *Nixonland*, my work brings attention to the lieutenants waging this cultural war which extended beyond White House circles. Even in Jefferson Cowie's *Stayin' Alive*, a remarkable analysis of the cultural and political changes that took place during the 1970s, the relationship between the *political actors* and the *medium* remains somewhat opaque. My thesis elaborates upon ideas about the political and social conflicts of this period as part of a larger "culture war" that brought about a realignment in the American political landscape.<sup>6</sup> Through demonstrating how conservatives adapted to the medium of television, the era of Walter Cronkite, and new forms of image management, this work explores conservative media strategy as an outgrowth of the cultural divisions set in place by 1968 and has implications highly relevant to America's contemporary democratic society.

### **Learning the Ropes**

Roger Ailes, from his birth in 1940 to the day he went off to college in 1958, lived in Warren, Ohio during its *belle epoque* period. A golden era of 20<sup>th</sup> century Americana was ushered in by two historical phenomena: (1) postwar industrialization and (2) the rapid growth of suburbia as a result of white flight. For better or for worse, the comforting conformity of this particular Midwestern suburbia with its blue-collar conservatism embodied a nostalgic ideal from which normality and "American-ness" were defined for Ailes throughout his lifetime. Ailes would reminisce about his postwar childhood in Warren as a period free from the countercultural pollution of American values. Accordingly, Ohio would always be conveniently ranked as the premier example of American "normality." Even into his mid-fifties, Ailes would laugh heartily

when a fellow Buckeye commented that the only exceptional characteristic of their home state was its uncanny ability to be “absolutely, completely, dead-on normal.”<sup>7</sup>

Although the young Roger Ailes had not experienced the first boom cycle of his hometown, much of his formative years overlap with the prolonged suburban migrations occurring at mid-century when the region was awash with union jobs and middle-class residents. By the time Ailes was ten years old, the small factory town had become home to 49,674 persons<sup>8</sup> who largely lived in decently sized tract homes and relied upon the Packard Electric Company in one way or another.<sup>9</sup> For these structural reasons, the neighborhood in which Robert Ailes Sr. established the family home was strikingly homogenous in its demographics. With the benefit of hindsight, it seems appropriate that Roger Ailes would personify two seemingly contradictory aspects of this early environment: the small-town conservatism of the region as well as the innovative spirit of the technologically inclined entrepreneur.

Roger Ailes first began to learn the ropes of entertainment upon arriving in Athens, Ohio, where he attended the University of Ohio in the fall of 1958. During his time on campus, Roger Ailes would walk to his classes, attend plays, and join the student-run radio station where he acted as the 7:00 AM sign-on jockey. Hence, it was on a college campus in southern Ohio where he first began to practice the art of entrenching himself within an organization that he desired to be a part of. In addition to experiencing the pleasure of “being on the air” for the first time, Roger Ailes said that he was even more “excited by the scripting, the deadlines, the creativity, and the enthusiasm of the other students.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, he delighted in helping the more prominent and talented students produce their content from the shadows. Embedding himself as deeply as he could in radio, Ailes became more involved and knowledgeable about the medium’s technicalities and techniques. In total, the future producer described his college years as the

personal catalyst in which he gained “the opportunity to provide the link between audiences and significant events and personalities in politics, sports, business, and entertainment.” Thus, his time in college was the first time in which Ailes was admittedly “*consumed* by broadcasting.” While there is no conclusive evidence that suggests that he viewed this opportunity as a steppingstone to a career in media, it is clear that he possessed a deep disinterest in the other academic subjects offered on campus. For example, one professor of the humanities recalled that Ailes was an “above-average” student, and his transcripts show that he graduated with a grade point average of 2.698.<sup>11</sup> It, therefore, appears that he discounted the intellectual side of university culture in favor of the arts and his professional ambitions. Still, Ailes learned many of the vital skills necessary for his career during his college years.

Indeed, Ailes spent much of college learning what it took to quickly rise up through the ranks and enthrall listeners, two skills he would carry forth to virtually every position he would have, save one. Even “former teachers” thought him to be “extremely well qualified in the Radio-TV field” despite his less than stellar GPA. For example, one Ph.D. in the School of Radio and TV Department noted that he considered Ailes to be “one of the brightest young people in this field” and “one who is quite an expert.” This same professor also perceptively detected that “the applicant is a highly, aggressive individual but added this aggressiveness is not offensive and is probably responsible for the success he has enjoyed” in his budding career.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, Ailes’s first task when he graduated was to parlay his technical experience in the college radio station into a job in one of America’s cultural and media hubs. Fortunately for Ailes, he had two job offers to consider. One was becoming a sports announcer for a Columbus radio station and the other was a prop boy for KYW-TV based in Cleveland. Although the radio job was the higher paying option of the two, Roger Ailes made a fateful decision to trust his instinct and the

growing potential of television; a decision that would lead to him advising three different presidents and changing American politics, television, and arguably culture forever.

### **Working in Television**

Within eight days of earning his Fine Arts degree on June 10, 1962, Roger Ailes was the new production assistant on the set of a daytime variety program titled the *Mike Douglas Show*.

However, as people involved with showbusiness would testify, the position of PA is often that of a glorified “gofer” (as in go-fer-some-coffee kid). As a result, the position likely created some contradictory feelings for someone like Ailes. On the one hand, Roger Ailes had penetrated the world of television successfully. “Suddenly, I was working daily with the biggest stars of the time – people like Bob Hope, Pearly Baily, Liberace, Jack Benny and Judy Garland.”<sup>13</sup> Each week he met a different Hollywood star who would co-host the program while he witnessed firsthand how to run a set with a live audience. On the other hand, being a PA meant that Ailes was utterly expendable and rather unimportant to the program’s larger operations.

Foreshadowing much of his career, Ailes angled for promotion almost immediately. Not only did he become diligent and helpful to those around him, but he also waged an unrelenting charm offensive designed to gain the respect of his superiors and make him more central to the show’s internal machinery; a move made easier by the fact the show was still navigating its debut season. As Ailes later remembered, “I was fortunate to join their group in the show’s first few months and my career grew with the show. By working very hard, I was promoted to assistant director, which is a gofer with stripes. I wrote cue cards for the songs, I ran for sandwiches for the stars, I picked up guests at the airport and brought them to the studio. I did whatever anybody asked.”<sup>14</sup> From this vantage point behind the camera, Ailes quickly began to learn from the

celebrity guests who captured the studio audience's attention. Within months he "learned the elements of effective communications." Ever the student of the practical, he wrote, "Each person I met had some impact on me." Nonetheless, he always maintained that the "great[est] impact of all" on his understanding of success in communication, public relations, and winning over audiences "was made by television itself."

By 1965, Ailes, now executive producer, had solidified his position as *the* leading force behind the scenes. Under his direction, the *Mike Douglas Show* established itself as a hit in the ratings (with numbers comparable to NBC-TV's *The Tonight Show*). Even better for Ailes's resume was the fact that much of this success was attributed to the twenty-six-year-old executive producer by those familiar with the studio's inner workings. Consequently, industry colleagues would meet him, and they were often in either disbelief or awe of the TV wunderkind from Warren, Ohio. Bennet Cerf, a publisher from Random House, was utterly amazed "at the fact one so young would be assigned such a responsible and demanding position." After hanging around the show's off-camera operations for a time, Cerf determined that the young producer was "unquestionably... the prime mover and guiding force behind the success of the show."<sup>15</sup> Another colleague testified in an interview with the FBI in 1968 that "since Ailes was only in his late twenties and just out of college when he joined this organization, he found it somewhat difficult to accept at face value the individual glowingly evaluated therein by older and experienced television professionals." Like countless others, however, seeing Ailes dynamically control a hectic situation "allayed his initial reservations and convinced him that Ailes is a legitimate phenomenon. Unquestionably brilliant and talented, personable, aggressive without being offensive, hardworking and, most amazingly, a surprising and truly creative professional for one so young."<sup>16</sup> While it is uncertain that he possessed political aspirations at this time, it is

very likely that remaining even a few steps above a “gofer” was untenable for the “young dynamo.”

As executive producer, Ailes was in charge of the many important details necessary to run a television program on and off the air. Chief among his responsibilities, undoubtedly, was the difficult task of ensuring that both Mike Douglas and the guests were portrayed in their best possible light. This meant steering the conversation in certain pre-planned directions, using the most flattering of camera shots, and scripting the talent towards behaviors and/or actions guaranteed to impress the audience. Himself enchanted by the talent of stars and the ability of the camera to capture their magic, Ailes would keep mental notes of how certain guests could enthrall the studio audience and later used them as examples in his consulting practice. By 1967, the *Mike Douglas Show* was a staple of American daytime television.

All signs pointed towards success: the ratings were high, the quality of guests superior to its earlier days, and production had been relocated to Philadelphia where a better studio was built for the syndicated program. Additionally, television and its audiences were growing throughout the 1950s and 1960s. And as more Americans were able to purchase a set, both the public and a group of intellectuals began to ponder just how much power the visual medium held in its ethereal grasp. For those who felt that television was indeed a new, powerful force in modern society, Marshal McLuhan’s *The Medium is the Massage* (1967) was both a revelation and a confirmation of the electronic medium’s omnipotence.

### **McLuhan and Nixon**

In the book, the professor of philosophy at the University of Toronto makes a series of salient observations and predictions about how modern individuals interact with and are affected by

television. The work largely reflects a technologically determinist point of view positing that any change to the predominant medium of communication of society necessitates corresponding alterations to that society. McLuhan's thesis was that "The medium, or process, of our time – electric technology—is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life. It is forcing us to reconsider and reevaluate practically every thought, every action, and every institution formerly taken for granted." Thus, McLuhan believed that "The older, traditional ideas of private, isolated thoughts and actions" were being replaced by an "instantaneous electric information retrieval, by the electronically computerized dossier bank—that one big gossip column that is unforgiving, unforgetful and from which there is no redemption, no erasure of early 'mistakes'."<sup>17</sup> These changes, therefore, lead to further alterations in the number of individuals one felt intimate with and learned from. The intimate circle "has widened" into the form of a "global village... a simultaneous happening."<sup>18</sup> For McLuhan, electronic communication technology "created the mass" and killed the public as it became uniformly reactive, impatient, and influenced by a consolidated fountainhead of electronic media.<sup>19</sup> As a result, western society was placed "back in acoustic space," surrounded by a wall of audible sensations that formed a unbroken force upon our ears from which "We hear sounds from everywhere, without ever having to focus."<sup>20</sup> Observing the Cold War and the superpowers' actions, McLuhan also posited that the "total war" of the early twentieth century "has become information war. It is being fought by subtle electric informational media – under cold conditions, and constantly."<sup>21</sup>

McLuhan was not alone in reaching his opinion. Released in early 1967, *The Medium is the Massage* quickly became a best seller and created a cult following of interested readers looking to understand both television and contemporary mass society. Among these early adherents to

McLuhan's writings, and their implications, were a significant number of the Nixon campaign staff, specifically, the members who were often younger and/or uninvolved with Nixon's previous election bids. Among them were men like Len Garment, Harry Treleven, Dwight Chapin, William Gavin, and Ray Price. Moreover, the presidential candidate himself was approaching his campaign with deference towards television as the lens through which wide swaths of the voting public would evaluate him.<sup>22</sup> Illustrating just how important television was becoming to the candidate and a young cadre of influential staffers, Treleven circulated an excerpt of McLuhan's writings to the rest of the campaign as part of its mandatory reading. The texts discussed: (1) how Jack Paar brought about a different side of Nixon's personality on camera, (2) how several world leaders had used television to govern both their country and public opinion, and (3) how television had simultaneously consolidated individual perspective and blurred images. Trying to demystify the reasons why one looked more authoritative within the frame of a television camera, the campaign read McLuhan's texts in search of answers. After reading his book, they could not help but concur that "Even teachers on TV seem to be endowed by the student audiences with a charismatic or mystic character that much exceeds the feelings developed in the classroom or lecture hall."<sup>23</sup>

Conscious of the power of television and now aware of McLuhan's writings, the Nixon campaign became a cynical, technologically-determinist operation aiming to take advantage of the visual medium. Hoping to prevent a defeat partially caused by negative images of their candidate, the 1968 campaign was careful to cultivate an *image* of the "new Nixon." A strategy that relied on emotional appeals, direct broadcasts to the public, and controlled political events designed to elicit a specific, desired response; an electoral direction reflective of the candidate's view that the culture had become politicized since 1960. Tasked with creating this image, Harry Treleven (creative director of advertising) and Frank Shakespeare (the president of CBS-TV as

well as an unpaid, yet highly influential advisor) were granted greater leniency and authority in how the campaign spent its advertising resources, much to the chagrin of more traditional political figures.<sup>24</sup> As two of the top figures in the more image-focused cadre of staffers, their counsel would carry the day as long as Nixon was convinced that the “new Nixon” persona was a necessary precondition for victory in the age of television. Thus, before the Republican Convention in Miami, the focus on television was both a strategy and a constant consideration of the campaign.

One of these men new to politics was William Gavin, a speechwriter respected by Nixon for his advice as well as wordcraft, who frequently wrote – alongside others – of the need to revolutionize Republican politics through television. This necessitated going above the heads of the press and communicating directly with the public in ways that *appeared* to be authentic, spontaneous, and frank. Rather than allowing the voters to only see Nixon through the lens of the adversarial journalists and reporters, the campaign began to directly assault the airwaves and supplant their judgements with their own depictions of Nixon. Like Ailes, Gavin believed that “Instead of the medium using [Nixon], [Nixon] would be using the medium...instead of a glamorboy technique, instead of safety, be bold... Go on ‘live’ and risk all. It is the only way to convince people of the truth: that you are beyond rhetoric, that you can face reality.”<sup>25</sup> If anything, television had hurt Nixon in 1960 because “you were not yourself; it didn’t hurt the ‘real’ Nixon. The real Nixon can revolutionize the use of television by dynamically going ‘live’ and answering everything.” Although the campaign would not be as bold as Gavin recommended, the desired response he outlined from the voting public became the goal of the campaign writ large.

Many of the younger staffers along with Nixon felt that if the GOP was unwilling to do this, the consequences could be dire. They saw that a few charismatic figures within the Democratic Party were already benefitting from the effects of television. Indeed, the campaign had even started to rationalize Bobby Kennedy's popularity as largely the result of television of their electronically-influenced gaze brought on by television. "His screaming appeal to the tv generation, this certainly has nothing to do with logical persuasion; it's a total *experience*, a tactile sense...those who are aural-tactile conditioned are much more emotional, more tribal."<sup>26</sup> Attempting to respond, William Gavin reasoned, "it's the emotion that gets across, the posture, the sense of involvement and concern" when watching television. Urging the shift to a more sensational, emotion-based strategy to counter charismatic Democrats, Gavin also warned that argumentative strategies could be problematic:

Reason pushes the viewer back, it assaults him, it demands that he agree or disagree; impression can envelop him, invite him in, without making an intellectual demand, or a demand on his intellectual energies. He can receive the impression without having to think about it in a linear, structured way. When we argue with him, we demand that he make the effort of replying, we seek to engage his intellect, and for most people this is the most difficult work of all. The emotions are more easily roused, closer to the surface, more malleable. Get the voters to like the guy, and the battle's two thirds won.<sup>27</sup>

McLuhan tells us the new television environment takes us back to something like the old tribal balance of the sense. The sense of hearing is once more dominant. And among the characteristics of the "village," of the tribal milieu, are a heightened emotionalism, a susceptibility to rumor, a more unified, in the sense of de-specialized, existence. People who get their information by ear are more dependent on what they are told...

Referring to McLuhan in a later memo, Gavin accepted the professor's view that television was directly responsible for transforming forum of public discourse into that of a "global village" reliant upon the senses, rather than the intellect.<sup>28</sup> "The sense of hearing is once more dominant" and as a result, American culture would be increasingly characterized by "heightened emotionalism" and "a susceptibility to rumor." In other words, Republicans would have to execute glossier, and more sensationalist, media campaigns to win because "People who get their information by ear are more dependent on what they are told."<sup>29</sup>

In the highly tumultuous election year of 1968, the central strategy of the Republican candidate was to make voters feel *comfortable* with Nixon. Policy would have to take a back seat until after the election. Additionally, the campaign was conceptualizing the public – as a later conservative media figure coined it – as “dittoheads” whom they had to reach before liberal opinions were considered as the result of other media reaching them first. In effect, Nixon believed that if he was to surmount the bias of the media *and* the scorn of the liberal establishment, then a strategy that directly reached the people was ultimately necessary. Indeed, television was the perfect instrument for this exact strategy. Speaking with David Frost years later about his second presidential campaign, Nixon admitted that the members of the silent majority who voted for him “had been moved by what was, I must admit, an emotional appeal, a patriotic appeal.”<sup>30</sup> Consequently, it was emotionally charged and divisive media tactics which allowed their conservative vision to win electorally. With the added benefit of hindsight, Nixon also reflected that his victory revealed: “that maybe the American people aren't as soft, or let me say, are not as susceptible to media brainwashing as some of us have thought.” In that same interview, Nixon also warned his successors about the dangers of acting in the traditional mold of Presidential behavior concerning their relationship with the media. “I do know this: if a president when the tough calls have to be made doesn't take his case to the people, *over the heads* of the media, if necessary, he is going to be chopped down.” In short, the 1968 election of Richard Nixon to the presidency could serve as a roadmap to winning elections in the age of television. And even though one had to resort to emotional appeals and media gimmicks, it was a communication strategy that worked nonetheless.

## **Nixon Meets Ailes**

On January 15, 1968, the most significant guest of Ailes's career stopped by the *Mike Douglas Show*. The guest, who was already in a bad mood, was none other than the likely presidential candidate, Richard M. Nixon. Lamenting about the debased state of American popular culture, Nixon remarked, "It's a shame a man has to use gimmicks like this to get elected." In the process of rehabilitating his public image, Nixon had stopped by the dimly lit studio located in downtown Philadelphia to directly reach – and impress – the seven million housewives watching at home. Comfortable with the direction of the conversation and assuming the air of some rather important, Ailes retorted as he leaned back in his chair, "Television is not a gimmick, and if you think it is, you'll lose again."<sup>31</sup> Although other twenty-seven-year-olds would have been more deferential when talking to a possible GOP presidential nominee, Roger Ailes was now comfortable with asserting himself when trying to intrigue his audience. Emerging from his office an hour later with a satisfied grin, Ailes shook his head as he told his colleague, "I may have just shot myself in the foot or gotten myself another job."

When Richard Nixon and Roger Ailes conversed for an hour on the importance of television, the young producer must have appeared as someone who could easily fit alongside the other staffers. Like the image-focused staffers he was to join, Ailes had advised Nixon that television was more than a gimmick because it "has completely changed our political process. It has changed whom we elect, how we elect and even why we elect someone."<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, as a leading producer with experience in capturing pleasant and seemingly authentic personalities, Ailes constituted a valuable asset in any image-focused campaign. His work in television had taught him that persuasion was only effective, in Raymond Price's words, "if we can get the people to make the emotional leap." Once hired, his voice would join a chorus of like-minded

staffers who cynically, but perhaps realistically, held that the chemistry of politics was between “the voter and the image of the candidate... that the response is to the image, not to the man... It’s not what’s there that counts, it’s what’s projected... what the voter receives.”<sup>33</sup>

Although contemporary journalists maintain that Ailes was responsible for getting Nixon to reevaluate the importance of television, the choice to hire him was itself the product of an already existing emphasis on the medium. The campaign had embraced McLuhan’s notion that “A new form of ‘politics’ is emerging” and that “The living room has become a voting booth.”<sup>34</sup> Ailes’s largest contribution to the Nixon campaign was producing the slick “Nixon in the Arena” program which was done on a regional basis and conducted with the perfection one could expect from a seasoned television producer. The program ingeniously put Nixon on center stage (to depict the candidate subliminally as a gladiator) in a televised town hall format in which the audience members were hand selected by the state Republican Party. Answering unscreened questions from a set of four-panel members, Richard Nixon was genuinely on his feet as he beat back the panel and won the admiration of the studio audience. The airing of each taping was live since a degree of suspense was central to depicting Nixon as able to court, then conquer, any possible danger.

The other key event Ailes produced for the campaign was a series of live telethons during the final week of the election. Ironically, one of these events may have somewhat marred his image with the Nixon brain trust since he had shown up to the taping on the eve of the election with a broken leg, the result of a skydiving accident the day before. Similar to the “Nixon in the Arena” concept, Nixon would answer questions in a Q&A format. This time the event was much more scripted due to the election being so close – in terms of polling and days. Ailes described the set-up as follows, “Keyes [a writer on the comedy show *Laugh-In*] has a bunch of questions

Nixon wants to answer. He's written them in advance to make sure they're properly worded. When someone calls with something similar, they'll use Keyes' question and attribute it to the person who called."<sup>35</sup> From the studio's control room, with a leg in a bucket of ice and a bottle of pain pills, Ailes chomped at the cameramen and ensured a smooth operation.

Despite being hired for a technical role, Ailes began to angle for more influence on Nixon and his circle of advisors. This translated into an effort to portray himself as an authority on both television and the new "living room politics." For example, just after November's close victory, he compiled a lengthy document titled "Confidential Report- Television President Richard M. Nixon" which revealed his thinking around this time:

Television will play a major role in the Presidency of Richard M. Nixon. Whether the administration acts or reacts to it is entirely up to Mr. Nixon and his key advisors. To whatever extent possible, they should make a conscious effort to control Mr. Nixon's image on TV. When it is necessary to run for re-election, it will be the public's composite impression of the President (formed over four years) that will influence them. Television was used well in this campaign, but in four years it will have to be better.<sup>36</sup>

Besides rehashing something the campaign had already accounted for; the document outlines a list of sixteen "thoughts I've had about the TV planning which I think should be implemented" and which Ailes was more than "glad to elaborate in person" if asked. As ambitious as they were unsolicited, the recommendations included shooting a "Day in the life of the President", using "key administration people" on TV shows to "carry the administration's point of view," developing "young TV stars of the Republican Party," building "local shows for distribution" around loyal representatives, and using TV to "enlist support for Cabinet members" by working "on their TV images." Even the President himself was expected to pitch in by offering "Progress reports to the Nation" which would have been, "[i]n effect, Mr. Nixon's own TV show." If a response was sent to Ailes concerning his prospective ideas about White House television, it was not filed within any official communication channels. With fellow staffers making the transition from the campaign to working in the White House and his prospects in politics in limbo, Ailes

must have penned the document as an informal application to continue as the administration's television man. However, unfortunately for Ailes, Nixon began to centralize image and media relations management around himself, H.R. Haldeman his political lieutenant and future Chief of Staff, and opposition researcher Pat Buchanan once the November victory was secured.

Not content to sit idle, Ailes established REA Productions Inc. and based its offices in New York City (former home of the Nixon campaign HQ). From here, Ailes worked to establish a lucrative cash revenue using what he had learned in the election while also penning several letters to the administration. Most of these letters had a casual tone and were designed to remind the top brass of Nixon's brain trust that Ailes possessed an understanding of the administration's objectives as well as his own expertise on matters concerning television and image.<sup>37</sup>

Further complicating the picture is the fact that Ailes was officially a consultant for the Republican National Committee, but felt unappreciated and largely confined to small projects. Even worse, Ailes found himself in the RNC Deputy Chairman Jim Alison's crosshairs, a situation ostensibly stemming from the official's position in a competing consultancy under his former campaign superior, Harry Treleaven. Not one to shy away from a fight in which he smelled blood; Ailes reached out directly to Alison. In his letter, which he then forwarded to the administration, he first questioned why Jim Alison had been conducting a smear campaign against REA Productions, and that if he had been misinformed the reasons why they simply could not patch things up and work together for the benefit of the GOP. One would venture to guess that the RNC had kept Ailes on its payroll into 1969 at the behest of certain figures within the administration who wanted to decide if they needed him in the future; as was the case when Ailes helped to produce the White House's broadcast of the Apollo 11 moon landing.<sup>38</sup> Yet, there must have been some unhappiness about this ad-hoc situation because Nixon himself

concluded that “we need a part or full-time TV man on our staff for the purpose of saying that my TV appearances are handled in a professional basis.”<sup>39</sup> Particularly vexing for the president were the technical and confidence issues that arose when he was attempting to recreate the slick, understated pageantry of the campaign. Nixon wanted “the very best professional advice” for when he appeared on camera. Without direction, Nixon worried about even the smallest of minutia when on television.<sup>40</sup> Even though Ailes was quite willing to act as Nixon’s lead producer at this time, Roger Ailes was considered to be more of a technical expert by Nixon throughout their relationship.

This state of limbo was reflective of the administration’s relationship with television in general. It lacked confidence and expertise to completely centralize image-making and be satisfied with the result. Nonetheless, it desired to continue the slick image-making practiced on the campaign trail while lamenting having to do so.<sup>41</sup> So, when Haldeman was explicitly tasked in December 1969, with finding a “TV man” he reached out to Roger Ailes for his thoughts on the administration’s use of television.<sup>42</sup> Luckily for Haldeman, Ailes had never stopped pining for a job within the administration since the election had concluded a year earlier. Indeed, Ailes had even penned a letter that gave the kind of detail-oriented advice Nixon ostensibly sought just the day after the president’s request was written in December 1969.<sup>43</sup> Responding to Ailes’s letter, Haldeman invited him to the White House to discuss ideas of how the administration could improve its broadcasts.<sup>44</sup> Desperate for a producer and Roger Ailes appearing to be the best choice, Ailes’s admission to become a part of the White House happened a year and a month after the campaign.

Now sought for his services, and to some degree his input, Roger Ailes wrote another ambitious report, marked it as confidential, and sent it off to Haldeman. Learning from his

experience with the 1968 memo, the new report was much more comprehensive as well as explicit in the structure of possible White House television operations. The plan called for a sweeping – yet tightly-controlled – presence on the airwaves regarding news coverage, press conferences, speeches, major events, appearances on popular shows, films, and the ideas laid out in his 1968 memo. Ailes also stated that the scheme was “contingent upon you appointing a person to be responsible who can organize and supervise it, who knows the answers and where to find the answer and who is always ‘thinking’ and presenting ideas for you to use.” Luckily for Haldeman, Ailes had just the person in mind for such an undertaking.

As we discussed, I believe the White House should not employ a full-time top-notch creative television producer. Even if the best people were available and affordable, it seems to me that an excellent job can be done if you have a TV consultant of the above caliber on call. I am proposing that you use me in this capacity because you know my work, I know your problems, I'm dedicated to the President on a personal and political basis, and I realize that in this type of work there is no margin for error.<sup>45</sup>

Unlike the previous report, the December 1969 memo was received with interest and considered by top-level staff. In a letter dated January 7, 1970, from Haldeman to Nixon, the Chief of Staff relayed the proposal and recommended going ahead with the proposal “as generally outlined by Roger.”<sup>46</sup> Haldeman even gave Ailes his support, if only temporarily. “I think Ailes is probably the best man for this job, at least for the present time. He has as much talent and experience in this field as anyone we are likely to find, and he has the plus of working knowledge of you and your staff.” After reading the memo and pondering the best way forward, Nixon put an x on the line denoting his approval.

However, as Ailes jumped to make the changes he thought necessary, the temporary nature of his position and his domineering nature started to ruffle feathers within the White House. Both the Special Assistant to the President Dwight Chapin and White House Press Secretary Ronald L. Ziegler disliked the attempt to centralize White House television operations

under someone who was not ultimately responsible to the press office.<sup>47</sup> But in Ailes's calculations the approval of Haldeman and Nixon was what mattered most, and he felt secure as long as he was deemed useful to them. Furthermore, Ailes began networking outside of the White House by advising other Republican officials, like Senator Bob Packwood, on their public image. In a letter to the Ranking Member of the Senate Committee of Banking Wallace F. Bennett, Senator Packwood gushed over Ailes's ability to consult on image making. "I simply wanted to tell you what a great job he did for me in setting up this appearance. Nothing was left unprovided or unthought of. In my estimation, whatever we're paying him is probably not half enough." Impressed with how effective Ailes's help was, the senator presciently decided that:

if we're not taking full advantage of his advice, talent and service, no matter what it might cost us to take full advantage of them, then I think we're missing a great opportunity to learn from someone who could teach most all Republicans a great deal about techniques that are critical for our future successes, both individually and as a party.<sup>48</sup>

Yet, the praise of even a Republican senator could not stop Ailes's status from languishing in limbo. Paid by the RNC to help Republicans at large yet primarily spending his time at the White House when in DC, Roger Ailes's position was seen by Ron Ziegler as having the potential to "embarrass the admin."<sup>49</sup> Other memos from 1970 highlight a sort of contradictory relationship of dependence and ambivalence the White House had towards Ailes. On the one hand, they needed him to settle issues regarding lighting, podiums, Nixon's appearance, and background issues that arose when shooting White House tapings. On the other hand, many staffers were annoyed with his requests for expensive lighting setups, his availability as an on-call consultant, and his attempts to place his men in the television assistant position. In brief, as long as television was important, the administration had to keep Ailes around, at least within arm's reach.

**Capitol News Service**

But to characterize Ailes's contributions as tangential to the White House's television strategy or operations is misleading. From 1968 through 1970, Ailes was intimately involved with all matters of White House television and very often a leading voice on how the administration could innovate or craft new types of programming favorable to the GOP. Another idea that the Nixon administration sought Ailes's advice on was a memo titled "A Plan For Putting the GOP on TV News" which Nixon credited to political adviser Charles Colson.<sup>50</sup> Known inside the administration as Nixon's "hitman" and by the press as the "evil genius of an evil administration," Colson self-described his value in the eyes of Nixon: "I was willing ... to be ruthless in getting things done."<sup>51</sup> Limited to the top inner circles of the White House due to the confidential nature of the administration and possible backlash inherent in the plan, the memo was sent to Roger Ailes for his thoughts its feasibility. As a result, Ailes's handwriting can be found throughout its pages allowing us to assume that the memo is the most reliable window into Ailes's education as well as the media strategies being considered in the summer of 1970. Like its title, the contents of the plan are laid out in a straightforward manner.

For 200 years the newspaper front page dominated public thinking. In the last 20 years that picture has changed. Today television is watched more often than people read newspapers. than people listen to radio. than people read or gather any form of communication. The reason: People are lazy. With television you just sit--watch--listen. The thinking is done for you. As a result more than half the people now say they rely on television for their news. Eight out of 10 say they tune in radio or TV news at least once daily.<sup>52</sup>

In total, the memo reveals to us the degree to which Nixon's close advisors held both a genuine understanding of the centrality of television within the information networks of the American people and a deep cynicism towards the public regarding its consumption of television news. Additionally, it speaks to the intense desire by the administration to infiltrate television news content using pre-established stations. According to the mindset presented throughout the memo, the GOP was at an informational and communicative disadvantage precisely because it wasn't

able to "balance", or rather control, the message within the news coverage that aired in the living rooms across America. Ailes particularly agreed with this diagnosis of Nixon's problem and added similar statistics which found that "29% [of adults] rely only on TV, 59% rely primarily on TV, [and] 44% say TV is more believable than any other medium."<sup>53</sup> Particularly notable is Ailes's observation that "44% say TV is more believable than any other medium." Hence, building a different news service was key to providing "pro-Administration, videotape, hard news actualities to the major cities of the United States." The document also provides proof that some members among the upper echelons of conservative strategic circles were urging a shift away from newspapers and the written word as their preferred way to reach the masses of the American public, and thus, influence public opinion. Instead of lamenting the necessity of this approach, the memo embraced it.

Indeed, the memo was specifically written in order to take advantage of this perceived dynamic of casual news consumption. The author believed that precisely because "[p]eople are lazy," the Nixon administration or the GOP must create its own national news service which can "balance" – or more precisely counteract – network news's influence upon public opinion. If "[t]he thinking is done for you" when watching the TV, then is it not imperative to have your own TV presence from which you can distribute stories which don't suffer from the same biases as the big three networks? Viewed through the lens of the zero-sum game of partisan politics, the conservatives would forever be at a disadvantage unless the GOP also established itself as a force on television.

To accomplish this task of disseminating "pro-Administration, videotape, hard news actualities to the major cities of the United States," the memo outlines the specific logistical requirements necessary for implementation, including: (1) equipment, (2) technical and

professional help, and (3) processing and delivery of the footage. Much of the content of the memo is spent discussing these aspects of the plan in intricate details – and in specific dollar amounts – necessary to produce the service across the country.<sup>54</sup> The locality-oriented nature of the plan is especially noteworthy because it illustrates just how ambitious the news service would have been. "Network television news is only half the story. People are also concerned about their localities. As a result, TV news is one-half network, one-half local." Thus, the numbers budgeted in the plan represented the estimated cost of setting up a public opinion influence operation in the nation's top 40 population centers, which would have generated a "reach over 75%" of the adult population according to Ailes.

In short, the memo's existence speaks to a vision of politics in which winning political debates in the minds of the public depended on influence over what the public consumes in its media diet. Hence, special attention would be placed on the visual medium of television, which according to the study mentioned earlier by Roger Ailes, was seen as the most reliable news at this time. In effect, the author of the memo and Ailes are arguing that television is actually a vehicle through which to fight Nixon's electoral enemies, the media itself being one of them. This is done by creating an alternative information ecosystem that people will subsequently trust unthinkingly. Therefore, the purpose of this plan was not to just simply offer an alternative point-of-view different from that of the networks, but rather to effectively circumvent and limit the perceived influence of the big networks upon the public's political opinions.

Another logistical factor discussed in the memo is a reliance on GOP officials in Washington to serve as an originating source of news material. The author points out that to make any news at all, the administration must try to generate stories that are of a "national priority" since there won't even be favorable coverage without the prerequisite national interest

in the stories themselves. The author of the memo then writes that since "Senators and Representatives are newsmakers of importance to their localities," GOP elected officials would be the natural originators of pro-administration news material.<sup>55</sup> Presumably, news coverage would start with these officials' legislative actions (speeches, news conferences, debates, discussion of legislation, etc.) from which engineers make edits to film that caters to a corresponding media market. This footage would then be given to the regional affiliates in a reciprocal relationship where local stations who did not have the resources to base reporters and the necessary equipment in Washington received "news from Washington" in exchange for the GOP getting pro-administration content aired in local markets.

It was assumed that this national-based mechanism of distribution would be effective precisely because it was able to take advantage of specific new stories – and wider GOP efforts – pertinent to each corresponding locality, while still maintaining a connection to the larger national debate on an issue. In the margins, Ailes wrote that this operation should organize itself through a "special program" with interviews of the newsmakers, superimposed titles and names on the screen (a production flourish then still uncommon for network television news, let alone local stations), and multiple cameras. In summation, the memo writes, "With Videotape Insert, [the local reporter] will be able to read the lead paragraph of wire copy -- and say, 'In Washington, our Senator XXXXX told WXYZ-TV....' and the next thing you see is Senator talking.... IF HE HAS BEEN EDITED DOWN TO THE REMAINING 40 SECONDS." Hence, you would assume the story presented on television was a genuine creation of your local news station in which you placed some degree of trust based on your own familiarity with the channel.

Near the end of the memo, Ailes writes that the usefulness of this plan rests in its avoidance of the "censorship, [as well as] the priorities and prejudices of network news selectors

and [its] disseminators." Again, this comment suggests that the purpose of the plan was to fight against any negative coverage which could either damage Nixon's image or cause the public to view him unfavorably. The document also represents a belief, from the administration and its strategists, of a cynical view of electoral politics in which one's image is more important than one's actions in regard to their effect on public opinion. More importantly, it encapsulates McLuhan's view of politics as being subservient to the realities of modern technologies.

Circulating among Nixon's top advisors, the memo was discussed and considered by men as important as Haldeman and by Nixon. As a piece of history, it illustrates the extent to which the administration was considering an alternative method of reaching the public due to the intense and mutual distrust that existed between the White House and the national press corps. Its contents thoroughly unveil not only a political cynicism but a desire to directly influence public opinion through television. While not pursued past preliminary discussion, we can conclude that "*A Plan For Putting The GOP on TV News*" demonstrated the extent to which Nixonian electoral strategy had become intertwined with media strategy. Again, this plan makes clear the centrality of television in the Nixonian conception of politics. Frustrated by the power of cultural liberalism, Colson's plan was an ambitious maneuver to outflank the network news with a conservative option masquerading as one's local news service.

Despite being relied on for his expertise and opinions on sensitive matters, Nixon's opinion of Ailes soured throughout the winter of 1970-1971 whilst the former producer's ambitions for White House television continued to blossom. The reasons for this appear to be threefold: (1) the publishing of Joe McGinnis's book which, according to Nixon, gave too much credit to his image consultants and showed the manufactured quality of the president to the public, (2) losses in the 1970 midterm elections, and (3) Ailes's ambitions for raising the profile

of one particular White House figure, Martha Mitchell. Proposed in both writing and personal meetings, Ailes's ideas for raising her media star further complicated the administration's relationship with a wunderkind who either impressed or induced anxiety in his contacts due to the boldness and implications of his plans. Adding to the complexity of this situation, White House officials simultaneously attempted to coopt his ideas at the very same moment in which they were beginning to exclude him from the center of presidential power; a task deemed sensitive because of the perception that Ailes could prove to be either self-serving or petty enough to damage the administration's image if he was not dismissed on amicable terms. Indeed, the fear of Ailes causing "disaster" as a result of his knowledge of the White House's plans for television and "any bad feelings" was acute enough to warrant a special meeting to "let him down" without incident.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, McGinnis's portrayal of Ailes as a genius in political television only exacerbated the potential splash the former producer could make in the Washington news cycle. Thus, Ailes's stature was relegated to that of a drifting satellite by the end of 1970 which officials sought to periodically utilize on their own behalf.

From the perspective of H.R. Haldeman who considered him still useful, Ailes continued to be a unique asset since he constituted the most daring television man willing to produce content that they also approved of. It is ironic that in the very same moment in which President Nixon began to consider Ailes to be "second rate man" and a liability, he nonetheless constituted the lead innovative voice regarding matters of television within the circle of White House advisors.<sup>57</sup> Just months after pitching the pro-administration "Capitol News Service," the former daytime television producer repeatedly recommended a proto-reality program centered around publicizing the life – and more importantly *the views* – of Martha Mitchell.

## **Martha Mitchell**

Having already established her Watergate apartment, and its dinner parties, as one of the hottest tickets for socialites in America's capital, Martha was very much a woman on the rise in both the press and local Republican circles by 1970. Part of the reason for this ascendance was a broader reluctance from leading GOP officials to hold the fashionable dinner party so important to social life in the capital. At these dinner parties, Martha Mitchell often captured the attention of her guests as a charismatic host who seemed to sparkle amongst an otherwise drab conservative officialdom. However, what initially caught the attention of both the media and Ailes was her penchant for controversial comments. As a result of the media's proclivity to seek out controversial opinions, Mrs. Mitchell debuted nationally when her comments on a Vietnam peace protest were broadcasted on television in November of 1969 as she was ostensibly representative of the administration's own thoughts.

In this broadcast, Martha Mitchell expressed her opinion in a characteristically brusque manner: "As my husband has said many times, some of the liberals in this country, he'd like to take them and change them for Russian Communists."<sup>58</sup> While such comments would have passed unnoticed if made by an average conservative housewife, what made the episode so inflammatory was the fact that the husband mentioned was the Attorney General of the United States. Overnight, Martha Mitchell became what *TIME* characterized as "a nine-day wonder" dominating the political scene.<sup>59</sup> John Mitchell attempted to quiet the circus-like atmosphere around the coverage of his wife's comments by telling reporters: "If you will transpose the word 'liberal' into 'violence-prone militant radicals,' I would be delighted to change them for some of the academically inclined Marxist Communists." However, as *TIME* observed a year later, "Instead of fading... the wonder [that is Martha Mitchell] has grown."

Nor was the growth of media coverage around someone who admitted in her youth that “I love to wind my tongue up, and I love to let it go” hard to fathom. *Life* magazine concurred with this self-assessment, writing “she obviously enjoys talking...[a]lmost from the day she and the Attorney General arrived in Washington... she has gleefully peppered the air with her extreme opinions – and wound up sharing, with Spiro Agnew, the distinction of being readily identified in headlines by her first name alone.”<sup>60</sup> Like contemporary conservative media personalities, it seemed as if her only end goal was to maintain her place in the public sphere by indulging in rhetoric which they know to be controversial and popular to their personal supporters. Throughout 1970 and 1971, Martha Mitchell continued to capture headlines through her telegenic charisma and populist attacks on American liberals. The following are a few examples of quotes which caught the attention of the media and established her public presence as a voice of the “Silent Majority”:

On the protest culture of the 1970s: "Any time you get somebody marching in the streets, it's catering to revolution. It started with the colored people in the South. Now other groups are taking to the streets. We could have worked out the integration battle without allowing them to march. My family worked for everything we had. We even have a deed from the King of England for property in South Carolina. Now these jerks come along and try to give it to the Communists."<sup>61</sup>

On university: “the academic society is responsible for all of our troubles in this country... The professors in every institution of learning... they are totally responsible for the sins of our children.”<sup>62</sup>

A few things are worth noting here: (1) these public comments were sanctioned by the White House, at least to some degree, and reflected a broader effort to send direct messages to the American public; (2) this unapologetic “truth-telling” resembles the contemporary rhetoric of the Fox News Channel which Ailes, an admirer of Martha, helped to produce in order to provide a reliable stream of such verbal content; and (3) her media approach is similar to the political brand of contemporary conservative punditry. What is most remarkable about these comments, however, in the context of today is their similarity in tone, rhetoric, and contempt to those made virtually every day on the Fox News Channel.

Initially sanctioned and encouraged by Nixon, who referred to Martha as “spunky,” her political role was explicitly defined by the president to “give’em hell” on the cultural front.<sup>63</sup> Although she did find it taxing to balance her socialite obligations with the duties of a political celebrity-pundit, Martha found the public spotlight and influence cathartic. She would even privately revel in the fact that “I have so many roles to play!” on behalf of the White House, and more importantly, on the behalf of promoting her own self-image as someone who was worth listening to. As a woman who held dreams of becoming an actress as a child, it is undoubtedly clear that Mitchell loved every bit of the newfound fame and attention given to her by journalists looking for a “hot take.” Throughout 1970, Martha received letters “at the rate of thousands a month” from individuals who not only agreed with what she had to say but also admired the relatable manner in which she said it. One woman from New Jersey lauded her comments, writing “I think you are absolutely great. You call a spade a spade.” A man from Ohio saw her comments as exemplary, urging her to start a national organization in which other women could follow her lead in supporting “the American cause.” Undeniably, the “Mouth of the South” had left her mark on the American public.

Within a year of her comments denigrating the protesters as radical communists, Martha Mitchell registered a 76 percent recognition rating among the American population and was even featured on the cover of TIME magazine.<sup>64</sup> Cognizant of both the popular appeal of Martha and her ability to get the press to cover her opinions on the American left, Roger Ailes came to believe that a television program around her life presented an unparalleled opportunity for American conservatism. Such programming would inaugurate a “pro-Administration” televised beachhead in the culture war while simultaneously offering entertainment for the very same housewife Ailes molded the *Mike Douglas Show* to appeal to. Seeing the value of such an

operation for both the Nixon administration and his own career, Ailes personally and repeatedly appealed to several administration officials for such a program. Besides his usual contacts of Lawrence Higby and Haldeman, Ailes continuously sought a meeting with the Mitchells in early 1971 to pitch the program. Unable to make headway and growing frustrated with the effort, he wrote to Higby, "I'm going to attempt another meeting next week with John and Martha Mitchell to discuss that program. I saw her on the 'The Today Show' and I am more convinced than ever that this program should be done and would be very helpful to the administration."<sup>65</sup> Below is a segment from said appearance:

**Martha Mitchell:** If I had a little soap box and could go around the country. I think I would be inclined to start out on these revolutionary people in this country that I think should be run out. And I don't believe in them: I don't think that a democratic country, how democratic it may be, should tolerate people that want drastic overthrow of the government of this country.

**Barbara Walters:** Which for example? What groups of people?

**Martha Mitchell:** Well, it's hard to say, because there's a whole list of subversive groups and people in this country that I do not have my fingers on.... If I singled out one. I'd like to cover this whole group who are violent.

**Barbara Walters:** What do you think we should do?

**Martha Mitchell:** Throw them out. Kick them out. Send them to Cuba. Mr. Castro has emptied all his prisons over there. And those are the unfortunate ones that we've gotten. We have gotten a lot of good ones. But you take the return trip on that. And what happens? They go dead-head back to Cuba. Now, in these planes all these revolutionaries, if they want that type of government, can get out of America and go to Cuba. (Today Show appearance Feb 1971)<sup>66</sup>

Fixated on the opportunity to deploy such an unapologetically conservative weapon in the culture wars, Ailes was determined to push this issue with all the influence he had left. After all, here was a telegenic media star who felt no compunction when offering opinions that were as populist as they were conservative. If nothing else, Martha Mitchell knew how to speak in a manner that both captured the news cycle and resonated with large masses of resentful White working class unable to voice their opinion in the mainstream media of the 1970s. However, the timing of his maneuvers could not have been more inopportune.<sup>67</sup> Nixon and Haldeman were increasingly finding the once useful Mrs. Mitchell both an object of scorn and envy as she became *the* most prominent female Republican in Washington D.C.<sup>68</sup> For a conservative

administration that prided itself on its sober approach to governance and an ability to control its image, the growth of Martha Mitchell's profile and political significance presented an imminent danger. While the administration was initially thrilled to see comments made in the press which reflected their own disdain of American liberals, it had long been apparent that the Attorney General's wife enjoyed being an independent voice for her its own sake. This aspect of her character was not hidden from the public, as Mrs. Mitchell herself had boldly stated "I love to do devilish things" in her cover story featured in the October 1970 edition of LIFE Magazine. The brash and populist rhetoric was part of the appeal for much of white America. Worse yet, in this same issue of LIFE, the reporter noted that the "flamboyant general style" and "spectacular verbal outbursts," which led members of the silent majority to applaud her actions, had long "turned off a good many people in Washington."

Even more damning in Nixonian Washington was the open secret, known throughout political and media circles, that "[c]abinet members and high Administration officials" as well as "their wives tend to wince at the latest Martha Mitchell episode."<sup>69</sup> But perhaps the most "devilish" *faux pas* done by Mrs. Mitchel, in the mind of the president, was her tendency to listen in on, and then convey to her favorite media contacts, her husband's conversations with other Nixon officials. For a media-obsessed White House highly sensitive to leaks and the appearance of incompetency, this action represented an immensely embarrassing breach of security.<sup>70</sup>

This assessment of Martha as a potential liability was not unique to the administration. For example, during a 1970 election fundraiser, a fellow Republican brought her on stage by announcing: "World War I had its Sergeant York; World War II, George Patton. But we have a much more dangerous fighter in our battle with the left, and she is even sometimes dangerous to the other sie [sic]."<sup>71</sup> Adding to this sentiment, the Attorney General publicly referred to her as

his own “unguided missile.”<sup>72</sup> Consequently, if one considers (1) the timing of Ailes’s efforts to push a program featuring Martha Mitchell as its star (and thus, the female face of the White House) and (2) the late February meeting in which Haldeman relates Nixon’s personal desire to move on from Ailes; the White House decision to limit Ailes’s influence within its media operations appears to partly a punishment for such a reckless proposition.

Despite Nixon’s wariness, Haldeman believed Ailes remained a valuable asset to the administration. Nixon’s chief of staff sought to find a way to keep Ailes on the payroll to avoid creating another “unguided missile” in the form of a disgruntled employee. So, there was a conscious effort to circumscribe his White House presence to what can best be described as an “on-call” basis on a limited set of matters (the most important being developing television shows). For instance, even in the meeting in which Haldeman personally told Ailes, “We have not been able to build the relationship between you and the President which we had hoped to see,” Haldeman was sufficiently intrigued by Ailes’s ideas for forming “pro-Administration” programming options. Responding directly to the Mitchell idea, the meeting’s memo outlined his thoughts on the matter, “there are undoubtedly a number of good show ideas which could be developed and placed on the air. This is in an area where we want to work with you and will cooperate completely.”<sup>73</sup> The listed ideas from which Ailes was pre-approved to develop were:

- 1) a new of type news panel
- 2) talk-interview type show
- 3) development of a TV series with pro-Administration plot

Overall, the effort to install Martha Mitchell as a conservative star is illustrative of the differences between the Republican elected elite and its media-minded avant-garde in postwar America. Though the historical record shows that Nixon and Haldeman had enjoyed, and to some extent encouraged Martha’s abrasive attacks on the counterculture, they were still circumscribed in the deployment of such a potent, and ultimately uncontrollable, political

weapon. As the events of Watergate would show, Martha Mitchell was too unwilling to not speak her truth even if it was at the expense of the administration to which she and her husband owed their public prominence. For Roger Ailes, however, the idea of unleashing an uncontrollable weapon against liberal Democrats presented enormous appeal and promise. As multiple memos show, Ailes was particularly keen on presenting the “Mouth of the South” to American television viewers. Revealing the generational and tactical differences between himself and the Nixon White House, the amplification of voices that were motivated by self-aggrandizement rather than by party loyalty marks a delineation of how elected-elite and conservative media figures conceived the limits (or lack thereof) of populist attacks. Furthermore, Martha Mitchell taught Ailes that an authentically unapologetic media personality willing to lob culturally conservative attacks on leftists and Democrats had an enormous audience in addition to boosting conservative voters’ morale. Lastly, this episode also demonstrates the first instance in which Ailes sought to use his television instincts to offer a media platform to actors who were divisive, aggressively anti-liberal, and most importantly, unconcerned with the elected elites’ political considerations and sensibilities.

### **Drifting Out of the Nixon Orbit**

Although Roger Ailes was eager to harness the power of telegenic and plain-speaking conservative punditry, his decreased status among White House advisors left him unable to push for ideas not already preapproved by either Nixon or Haldeman by 1971. Nor is it completely clear why Nixon had begun to consider Ailes second-rate. This author’s own guess is that there was most likely a combination of personality conflict (this is somewhat hinted at in Haldeman’s meeting notes with Ailes), dislike of Ailes’s role in McGinnis’s embarrassing exposé, and

Nixon's own continued frustration of how the White House managed television production (e.g. Ailes had "blew things pretty well" when producing a nomination announcement for a Supreme Court).<sup>74</sup> Nonetheless, Roger Ailes involvement with Republican electoral politics was largely confined to consulting on a modest number of political campaigns by the end of 1971. Yet, the 1970 mid-term elections would prove to be the high-water mark of any direct involvement in the electoral operations of the decade. Forced to look elsewhere for power and contracts, Ailes took greater advantage of the reputation created by *The Selling of the Presidency* once Bill Carruthers (the "Johnny Cash Show") and Mark Goode (the "Pat Paulsen Show") were hired by Nixon as his replacements in May of 1971.<sup>75</sup> In a two-part strategy reliant upon Ailes's reputation in both television and the world of politics, Roger Ailes & Associates maintained its efforts to produce popular television programs while its CEO simultaneously began to assert himself more aggressively as an expert in media relations and campaign consultancy, an opportunity that was only possible because McGinnis characterized Ailes as the wunderkind of Nixon's 1968 television strategy.

Luckily, the timing of this career move back to television was extremely fortuitous; the *Mike Douglas Show* was experiencing a popular resurgence – after its post-Ailes decline – with the American public. Being the producer most associated with the show's initial rise to prominence, the connection proved invaluable as it was largely responsible for keeping his reputation for successful programming afloat throughout the seventies despite a series of disappointing projects.<sup>76</sup> Maintaining his name as a winning brand required the image-conscious Ailes to strengthen both his message and profile within the worlds of political communications and entertainment. In a decade in which Ailes was professionally adrift from the centers of political power, he maintained relevance by ambitiously establishing differing personas. To those

in show business, he was a New York-based producer who could develop both Broadway plays as well as syndicated programming. To those in politics, he was the well-paid, young communications expert whose presence was growing amidst the national landscape of media-political consultants.

Roger Ailes did not waste much time securing these valuable personas for himself. In October 1971, he signed a contract with the Kaiser Broadcasting Corporation to conduct a series of one-day workshops for political candidates, their staff, and ad agents. These workshops were held in the six markets where Kaiser Group's UHF-TV stations were based: Boston, Philadelphia, Detroit, Cleveland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.<sup>77</sup> As the owner of several politically important FM-AM-TV stations, Kaiser stood to benefit from demonstrating the power and process of political communications and advertisements. Thus, these free sessions were themselves an advertisement of the media's potential role and its effectiveness in creating a successful political campaign.

Crucially, the choice to pay Ailes a sum in the "high five figures" for lectures on topics such as polling, financing and/or operating campaigns, devising television strategies, and the psychology of a "winning" campaign incalculably reinforced the consultant's reputation among those present as an expert on contemporary politics.<sup>78</sup> While Ailes did not actually possess intimate knowledge on such topics as financing and running electoral bids, his ambition to create for himself a seat in the annals of political-television power made his lack of qualifications mere details. Besides, his work in television had taught him that audiences often saw what they wanted to if one knew how to play the part well. Indeed, according to both the entertainment and television press who interviewed various regional collections of politicians who attended the workshops, Ailes's lectures were deemed to be as illuminating as they were interesting. *Variety*

noted that the former producer was an apt choice to discuss how television-based campaign strategies worked.<sup>79</sup>

Overall, this opportunity marks a rather critical moment for Ailes's career since it offered a chance to recover his confidence and political prominence. Rather than being consigned to slowly drifting out of the Nixon-White House orbit, Ailes found a lucrative way to present himself to 100-200 candidates, top campaign staffers, and important advertisers as a leader of political television. Perhaps the only drawback for Ailes was the fact that he had to offer his services to anyone who attended these workshops; this meant divulging, and teaching, his craft to his cultural enemy, liberal democrats. This was one of the few times, if not the only time, he has done so. Comfortable with the persona of a political-television prophet, Ailes propounded his philosophy and understanding of the medium to influential individuals in both television and politics. In six of the nation's largest media markets, he taught his audience the tenets of modern communications. Below are some of the most important lessons he taught his clients to keep in mind when speaking in public:

- (1) Take responsibility for the communication you send and the communication you receive. If there's misunderstanding either way, assume the responsibility for correcting it."<sup>80</sup>
- (2) Today, more than ever, we see that television, mass media, and the blooming of the Information Age have changed the way we communicate. For better and worse, we live in an age of exposure where electronic media can record, monitor, and broadcast our thoughts and actions. Whether we like it or not, society's views of people and ideas are shaped and influenced by the flickering images on television and other electronic screens worldwide."<sup>81</sup>
- (3) [I]t takes only seven seconds for you to make an impression on other people. Ours is an era in which both information and interpretation keep getting more tightly compressed. That seven seconds is crucial in the making and breaking of impressions, relationships, sales, and decisions that affect the direction of our lives."
- (4) Together we'll examine what I call the composite you. That composite makes up the total message you send to others, and it includes: the words you use, your voice, the way you move, the signals you send with your facial expressions, and your attitude."

Ailes's lessons generally taught his clients to think of themselves as the medium of their portrayal, and overall, they reflect how a television producer adapted his image-conscious approach to public and personal communication. Deeply influenced by the writings of Marshal McLuhan and his *The Medium is the Message*, Ailes also believed that society had drastically

changed as the result of electronic forms of communication – of which its visual manifestation, television was the most important. He believed that “As a result of TV, people today expect to be made comfortable in every communications situation. When someone speaks to them, they want to relax and listen just as they do when a TV professional entertains them in their living room.”<sup>82</sup> According to Ailes, people were not able to approach social situations otherwise, because “we are unconsciously judged by our audience against the standards set by David Letterman and Dan Rather.” Therefore, it was vital for capitalistic and electoral success to adapt oneself to performing as the best version of oneself.

To a television producer, the word “best” is something that changes according to – and is dependent on – one’s audience. Thus, Ailes advised clients to avoid behaviors that often caused a negative reflection of themselves: “stiffness,” “fear of failure,” “lack of humor,” “unclear speech direction,” and “lack of energy.” After all, a compelling individual ought to be a person whom you would not turn the channel away from. For this exact reason, Ailes routinely had his clients record themselves making public speeches or pitches for reviewing. Indeed, this was a tactic he used throughout his career with Mike Douglas, Richard Nixon, Dennis Wholey, Robert Taft Jr., Mitch McConnell, and George H.W. Bush.<sup>83</sup> After capturing the client, Ailes would then review the videotape at least once with the sound off; then, at least once with the sound on. Footage with the sound off allowed Ailes to see if the subject was adequately compelling on the subconscious level.<sup>84</sup> If one felt as if they wanted to “turn the channel” then the client was considered in drastic need of improvement. And therefore, the fundamentals of Ailes’s communication were visual, a distinction he made as a result of his belief that the audience gazes out before they begin to listen in.

Having established a visual baseline of performance, Ailes discouraged his clients to use any language which was too dry, boring, monotone, and/or intellectual. While most communications experts concur that speaking with a lack of enthusiasm or a monotone delivery is detrimental to retaining your audience's attention, Ailes was emphatic that a presentation too "intellectually oriented" was even worse. Not only would the speaker appear to be "talking down to this audience" but they would also create emotional barriers between themselves and the general population.<sup>85</sup> This, more importantly, prevents establishing a "rapport with listeners" and leaves the audience emotionally uninvested in the message being produced. In an age of digital and instant gratification, "If you don't communicate effectively you... won't live as fully as you should, nor will you achieve [your greatest] personal goals."<sup>86</sup> For these reasons, if your "Presentation of material is intellectually oriented," Roger Ailes believed that you committed one of the top three "Most Common Problems [of public communication]."<sup>87</sup> Therefore, Ailes perceived democratically-elected leaders as individuals who skillfully acted as polished, performative reflections of those audiences who controlled their chances of victory; as opposed to virtuous individuals who worked primarily for the betterment of the masses. Leadership and success required no virtue in a televised environment. In fact, these concepts could actually cost you the public's disapproval if one is perceived as being smug, egg-headed, or uptight.

According to Ailes, these images are exactly the sorts of characterizations that lead to Hubert Humphrey's 1968 presidential loss. When asked about Humphrey over the years in relation to his role in that election, Ailes would first offer that the former vice president was undoubtedly a "sweet man" as well as "a terribly nice guy." Nonetheless, the problem with Humphrey was that the vice president was just bad television. "When I was doing the Mike Douglas Show, I had him on. I like him... But when it got down to presidential politics, he began

to look like a cartoon.”<sup>88</sup> Even when not asked directly, Humphrey was the go-to example of what not to do for the rest of Ailes’s career. Whenever Roger Ailes discussed bad presidential images, Humphrey was eventually brought up. For example, when Joe McGinnis asked Ailes on *The David Frost Show*, “Aren’t you underrating the audience by saying that they could only have an attention span of two and half minutes?”<sup>89</sup> Ailes shot back, in his trademark combination of acerbity, smooth presentation, and conservative pugnacity, “No, not at all... they’re used to seeing it. Mr. Humphrey for instance gave an 11-minute answer during the campaign in which it got to the point where... he wasn’t sure what the question was anymore!” For Ailes, and a public which yearned for easy answers, the juxtaposition of a longwinded, intellectually inclined politician against a “straight-talking” fighter who is “calm in front of... viewers and understands television as a communicant process, not as a lecture hall process” stood only to benefit the Republican Party.<sup>90</sup>

Factoring in the tumult of 1968, Ailes considered Nixon hard to beat, “He’s got guts, he’s tough, he picked himself up by the bootstraps two or three times and came back won the prize... Nixon’s a doer, not a talker. I respect him... People have an intangible dislike for Nixon – but in a crisis, Nixon is the better man.” Although “Humphrey is a very warm and nice man... [he’s simply] not tough enough.”<sup>91</sup> For Ailes, the fighter who was also a winner was *the ideal* kind of candidate. According to this mindset, the clearest reason why the modern American liberal was a loser in the television age was the lack of personal grit. “I remember at another time, in Cleveland, I parked with these guys and they yelled ‘---- you, Humphrey...’ and he started crying and yelled back at them from his platform and shook his fist at them. He kind of went bananas on stage. He just lost his credibility as a President.” Besides offering an example of why Democrats lost in 1968, the anecdote is incredibly illustrative of how Ailes imagined the world.

The importance of controlling one's image in order not to appear fragile in public was never forgotten by the consultant. He would make sure to teach his clients to keep their cool, lest they appear weak, and to make sure their political opponents would lose their composure instead.

From his work on a daytime television set to his firsthand experience serving a President who tailored his messages to the silent majority, Ailes participated in and helped to drive the seismic changes to entertainment and politics which were being manifest through the medium of television and encouraged by their lowest common denominator, the audience's desires. He had appreciated, alongside Nixon, that large portions of the American public desired a champion who fought against what they deemed to be decaying forces of secular humanism and socialism. As a child, he had instinctually grasped that General Eisenhower was all the more compelling when juxtaposed against the figure of an intellectual Adlai Stevenson. And coming from a small union town in the Industrial Belt, he knew the quickest way to get the layman's approval – and trust – was to appear authentically homegrown by eschewing a vernacular which could be perceived as either intellectual or socially liberal. More importantly, Ailes believed that television had put an end to the era of “backroom politics” by democratizing the approval process from a political elite to a broader audience.<sup>92</sup> When asked for his thoughts on the 1972 election by the Boston Globe in May 1970, he could not have stressed the importance of television more forcefully. “If there's any future in the world, it's in television.”<sup>93</sup> For the self-made man from Warren, Ohio, everything came down to television. Indeed, his entire career and any power he held was due to this visual medium. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that this future CEO of Fox News thought that the promise of the future was held in the hands of those who would utilize it for their own purposes. Whether it was entertainment, education, or reestablishing small-town values in American culture, “It will come through TV...[because] Politics is power, and

communications is power, and unless we can put them together and make it work, the world will be fouled up [by secular humanism].” In short, the question of who effectively utilized television for political purposes was an existential arms race of the American culture wars.

### **Showbiz Blues**

Having parlayed his political connections with Nixon into a few lucrative contracts, a significant reputation, and a modest portfolio of national candidates, one could assume that the 1970s was going to be an easy decade for the career of Roger Ailes. However, this was not the case. The 1970s was a time for Ailes in which he was forced by external factors towards years of soul searching, experimentation, struggle, and reinvention for Ailes as for others. Throughout the decade, Ailes worked on projects which ultimately failed to become enduring successes. Among these projects were two cancelled television programs, an unaired pilot, and a less than mediocre off-Broadway show about the importance of ecology. The lack of sustainable success led to Ailes resigning himself to bolstering his credentials in the world of showbusiness rather than Washington. As a result, Ailes leapfrogged across the entertainment industry from one project to another.

For example, in 1971, Roger Ailes & Associates continued to find both political and entertainment work, but the public profile of its new clientele was significantly reduced. One of the few, if not the only, GOP electoral contracts signed by the company entailed the creation of televised commercials for a municipal office; Ralph Perk’s successful mayoralty bid in the city of Cleveland.<sup>94</sup> The job which must have brought Ailes some personal satisfaction since it marked the first election of a Republican to the city hall in several decades. Still, Ailes must have felt his star to be dimming as even hindsight clearly illustrates 1971 to be the nadir of his already storied career. Even in the realm of showbusiness, 1971 is notable due to its lack of any

significant television projects. Hoping to reverse his fortune in 1972, Ailes doubled down on cultivating his reputation as a consultant and began to experiment with different kinds of production work. Overall, the year reflected his deliberate endeavors to stay relevant and well-regarded, while his lack of clients encouraged an unremitting cultivation of the television wunderkind image. With his calendar empty in the election season of 1972, Ailes spent the campaign season disastrously trying to ingratiate himself among the liberal theatre scene of New York City with a play about ecology titled “Mother Earth.” However, the play flopped and was panned by critics as itself being a form of “pollution.” But if anyone knew Roger Ailes, this was only a minor setback.

Debuting in an off-off-Broadway theatre on February 13, 1973, his next project “The Hot 1. Baltimore” received a much more positive critical response than his debut.<sup>95</sup> Impressively, the play was labeled by critics as “a welcome addition to an otherwise spotty off-Broadway season,” traveled to other major cities, inspired two sitcom spin-offs, and even won the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for “Best American Play”.<sup>96</sup> Reinvigorated by financial success and critical acclaim in New York, Ailes optimistically went back to Cincinnati to pitch WCPO on his fourth talk-variety daytime series in the spring. However, the “John Wade Show,” in the end the program had a difficult time reaching broad syndication between the time it debuted on June 18 and its winter cancellation.<sup>97</sup> Nonetheless, throughout its production Ailes actively sought to grow his professional network in showbusiness by attending several important industry functions. For example, on February 8<sup>th</sup>, he attended the National Association of Television Program Executives and participated in an important panel; and on June 27<sup>th</sup>, he was elected to the Board of The Conference of Personal Managers (the nation’s oldest trade association for talent agents).<sup>98</sup> Proving the importance of timing for making ambitious maneuvers, these

positions were acquired early in the show's production, well before the industry realized that the project was another flop.

As the seventies progressed, it became clear that the most reliable revenue stream for "Ailes & Associates" was his consultancy and talent management services. These private services were conducted by a small group of intense and loyal employees whom Ailes looked upon and treated as close family. In their capacity as consultants, Ailes and his team primarily taught executives and politicians how to respond to media investigations, perform as their best selves, improve communication skill sets, resolve internal issues regarding problematic personalities, and navigate public scandals. In total, much of this activity required Ailes to perform techniques remarkably similar to those he advised, and witnessed, during Nixon's 1968 campaign albeit with a greater sense of personal influence in relation to his clients. Like in his days on the campaign trail, the audio and videotaping of clients was a prominent occurrence. And like in politics, clients were taught (1) to perform as their best selves, (2) be comfortable before an audience and a live camera, and (3) to analyze one's speaking habits in order to eliminate bad habits and/or performative obstacles.<sup>99</sup> By continuing to act as an advisor, communications instructor, and a public relations media consultant, Ailes effectively enabled himself to prosper as he built corporate connections despite his recent setbacks in showbusiness.

## **TVN**

These connections paid off as Ailes's name was continuously referred to prominent individuals and major corporations seeking a boost to their public profile and media operations. It was through this kind of personal and corporate consultancy that Ailes first began to work in the news industry. Hearing of Ailes & Associates' media savviness, and comfortable with its

CEO's Nixonian political inclination, Television News Inc. hired Ailes in early 1974 to help manage their public relations from their Manhattan office. Television News Inc. (TVN) was, in many ways, the culmination of the 1970s Nixonian conservative media strategy. The station was financially supported by right-wing philanthropist Joseph Coors explicitly to provide a more conservative option for mainstream news. The idea for the project was first pitched to Coors and his political lieutenant Jack Wilson by Robert Reinhold Pauley.<sup>100</sup> Forced out of the presidency of ABC-Radio in 1967 and frustrated by the direction of the networks towards political coverage, Pauley had spent 1968-1973 contemplating how to reverse the string of losses conservatives faced in the culture war as well as any drift towards liberalism by mainstream American institutions. To reverse this momentum, Pauley believed that Republicans needed to first address its proliferation. This meant "balancing" the news coverage distributed and aired by the big three networks of ABC, NBC, and CBS. Roaming around the conservative fringe after leaving ABC on less than amicable terms, Pauley was both a prominent Goldwater supporter and John Birch Society member.<sup>101</sup> Freed from the constraints of the networks and moderates alike, Pauley began to pitch plans of a conservative news network to possible financiers and rightwing donors. However, success remained elusive as it took four years to find someone who was sufficiently daring, wealthy, and conservative enough to lead such a venture.

Searching for nearly half a decade, the man he found who could finally realize his vision was the conservative scion Joseph Coors. Funding projects such as the Heritage Foundation and several other D.C.-based congressional organizations, Coors believed that TVN was the project most likely to have a lasting influence over the political scene.<sup>102</sup> The initial design is strikingly familiar to the blueprint laid out in "A Plan for Putting the GOP on the News." Local stations would purchase a steady stream of network-quality news shipped to them directly through air

transport, and thus an “independent” news service could be fashioned around local stations. Also, like the plan discussed within administration circles in 1970, the TVN news service would be controlled by individuals (in this case Coors, Pauley, and Jack Wilson) who could ensure the bolstering of the conservative political interpretation of news within American society and culture. And similar to the “fair and balanced” Fox News, TVN was packaged with apolitical slogans. For example, company representatives stated in its debut press release that it had “no philosophical axes to grind” and several presidents of TVN maintained that “We tell both sides.”<sup>103</sup> By “leaving viewers to decide”, Coors and his associates believed that “the American public” was intelligent enough to formulate the correct interpretation if they could only be shown “both sides of a story and enough information.” In brief, if people were able to consume some kind of news programming consisting of “unbiased” content, then more subsequent political and cultural dissatisfaction with American liberalism would develop. However, the ironic notion that Coors, Wilson, and Pauley started their own venture in response to a definition of fairness set by networks, and exemplified in temperate icons such as Walter Cronkite, to avoid the politicization of television was not considered. This definition of fairness – the bedrock of early television news in the postwar years – centered on objectivism and coverage which avoided exclusively promoting any single political narrative over another.

The TVN news service was launched on May 14, 1973, and immediately management came into conflict with the hand-picked staff.<sup>104</sup> This problem would continue to vex the company till its death and largely stemmed from the fact that Coors and Wilson had hired employees from the same institutions and standards they were trying to depart from.<sup>105</sup> Though the news service managed to stay independent from its financier’s wishes for a time, a stream of

memos circulating among Pauley, Coors, and Wilson expressed just how off-course their pet project was getting from its existential objective.

July 9, 1973: Money. Why is it when I call for balance, 19 out of 20 times it's an attempt to get conservative balance to liberal presentations? There shouldn't even be a question mark there, the answer is so obvious that the liberal point of view is the only one represented on TVN.

July 12, 1973: Sterilization. The American Civil Liberties Union is generally recognized as the legal arm of the extreme left if not the Communist Party in the United States. They held, as our reporter said, "A well-attended press conference" and TVN – just like everyone else – set cameras along side each other and gave them full uncontested exposure for their line... how come TVN sees fit to give huge coverage to one side of the story. Let's hear from the people in North Carolina, the legislators down there or one of the hundreds of thousands who supported this kind of legislation.

July 25, 1973: American Indian Political Movement (AIM). What in the world are we doing giving a platform to AIM revolutionaries. Two of them are allowed to say whatever they want in front of our microphones with no balance and no truth about any of their efforts. This non-sense goes on and on and on...<sup>106</sup>

These memos reflect a litany of facets of TVN's operations which are important to note. First, the series of memos contain both the views and complaints of the Coors team around their news service's early operations, most of which are based on the desire for more conservative arguments. Second, since Wilson happened to be on the Board of Directors, we can see that some desire to realign the content of the coverage and eliminate potential liberal staff members from its payroll was present from the beginning. Third, the kind of content that Wilson wanted to see produced by the news service was something drastically different from the standards of the day. As alluded to by Nicole Hemmer in *Messengers of the Right*, objectivism was itself seen a liberal political doctrine which inevitably led to perpetual critiques of conservatism and conservative policies.<sup>107</sup> As a result, Wilson wanted to broadcast conservative opinion dressed in the framings of a balanced newscast where opposing viewpoints, liberal or not, would maintain only a token presence. In other words, TVN's "balanced" content was to resemble *Hannity and Colmes* where the democratic point of view served as the foil complementing the main thrust of the program.

Thus, we can also deduce that TVN's purpose was *not* to operate with the fairness and journalistic standards of the day and that it was actually created to provide a pro-conservative point of view which only sometimes offered a liberal rebuttal. And if one was offered, it could not be too effective or persuasive. Third, groups like AIM, the ACLU, as well as other civil rights organizations were not to be portrayed as speaking for the interests of the broader public or being authoritative representatives of their communities in the slightest. Lastly, the memos also demonstrate the degree to which TVN was a political project existing for the explicit purpose of combatting the mainstream narratives (and therefore, Americans' understanding of the world) that contributed to the right's political-cultural losses.

Attempting to resolve these issues, Jack Wilson, who "used to deliver Coors beer to H.R. Haldeman" and was a trustee of the newly established Heritage Foundation, began to interview incoming staff alongside the organization's John McCarty.<sup>108</sup> Other members of the foundation, such as Paul Weyrich, also became involved with TVN's internal operations to promote their shared vision of balancing the networks. Besides offering advice directly to Coors and Wilson, Weyrich orchestrated week-long education programs aimed at the newsmen "who call themselves political and economics reporters... [but] really don't understand what they're doing."<sup>109</sup> Part of the training for the Washington staff included meetings with conservative leaders such as Clark Mollenhoff (special counsel to Nixon and a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for the Des Moines Register), Ed Feulner (director of the House Republican Study Committee and co-founder of the Heritage Foundation), Howie Phillips (head of the American Conservative Union and former director of the Office of Economic Opportunity), and Jim McKenna (Heritage Foundation). The purpose of these introductions was twofold. First, TVN executives wanted its reporters covering national political news to be re-educated by the very same men who would

help build the foundations of the New Right. A movement TVN was designed to encourage on the cultural front. Second, the directors were trying to engender personal relationships between its staff and those individuals “who weren’t ordinarily on” the other networks, therefore, increasing the likelihood of these hand-picked figures appearing on-air as experts in their respective fields.<sup>110</sup> Paul Weyrich would then spend the rest of the week directly “teaching” the staff what he saw as necessary information for TVN’s success.

In short, TVN was the first television-based news operation whose management did not seek to insulate editorial and hiring decisions from the influence of partisans and political actors. Thus, its existence serves as a signpost where we can observe that the golden era of television news was beginning to give way to subscription-based, profit driven, echo chambers managed by partisans. It was a technologically advanced reversion to earlier forms of journalism more concerned about presenting specific narrations of world events rather than comprehensively informed citizens. Furthermore, the channel’s existence, as is evidenced by the assertions of management within its internal operations, illustrates the extent to which the rightwing of the 1970s was seeking to not only control headlines but the actual language, messages, and philosophies that aired to people’s living rooms. Its success, defined by its brain trust, depended on its ability to directly promote “traditional values” and offer support to America’s “free market” ideology. However, this led the organization to have issues when deciding what news events to cover. An issue that was exacerbated by the period’s journalistic standards in television. Consequently, TVN became plagued with disgruntled employees and several public relations issues (due to the discontent of these employees). To resolve this dilemma, Wilson and Coors enlisted the help of several conservative luminaries and political consultants.<sup>111</sup>

One consultant who was particularly trusted and valued for his input on these dilemmas was Roger Ailes. Joining the fray in early 1974, Ailes was deemed perfect for the job not because of his showbusiness reputation or his television expertise, but for his ability to spin PR problems and his associations with the Nixon administration. One staffer even summarized the choice of hiring Ailes as a full-time consultant to be the result of political considerations. “The Coors people trust Ailes because of his affiliation with the Republicans, and because he’s not a newsman. They don’t trust newsmen.”<sup>112</sup> This decision to hire Ailes largely stemmed from the PR fallout around the departure of two different TVN presidents within a span of 2 months and more broadly marks a significant shift for the news service at large. With the placement of Jack Wilson into the presidency of TVN, the conservative brain trust had taken the gloves off in their attempt to wrestle control of the company’s content. One of Jack Wilson’s first moves was to improve the service’s public image resulting from the newsroom’s chaotic situation. And immediately Ailes threw himself into the situation with his usual chutzpah. The board minutes recorded that the new PR consultant had been spinning TVN’s growth to other media outlets and that he commanded the attention of the empowered Jack Wilson.<sup>113</sup> In such meetings with the board, Ailes also pitched possible ways to present a winning image. For instance, Ailes said that if TVN was seen as high enough quality by other leaders within the news industry, it could “receive some awards and citations, as these would help establish TVN as an indispensable service in the eyes of the broadcasting community.”<sup>114</sup> Impressing Jack Wilson with his aggressiveness and a number of proposed solutions, Ailes was promoted to news director of the Manhattan office by August of 1974.

Shifting from consultant to news director required Ailes to not only adapt to a new set of expectations and responsibilities but a new role entirely. While this task would have been

challenging to most individuals without newsroom experience, Ailes had long grown accustomed to “performing” according to his audience’s – in this case Wilson’s and Coors’s – expectations. Although certain executives, in addition to a few clients, questioned the choice of hiring someone whose resume completely lacked relevant experience, Ailes felt more than ready to play his new role of being a leading newsman. “I’ve never run a newsroom, but I’ve been around them. And 90 percent of what you do in any job is common sense.”<sup>115</sup> Impressing all with his performance of being a news director, even critics of TVN’s managerial biases applauded the hire of Ailes. “On balance, Ailes may well be good for TVN. He is smart, tough, and nothing if not aggressive.” And in a few cases, such laudatory comments seemed warranted.

In one of these instances, Ailes took “the unusual step of ordering a special feed” to provide clients with the verdict of the Watergate cover-up trial late into the night. However, this choice probably reflected his sense of what would be great television rather than a desire for unbiased journalism, and perhaps, a bit of resentment on his part toward his former boss. Stephen Rosenfield, a young associate of Ailes who continued to work at Ailes & Associates noted a change in his boss in late 1974. “He took on a role of a news guy. But he *wasn’t* a news guy. I remember seeing a typewriter in his office at TVN, which amused me. I don’t think he knew how to type. He had a secretary from the time I could remember.”<sup>116</sup> Demonstrative of the amount of confidence and trust he had secured from Wilson, Ailes gained the ability to “hire, fire, and program the TVN feed” as he saw fit.<sup>117</sup> Acting on his newfound authority, Ailes hired Bruce Herschensohn, a film producer and former Nixon aide, to explore the idea of producing longer, documentary-type television programs. A programming idea undoubtedly informed by his own experience of directing a 1974 African nature documentary with Robert Kennedy Jr. (which happened to also air on TVN).<sup>118</sup>

It, therefore, appears that late 1974 was the moment in which Ailes became perfectly comfortable with leading the charge against the big three networks from a Manhattan-based command center. Furthermore, Rosenfield's account of the change in Ailes's behavior is an indication that power and the prestige resulting from being a news executive were deeply satisfying on a personal level. When asked by a reporter about his stance on the political bias of the networks, Roger Ailes leaned back and retorted, "One thing is sure, the networks are not biased to the right... But I'm not trying to compete with the networks... I'm not going to worry about the networks." While this comment was undoubtedly made with public relations considerations in mind, it also contains a germ of the truth; any network in which Ailes held influence would seek not to compete for the audience of the established networks. TVN's mission under Ailes was to carve out its own audience to which the *networks* would be forced to respond to. Thus, once the silent majority had an option for consuming conservative news, the public's sensibilities would become accustomed to a new type of news and demand would necessitate the big three to follow suit.

It was during his stint under Jack Wilson's supervision that Ailes first worked to change the overall news landscape of American culture. Under Wilson, Ailes not only learned how to operate a conservative newsroom but also how to play the long game. Indeed, this was a lesson Wilson endeavored to teach all of his fellow partisan staffers. As President of TVN, Wilson would acclimate top-level staff by inviting them to his office on the twenty-first floor overlooking the Hudson River for a speech. In these speeches, Wilson would often gesture towards the window as he compared TVN and its purpose to a seemingly innocuous tugboat. After having found his boat slowly crawling up the river, he would ask "Do you see that tugboat out there? Did you ever see the way a tugboat turns an ocean liner around? It doesn't do it in one

swift motion. It pushes and nudges the liner slowly. That's the way we want to put our philosophy in the news: gradually, subtly, slowly. It must be subtle."<sup>119</sup> Consequently, it was from the news directorship of TVN that Ailes first grasped that any effective change to the news landscape had to come slowly and possess a simulacrum of legitimacy. This would prove to be the winning formula for any conservative news service and can be traced back to TVN's New Right brain trust. Any other approach towards conservative television news which looked too different from its network colleagues would have produced a perception of illegitimacy and/or public relations debacles. A problem Wilson summarized himself, "If we were to project something different than what you see today – news today is the mean – if we were to project what we mean by 'accurate' and 'informative' and 'honest' in the news, we might make waves."

For Jack Wilson, Ailes proved to be the perfect fit as well as the exact kind of news director they sought. "Roger Ailes has quickly given needed leadership to his people while fully understanding the Board's policy statement regarding news coverage... We are now fully on our way to the product we have dreamed of all along."<sup>120</sup> Throughout Coors's circle and TVN's upper management, Ailes's involvement was a desperately needed sign of relief. The financial situation of the company had long been dependent on the patronage of the rightwing scion and Ailes had made both the management and the staff feel more comfortable with their precarious situations. Moreover, the memos and documents that come from TVN during this period give the sense that Ailes had actually come to enjoy the authority and trappings of legitimacy that came with his new television gig. For example, in a memo written on November 25, Ailes dictated to Wilson a series of changes to TVN's internal operations he thought necessary. The memo reads as an early indication of how Ailes imagined *his* ideal news operation and encapsulates lessons learned while observing the structure of the Nixon White House. As news director, he would

“get control of the news department and the daily feed so that the original vision of TVN can be carried out.”<sup>121</sup> The plan also called for centralization of all the news desks under the Manhattan-based office at 10 Columbus Circle as well as a hollowing out of the other regional directors’ authorities. According to Ailes, this plan would “give us the opportunity to coordinate and achieve the goals and philosophies of TVN” in a much more disciplined and streamlined manner, and reminiscent of how the Fox News Channel was later directed by Ailes. In addition to foreshadowing the tight control Roger Ailes would possess in another Manhattan-based conservative news operation, the memo demonstrates the importance Ailes held for secrecy and employee discipline (i.e., loyalty). He highlighted one female dissenter within the ranks as particularly problematic. “I see her as negative to management and TVN. She is maintaining communications with [disgruntled] former employees.” Lastly, the memo also presents how Ailes planned to balance his sticks with some lucrative carrots, “thereby reversing the trend of firings, insecurity and desperate searching for jobs presently going on [at TVN].” Impressed with Ailes’s willingness to take over, Wilson promoted him to the position of Vice President of Television News Inc. in May 1975. Nor was this promotion surprising to his associates, “From the day he walked in, he was looking for Wilson’s job, it was my feeling... [and] I’m sure he would have been better at it than Wilson.”<sup>122</sup>

A year into the world of conservative news, Ailes was seeking complete autocratic control of TVN, eliminating dissent, impressing his well-connected superiors, and portraying himself as a leading newsman just months after being hired as a consultant. For Ailes, his actions were just another incantation of his usual ambition and ability to perform as his best self. In many ways and throughout his career, he had transformed the act of “climbing the ladder” into a simple parlor trick, one he monetized by teaching others to perform for a fee. Therefore, it

should not be surprising that Ailes found no moral compunctions connected with being a news director, it was more of a game in which the actors performed according to the expected roles written for them. So, when Ailes proposed for TVN to offer business advisory services (another trick he had much experience perfecting) he felt no reservations. In the Nixonian frame of mind, the other newsrooms were also shallow, superficial, political, and looking to please audiences with the content they offered. Thus, by hoping to create a more conservative voice that fought against the big three, Ailes had enlisted and found personal satisfaction in a broader right-wing political effort to defend their vision of American society. But the day in which he could fight the cultural war against American liberalism through the arsenal of the news would have to wait. On October 31, 1975, TVN ceased operations due to financial reasons. Since operating a television news service required interminable large influxes of liquidity, its fate was decided once Joseph Coors stopped financing his pet project. However, Coors had not given up on his quest to alter the news landscape. On the last day of Nixon's presidency, one of the final acts the disgraced president had done was to nominate Joseph Coors to a seat on the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.<sup>123</sup> Faced with having to decide between continuing massive payments to a tumultuous project or gaining a means to influence media from within government, Coors chose the seemingly more effective, and safer, alternative.

The legacy of Coors's TVN proved to be more important than anyone realized when it finished operations in the fall of 1975. Ailes had learned a great deal during his brief stint with the company and kept such lessons in mind when he was tasked with creating another television news service on behalf of another wealthy patron, Rupert Murdoch. The most important of which are as follows: (1) TVN had taught Ailes how to conceptualize and plan for a news network that would have to produce its own income stream independent of daytime programming. (2) To

achieve popularity, ratings, and revenue, Ailes had begun to conceptualize news “as a kind of salami, to be cut up and sold” through innovative television techniques. This included experimentation with “action-news” formats, stories limited to easily digestible “minute-and-a-half” segments, and other more sensationalist approaches. (3) Therefore, he brought his television producer skills to bear on TVN and developed a philosophy of news centered around its effects on the audience rather than in terms of journalistic responsibility. As he put it, “I want to find out what they want and give them what they want.” (4) The failure of TVN due to Coors’s retreat from the venture taught Ailes that if such a conservative news service were to succeed in the future, the undertaking would require an investor who could soak up costs associated with starting up a cash-intensive business. When pondering over why TVN ultimately failed, Ailes specifically believed it was the lack of a long-term commitment from Coors and his team. After he resigned from the vice presidency of TVN in late September, he told a reporter that “the service needed [sustained influxes of] money if it was to survive” and that sustainability would have taken at least “three years.”<sup>124</sup> The same length of time Fox News needed to establish itself at the end of the Clinton presidency. (5) Lastly and most importantly, the conflicts of interests between ideologically minded management and genuine news staff consisting of journalists and reporters would have to be avoided. A problem exacerbated by the need for some legitimate journalists to be present in such a venture, lest the news service is seen as lacking credibility. A riddle Ailes would solve by placing more credible newsmen in the less-watched daytime slots and telegenic individuals from the world of entertainment/tabloid journalism in the primetime programming.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Roger Ailes's career in the 1970s is remarkably useful to gain insights into how conservative politicians and activists attempted to use television to influence both popular opinion and American culture. From Ailes's initial foray into politics, the 1968 Nixon campaign, we can see how conservatives used television and cultural divisions to craft emotional appeals to beat back the tide of cultural liberalism. From Ailes's time in the administration, we gain a glimpse into how conservative elites contemplated television content, and thus, the possible divide that existed – and continues to exist – between politicians and conservative media activists. From his time working alongside members of the New Right brain trust at TVN, we can see that the golden era of television news itself constituted a problem that required capital intensive, and commercially successful platforms to rectify. Furthermore, both Richard Nixon and the New Right had tasked Ailes with aiding, and implementing, news services designed to bolster conservative opinions in the public sphere. In addition to an exploration of important figures of 1970s conservatism and their interaction with the era's predominant medium of communication, this study of the first eight years of Roger Ailes's career has been worthwhile due to its ability to illustrate how the leading figure of the second generation of media activists learned from the broader conservative movement when conservative television was only a pet dream.

By recounting how the career of Roger Ailes was impacted by the Nixonian conservatism of the 1970s, I have traced the origins of not only conservative television but the process by which a structural assault on cultural liberalism through the use of technology occurred. Therefore, it was during the 1970s that Ailes developed a vision of conservative news which was explicitly “pro-administration”, anti-objectivist, and aggressively populist in rhetoric. Through learning the art of political-television production, adopting Nixonian political values,

and participating in the conservative efforts of the 1970s to change the news, Roger Ailes developed the vision and skillset which enabled him to arguably become one of the most important American conservatives of the twenty-first century. However, this meant Ailes would inadvertently leave the Republican Party intertwined with media forces which were more sensationalist, less concerned about governing, and dependent upon the conservative audience's approval than when he began his work in 1968.

Moreover, it is worth keeping in mind that populism, of all kinds, often experiences little hesitation in utilizing our vulnerability to emotional rhetoric and superficial appeals for its own purposes. Even more worrisome, modern technology has only granted more tools and exposure to those who, like Ailes, practice politics which resemble the Nixonian calculus of a zero-sum, amoral approach. Consequently, the willingness to land the first low blow has supplanted the conservatism of William F. Buckley, or even Barry Goldwater. As we have recently witnessed, such tactics can become amplified and augmented when party elites within key institutions lend their personal and institutional cache to the phenomenon in a *quid pro quo* exchange for stronger electoral messaging. By utilizing technologies of mass communication and eschewing past restrictions on what is "acceptable" behavior, public figures like Tucker Carlson, Ben Shapiro, and Donald Trump have established themselves collectively as the heirs to the political legacy of Nixon and Ailes. Thus, with the development of conservative television in the 1970s, we can also trace how the Nixonian use of television both foreshadowed and enabled the Fox Newsfication of the Republican Party. More specifically, this story reveals how the arena of television, the era's leading form of modern political media, was the premier stage for these transformations. Although some might posit that this observation is cliché and/or cynical in nature, it is nonetheless worth making in light of how politics is still practiced today. Indeed,

Donald Trump is only a recent example illustrating how the right's adept use of populist media, cultural divisions, and adaptive use of media technology can lead to conservative electoral success.

Beginning as the electoral solution to the counterculture's potency and emotional influence upon the politics of the late 1960s, conservative television has proven the Nietzschean warning about staring into the abyss to be particularly relevant when unpacking the question of *What Happened*. At that time, Daniel Patrick Moynihan's assertion that the GOP was the party of "squares" from which a "Republican mob" was unthinkable appeared to be a coherent analysis. Consequently, this perception of the GOP as largely consisting of passive observers to the era's changes led conservatives like Richard Nixon and Roger Ailes to assume strategies centered on instigating emotional responses among "patriotic" minded voters were a warranted response. Today, after decades of being surrounded by this "in your face" political atmosphere, many GOP voters have become accustomed to candidates who eschew traditional statesmanship in favor of an aggressive political style. Often these candidates are often defined by appealing political personas ("appealing" being determined by primary voters), an ability to demonstrate at least some degree of media training, and a willingness to court controversy which is often conflated with authenticity.<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, despite the adaption and growing consciousness in response to the artificiality of American politics on part of the public, it is also apparent that political debates are increasingly reminiscent of brand exercises and echo chambers rather than platform differentiation. Subsequently, the forces of mass media and populism have converged (or coalesced) to make electoral contests more reliant on personas, emotional appeals, and the candidate's rhetorical tone. While pageantry and public image have always, and unquestionably,

been a part of the political world, it is also undeniable that each election cycle has witnessed unprecedented levels of debased behavior from general election candidates.

Hence, we find our democracy in a situation that is more reminiscent of theatrical contests centered on fighting the current culture wars (between contrasting audiences and rosters of media-trained champions) than a process of democratic decision-making. This leaves the public unable to coalesce around pragmatic, majority-desired policy outcomes, and more focused on supporting their personal avatars within zero-sum political battles. Likewise, to lament this development in democracy is not an exercise in a futile ideology of romantic protest. It is a necessary diagnosis of a flaw modern democracies face and which we can aim to treat (even if a cure is beyond our reach). Lastly, this paper demonstrates that Roger Ailes is a truly distinctive, and important, individual within American history who can help chart for us the drift of American political culture towards the assumptions that Nixon himself held. These assumptions of politics can be sorted into the following: (1) Americans are divided among lines of cultural liberalism (led by a coalition of intellectuals, advocates of diversity, and youth) and cultural traditionalism (led by a coalition of blue-collar conservatives, “middle America”, and older voters); (2) it is necessary for conservative political forces to adopt a zero-sum political mentality in order to remain electorally relevant; and (3) the political opposition is inherently immoral and a danger to the overall culture of America, therefore, one’s political allies must concert to culturally isolate and excise the opposition’s political ideology.

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