Notes From Underground

Roger Ailes, the recently deceased former chairman of Fox News, was known for his extreme paranoia—going so far as to hide guns and ammunition inside the thick wooden door of his office—but his multi-room underground security bunker was less an outlier than one data point in a growing trend. America’s super-rich are investing in subterranean resilience at an unprecedented rate, spending as much as $100 million on fortified bunkers designed to withstand any kind of disaster. In Kansas, the Survival Condo Project quickly sold out a dozen single-family luxury apartments in a converted missile silo; Bill Gates is rumored to have built shelters below every one of his homes; and America’s largest manufacturer of underground steel bunkers reported a 700 percent sales increase in high-end bunkers from 2015 to ’16.

Why is a sense of impending apocalypse gripping the most secure minority in the world? A quote in The New Yorker from Alexandria-based venture capitalist Robert H. Dugger offers one possibility: “Anyone who’s in this community knows people who are worried that America is heading toward something like the Russian Revolution.”

—Evan Malmgren

The Witch Is Dead

Roger Ailes was abetted by liars and apologists at Fox News and beyond.

Apathetic presidents come and go, but the damage wrought by Roger Ailes may last forever. Can one think of a single individual who, in the past half-century of American history, has done more to degrade our democracy and debase our discourse? By creating a propaganda channel under the guise of “fair and balanced” news, and then using it to undermine the very idea of truth—all in the service of racism and sexism—Ailes, with Rupert Murdoch’s backing, paved a path for a whole host of faux “journalists” and right-wing demagogues to do the same. Inside the headquarters of Fox News, he fostered a culture of sexual intimidation and racial animosity, one that was reflected on the air as well. Had Ailes not spent two decades tearing down the journalistic safeguards that were supposed to defend our country against just such demagoguery, it is impossible to imagine that a pathologically dishonest, egomaniacal, racist, sexually predatory huckster like Donald Trump could ever have been elected president of the United States. Indeed, well before he created Fox News—from the time Ailes left The Mike Douglas Show in 1968 to sell Richard Nixon the way Douglas sold mouthwash—Republican presidents have at least partly owed their election victories to Ailes. (“It’s a shame a man has to use gimmicks like this to get elected,” Nixon once lamented to his Mephistophelean manipulator.)

Though he ran an alleged news organization, Ailes continued to offer private instruction in the art of public deception for Republican politicians and even generals, frequently deploying the power of Fox as a bribe or cudgel. In The Loudest Voice in the Room, his biography of Ailes, Gabriel Sherman describes the Fox founder wooing Chris Christie in 2010, promising him the network’s support if he ran for president. Bob Woodward uncovered a conversation, preserved on audio, in which Ailes apparently dispatched K.T. McFarland, then of Fox and now of the National Security Council, to Kabul to ask David Petraeus if there was “anything Fox is doing, right or wrong, that you want to tell us to do differently.” McFarland then enjoined the general to “just chat with Roger” should he want to run for president. She even floated the idea that Ailes would resign to run the campaign and Murdoch would finance it.

But Ailes didn’t do it alone: He was empowered by everyone he worked with at Fox. Nobody who stayed there long enough to realize what was going on without quitting deserves to call himself or herself a “journalist.” Ailes certainly received his share of criticism in the wake of his comeuppance and recent death. But what about all the people who made excuses for him before the wave of sexual-harassment lawsuits and reports of secret payoffs turned him radioactive? What about the Fox executives, past and present, who enabled his sexual terrorism? What about the liars who did his bidding on the air? What about the so-called “mainstream media” members who adopted Ailes’s lies as truth and even defended Fox when others tried to expose it—and him?

For instance, what of the writer Zev Chafets, whom Ailes pressed into service to pen a Soviet-style whitewash as part of his paranoid attempt to blunt the impact of Sherman’s honest accounting of his life and work? (Chafets somehow failed to mention that Ailes had been forced out of NBC for having called a fellow executive a “little fucking Jew prick.”) What about the former feminist Susan Estrich, who has recently made her living as Ailes’s attorney by attempting to under-mine the character of the women whom Ailes sexually tormented at Fox? And what of those journalists who stepped in to defend Ailes and Fox when the Obama administration bravely tried to isolate the network’s quasi-reporters from their more professional colleagues? One hopes that Baltimore Sun critic David Zurawik now regrets his ass-backward assertion that he detected “echoes of Nixon-Agnew” in Obama’s actions for his alleged failure to respect “press freedom.” Surely, Jake Tapper today wishes that he never warned Obama’s then-press secretary, Robert Gibbs, that “it’s escaped none of our notice that the White House has decided in the last few weeks to declare..."
possible Trump ties to Russia is a distraction from more important issues?

AF: The Russia investigation is incredibly important—it’s about a foreign power interfering with the very basis of our democracy. So we shouldn’t lose sight of that. But we have to be able to walk and chew gum at the same time—health care being a prime example. Right now, Republicans are trying to pass a cruel and irresponsible piece of legislation that would have devastating consequences for Minnesotans. I’m trying to stop that bill, because it would dismantle Medicaid, rip coverage away from millions of Americans, and allow insurers to once again discriminate against people with preexisting conditions.

JW: Who in the Senate could have been a Saturday Night Live cast member?

AF: No one… no one. Remember, I wasn’t a cast member. I wanted to be a cast member. I was just a featured player!

JW: Any of your SNL colleagues, could they be senators?

AF: Oh, yeah—a lot of them. Conan [O’Brien], definitely.

JW: You wrote a book called Why Not Me? about a fake (and disastrous) Al Franken presidential run. Do you ever say “Why not me?” for real about the presidency?

AF: That was a joke! (Laughs) No.

JW: Why not?

AF: It’s a really, really hard job! (Laughs again)

JW: So there are no circumstances...

AF: No. None.

JW: That’s pretty definitive. But I think a lot of people are gonna finish this book and wish you were running.

AF: What I think is funny about the book—remember, I started writing it in 2015, I’d basically finished it when Trump was elected—is some people are gonna read it now and go: “Oh, Franken really cracked the code of what kind of a memoir to write in a post-Trump world! He’s clearly playing three-dimensional chess, and he’s four moves ahead of anyone else!” And I’m like, “No, no, no!”