

How the 'Gipper' Dismantled Media Safeguards and Planted the Seeds of Trumpism

Reagan's deregulation and repeal of the Fairness Doctrine cleared the path for Murdoch's empire and the propaganda machine that gave rise to Donald Trump's politics.

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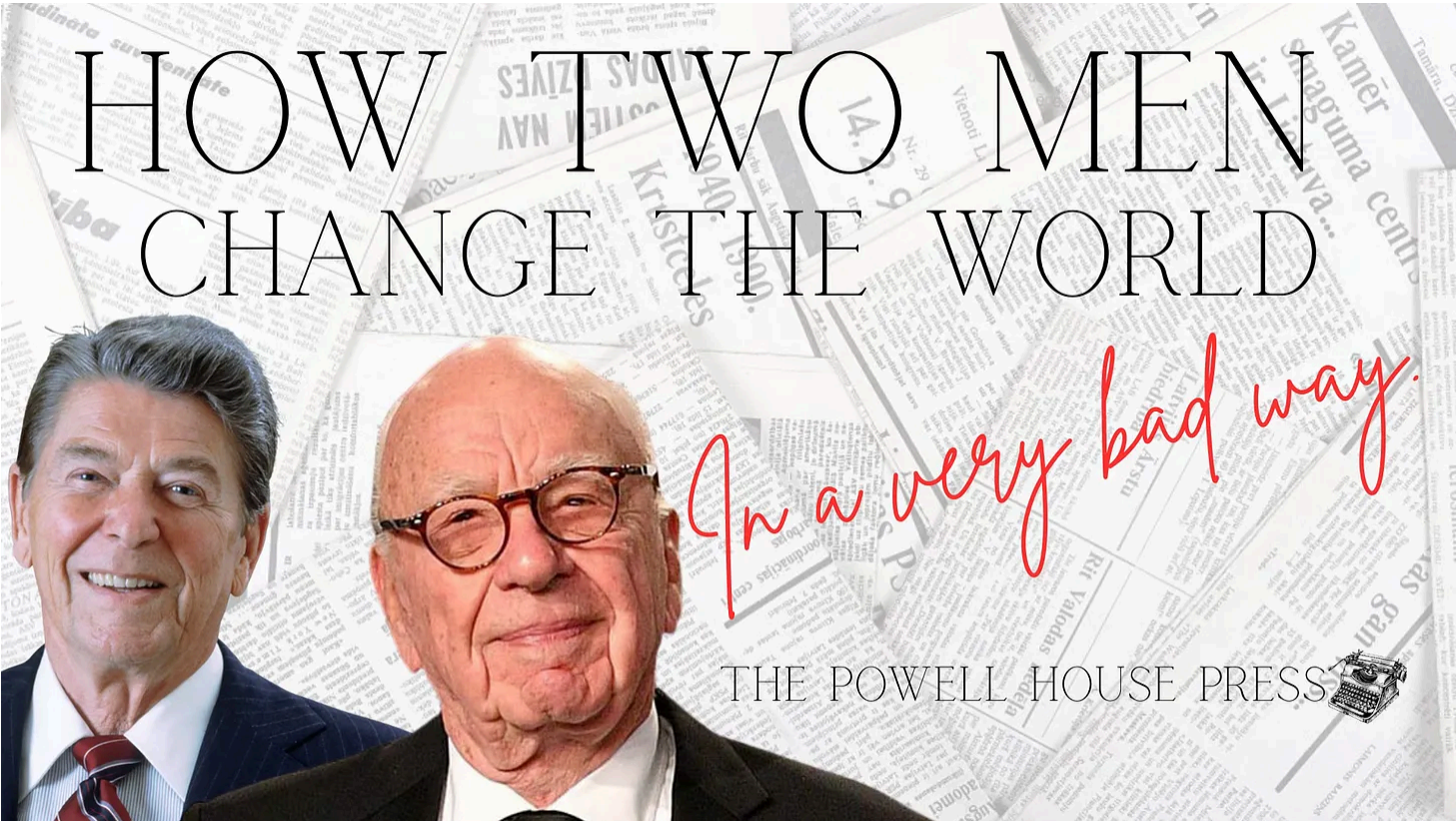
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Ronald Reagan, the affable Gipper, is a myth. The reality is far darker: he was a destructive force whose policies, deceptions, and transgressions fertilized the soil from which Trumpism would eventually sprout. His systematic attacks on public education and his deregulation of the media helped produce a generation of Americans so poorly versed in democratic principles that our current political crisis feels less like an accident than an inevitability.

Before examining the specific policy changes that allow his legacy to haunt American media to this day, it's worth settling the historical record on facts that remain surprisingly obscure - obscured, in no small part, by the very communications apparatus he helped construct and the free press he destroyed.

He lied to Congress about Iran-Contra, authorizing the secret sale of weapons to a hostile nation to fund an illegal war in Nicaragua. He plunged the country into unprecedented peacetime debt, tripling the national deficit while preaching fiscal responsibility. He invaded Grenada without congressional approval. And perhaps most disturbing of all, he and his wife Nancy, along with their closest advisers, kept him in

office while it was known he was suffering from cognitive decline - a fact his own son Ron Reagan has spoken about publicly and biographers have documented in detail.

But what I want to talk about is his legacy with the media - a legacy that has profoundly altered America and its politics in ways most citizens still don't fully understand.

Before Reagan took office, America had rules. Not vague guidelines or suggestions - actual federal regulations designed to prevent any single corporation from dominating the public conversation. A company couldn't own a newspaper and a television station in the same city. There were hard caps on how many radio stations one entity could control. And if you held a broadcast license, you had a legal obligation to serve the public interest, including presenting multiple viewpoints on controversial issues. There was also a rule that seems almost quaint now: foreign nationals were prohibited from owning American broadcast media. The airwaves belonged to the American public, and the government maintained that only American citizens should control them.

By the time Reagan left office, the philosophical foundation for all of that had been demolished. And waiting in the wings was an Australian-born media baron named Rupert Murdoch - who would conveniently become a U.S. citizen in 1985 specifically to circumvent those foreign ownership restrictions - ready to build an empire on the rubble.

In 1981, Reagan appointed Mark S. Fowler as chairman of the Federal Communications Commission. Fowler wasn't a career regulator or a public interest advocate. He was a communications industry lawyer who had served on Reagan's presidential campaign staff in both 1976 and 1980. He arrived in Washington with a clear mission: dismantle the regulatory framework that had governed American broadcasting for half a century.

Fowler's philosophy was captured in a now-infamous interview with *Reason* magazine. Television, he declared, was "just another appliance - it's a toaster with pictures." The idea that broadcasters had special responsibilities to their communities? Nonsense, in Fowler's view. "The perception of broadcasters as community trustees," Fowler said, "should be replaced by a view of broadcasters as marketplace participants."

Critics were not kind. Consumer advocate Ralph Nader called Fowler "probably the most damaging appointment Ronald Reagan ever made." Others dubbed him "the James Watt of the FCC," comparing him to Reagan's controversial Interior Secretary who wanted to open public lands to private exploitation.

Under Fowler's leadership, the FCC systematically gutted the rules that had maintained some semblance of diversity in American media. The ownership limits that had stood since 1953 - the "7-7-7 rule" that prevented any single company from

owning more than seven AM stations, seven FM stations, and seven television stations nationwide - were expanded to 12-12-12 in 1984. “Bigness is not necessarily badness,” Fowler said at the time. “Sometimes it is goodness.” The FCC abolished longstanding obligations requiring stations to file program logs and document how they were serving their communities’ information needs. Public interest programming requirements were stripped away. The ability of citizens to challenge license renewals was curtailed.



Former Congressman Tim Wirth. Associated Press.

Then came the kill shot: the [Fairness Doctrine](#). Since 1949, the Fairness Doctrine had required broadcasters to present balanced coverage of controversial issues. It wasn’t censorship - stations could say whatever they wanted - but they had to allow opposing viewpoints a hearing. The Supreme Court had upheld it unanimously in 1969 in *Red Lion Broadcasting Co. v. FCC*, ruling that the public’s right to diverse information trumped broadcasters’ desire for unfettered editorial control.

In 1985, Fowler’s FCC released a report declaring that the Fairness Doctrine “hurt the public interest” and violated broadcasters’ First Amendment rights. In 1987, the Commission voted 4-0 to abolish it entirely. Congress fought back. Both the House and Senate passed legislation to codify the Fairness Doctrine into law, with overwhelming bipartisan support. The House vote was 302-102. Reagan vetoed it. Congress couldn’t muster the votes to override.

Congressman Timothy Wirth of Colorado, chairman of the House telecommunications subcommittee, saw what was coming. “If they deregulate in 1990,” Wirth warned, “we could end up with a handful of companies owning every broadcasting outlet in the country.” He was right.

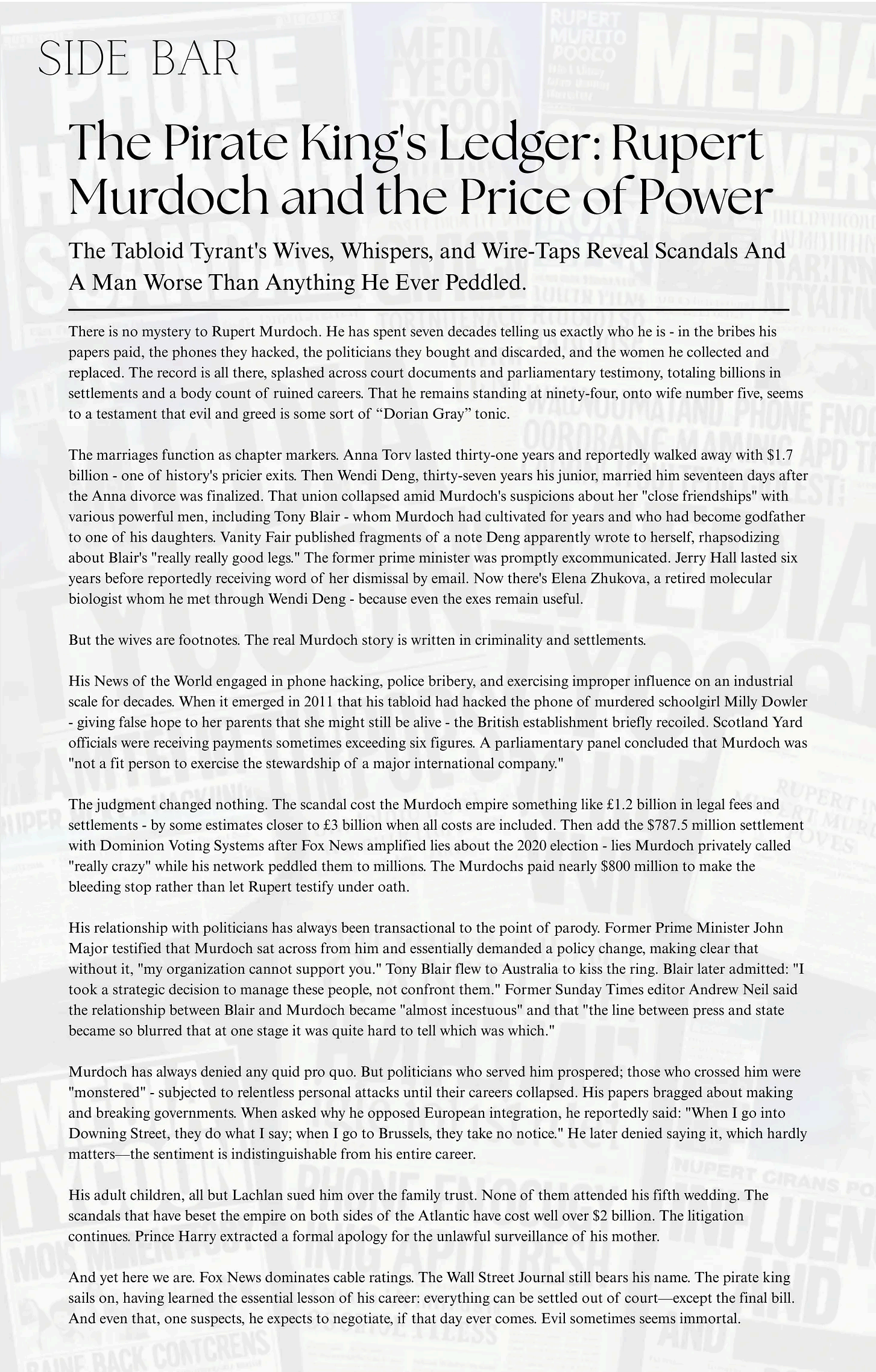
While Reagan’s FCC was busy dismantling regulations, Rupert Murdoch was preparing to exploit the new landscape. Murdoch had already built newspaper empires in Australia and Britain, forming a close alliance with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher that allowed his acquisitions to bypass normal regulatory scrutiny. In 1985, Murdoch became a United States citizen - not out of any patriotic calling, but because it was a legal requirement for owning American broadcast licenses. The law that was supposed to keep foreign interests out of American media was simply a paperwork problem for a man of Murdoch’s resources. That same year, he purchased Twentieth Century Fox and bought seven television stations from Metromedia. In 1986, he used those stations to launch the Fox Broadcasting Company, the first successful challenge to the Big Three networks in decades.

Murdoch was adept at working the regulatory system. As the *New York Times* noted, his Fox network “could never have succeeded if it had not received generous treatment at the Federal Communications Commission.” The FCC let Fox skirt rules about how much programming a “network” could own, allowing the company to build up its production studio while technically not qualifying as a network under regulations that would have limited its growth. The political contributions flowed accordingly. In 1996 alone, Murdoch personally donated \$1 million to the California Republican Party, while News Corp added another \$654,700 in soft money to the national GOP.

Murdoch wasn’t operating alone. The push to eliminate media ownership rules was a coordinated industry effort involving the biggest names in American media. In November 1987, the “Freedom of Expression Foundation” - a name that sounds like a First Amendment advocacy group but was actually a front for corporate interests - petitioned the FCC to abandon its cross-ownership rules. The foundation was headed by the major newspaper chains: Gannett, the Washington Post, Harte-Hanks, Times Mirror, Knight Ridder, and Capital Cities/ABC. The timing was no coincidence; the only cross-ownership waiver cases pending at the FCC were Murdoch’s.

Murdoch also joined the board of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank that boasted of having “actively promoted the deregulation of the television and telephone industries.” Fellow board member John C. Malone, CEO of Tele-Communications Inc., the largest cable operator in America, shared Murdoch’s vision of a deregulated media landscape. The industry used its own media properties to keep the public in the dark about what was happening. As media critic Ben Bagdikian observed: “The more dignified publishers accomplish the same thing quietly. They do not report in the news the negative social and economic effects of their most desired legislation, or they do it

only briefly and obscurely. Thus, they have kept the issue out of the national discourse.”



SIDE BAR

The Pirate King's Ledger: Rupert Murdoch and the Price of Power

The Tabloid Tyrant's Wives, Whispers, and Wire-Taps Reveal Scandals And A Man Worse Than Anything He Ever Peddled.

There is no mystery to Rupert Murdoch. He has spent seven decades telling us exactly who he is - in the bribes his papers paid, the phones they hacked, the politicians they bought and discarded, and the women he collected and replaced. The record is all there, splashed across court documents and parliamentary testimony, totaling billions in settlements and a body count of ruined careers. That he remains standing at ninety-four, onto wife number five, seems to a testament that evil and greed is some sort of “Dorian Gray” tonic.

The marriages function as chapter markers. Anna Torv lasted thirty-one years and reportedly walked away with \$1.7 billion - one of history's pricier exits. Then Wendi Deng, thirty-seven years his junior, married him seventeen days after the Anna divorce was finalized. That union collapsed amid Murdoch's suspicions about her "close friendships" with various powerful men, including Tony Blair - whom Murdoch had cultivated for years and who had become godfather to one of his daughters. Vanity Fair published fragments of a note Deng apparently wrote to herself, rhapsodizing about Blair's "really really good legs." The former prime minister was promptly excommunicated. Jerry Hall lasted six years before reportedly receiving word of her dismissal by email. Now there's Elena Zhukova, a retired molecular biologist whom he met through Wendi Deng - because even the exes remain useful.

But the wives are footnotes. The real Murdoch story is written in criminality and settlements.

His News of the World engaged in phone hacking, police bribery, and exercising improper influence on an industrial scale for decades. When it emerged in 2011 that his tabloid had hacked the phone of murdered schoolgirl Milly Dowler - giving false hope to her parents that she might still be alive - the British establishment briefly recoiled. Scotland Yard officials were receiving payments sometimes exceeding six figures. A parliamentary panel concluded that Murdoch was "not a fit person to exercise the stewardship of a major international company."

The judgment changed nothing. The scandal cost the Murdoch empire something like £1.2 billion in legal fees and settlements - by some estimates closer to £3 billion when all costs are included. Then add the \$787.5 million settlement with Dominion Voting Systems after Fox News amplified lies about the 2020 election - lies Murdoch privately called "really crazy" while his network peddled them to millions. The Murdochs paid nearly \$800 million to make the bleeding stop rather than let Rupert testify under oath.

His relationship with politicians has always been transactional to the point of parody. Former Prime Minister John Major testified that Murdoch sat across from him and essentially demanded a policy change, making clear that without it, "my organization cannot support you." Tony Blair flew to Australia to kiss the ring. Blair later admitted: "I took a strategic decision to manage these people, not confront them." Former Sunday Times editor Andrew Neil said the relationship between Blair and Murdoch became "almost incestuous" and that "the line between press and state became so blurred that at one stage it was quite hard to tell which was which."

Murdoch has always denied any quid pro quo. But politicians who served him prospered; those who crossed him were "monstered" - subjected to relentless personal attacks until their careers collapsed. His papers bragged about making and breaking governments. When asked why he opposed European integration, he reportedly said: "When I go into Downing Street, they do what I say; when I go to Brussels, they take no notice." He later denied saying it, which hardly matters—the sentiment is indistinguishable from his entire career.

His adult children, all but Lachlan sued him over the family trust. None of them attended his fifth wedding. The scandals that have beset the empire on both sides of the Atlantic have cost well over \$2 billion. The litigation continues. Prince Harry extracted a formal apology for the unlawful surveillance of his mother.

And yet here we are. Fox News dominates cable ratings. The Wall Street Journal still bears his name. The pirate king sails on, having learned the essential lesson of his career: everything can be settled out of court—except the final bill. And even that, one suspects, he expects to negotiate, if that day ever comes. Evil sometimes seems immortal.

The final piece fell into place under President Clinton, but the groundwork had been laid during the Reagan years. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 eliminated

national radio ownership limits entirely and loosened restrictions across all media. The act required the FCC to regularly review its ownership rules and eliminate any deemed “no longer in the public interest.” The results were catastrophic for media diversity. Within five years of the Act, radio station ownership dropped from 5,100 owners to 3,800. Clear Channel Communications, led by Texas businessman Lowry Mays - who had chaired the National Association of Broadcasters in the mid-1990s - exploded from 40 stations to over 1,200, becoming the largest radio conglomerate in American history.

Gannett’s chairman Al Neuharth had been brutally honest about the industry’s motivations. “The synergies between our conventional newspaper operations and broadcast operations are obvious,” he wrote in his autobiography, *Confessions of an S.O.B.* If he could acquire television stations in markets where Gannett already owned monopoly newspapers, profits would soar. Only the FCC’s cross-ownership rules had prevented it. Neuharth famously called owning a local newspaper monopoly “a license to steal.” In 2017, the FCC finally eliminated the newspaper-broadcast cross-ownership rule entirely. In 2021, the Supreme Court unanimously upheld the decision in *FCC v. Prometheus Radio Project*.

In 1996, Murdoch launched Fox News Channel, hiring Roger Ailes - a former political consultant to Presidents Nixon, Reagan, and George H.W. Bush - to run it. The network positioned itself as the “fair and balanced” alternative to liberal media bias, quickly becoming the most-watched cable news network in America. Without the Fairness Doctrine, there was no requirement to present opposing viewpoints. Without meaningful ownership limits, Murdoch could build a vertically integrated media empire spanning newspapers, broadcast television, cable news, and film production. The Reagan revolution in media had made it all possible.

Here is what most Americans don’t understand: Fox News is not a licensed news organization. Neither is CNN. Neither is MSNBC. The FCC licenses and regulates over-the-air broadcasts - the local ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox affiliates you can pick up with an antenna. But cable channels are different. They run through private providers, and the FCC has no authority over their content. As a spokesperson for the FCC has confirmed: “We do not have any rules or licensing requirements in which a cable channel might categorize itself as news vs. entertainment.”

This means Sean Hannity, Laura Ingraham, and their colleagues operate in a regulatory vacuum. The rules against broadcasting false information? They apply only to over-the-air networks. The public interest obligations that once defined American broadcasting? They don’t apply to cable at all. As former FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler has explained: “Unfortunately, the FCC does not have jurisdiction over cable networks. In fact, it doesn’t even have jurisdiction over networks like CBS and NBC who use the airwaves.” The agency regulates local affiliates, not network content.

Fox's own lawyers have made this reality explicit - in court. When former Playboy model Karen McDougal sued Tucker Carlson for defamation in 2020, Fox successfully argued that no "reasonable viewer" would take Carlson's statements as fact. U.S. District Judge Mary Kay Vyskocil agreed, ruling that Carlson's program consisted of "rhetorical hyperbole and opinion commentary intended to frame a political debate," not factual news reporting. "Given Mr. Carlson's reputation," Judge Vyskocil wrote, "any reasonable viewer arrives with an appropriate amount of skepticism about the statements he makes." In other words, Fox's legal position is that their primetime hosts are not actually doing journalism - they're just "bloviating," as Judge Vyskocil put it. The network that calls itself "Fox News" successfully argued in federal court that its flagship programs shouldn't be understood as news at all.



Mark S. Fowler former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission

Current FCC Chairman Brendan Carr recently confirmed this publicly: "Fox News doesn't have an FCC license, CNN doesn't, but ABC, CBS, and NBC - those broadcast stations do."

This is Reagan and Murdoch's true legacy: a media landscape where a handful of billionaires control the flow of information to the American public, where cable "news" networks operate without any meaningful oversight, and where the very concept of journalism as public service has been replaced by "marketplace participation." The toaster won. And we're all getting burned.

This is what is terrifying: Reagan's damage took decades to fully reveal itself. The media consolidation, the destruction of the Fairness Doctrine, the transformation of news into infotainment - none of it was immediately apparent to most Americans. It crept up on us, normalized itself, became the water we swim in.

Donald Trump's long-lasting changes to the American government will surface in the same way. The gutting of federal agencies. The installation of loyalists throughout the judiciary. The tax policies that enriched billionaires while adding trillions to the national debt. The self-dealing and corruption normalized at the highest levels of power. The dismantling of institutional safeguards. The weaponization of the Justice Department.

We won't fully understand what he broke until years from now, when we reach for institutions that are no longer there, when we expect accountability that no longer exists, when we assume norms that have been quietly erased.

Reagan's legacy made Trump possible. The media environment that Reagan and Murdoch created - where propaganda masquerades as news, where a foreign-born billionaire's political agenda shapes what millions of Americans believe to be true - is precisely what allowed a reality television host to capture the presidency and convince tens of millions of people that the free press is the "enemy of the people."

When historians finally tally the full cost of what Trump did to this country - the corruption, the cruelty, the institutional destruction, the lies upon lies upon lies - Reagan's horrific leadership will look Disney-esque by comparison.

Please share *this* article. I don't ask that often, but we a better understanding of what is happening in our America and how it started.

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Exceptional breakdown of how the Fairness Doctrine repeal created the infastructure for modern propaganda. The link between Reagan's FCC appointee calling TV "a toaster with pictures" and Fox's lawyers later arguing that no reasonable person would take Carlson as factual news is perfect symmetry. Once marketplace logic replaced public service obligations, this endpoint was inevitable.

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