

THE BAFFLER

The Business He's Chosen

Tucker Carlson's hard right turn was bound to have consequences

Ben Schwartz

November 13, 2018

LAST WEEK, activists from the D.C.-based group Smash Racism gathered outside the home of dapper Nazi favorite and Fox News host Tucker Carlson to protest his white nationalist views. The general idea, as one anonymous member of the group told the *Washington Post*, was “to bring the pain that is felt every day among marginalized people who have been victim of right-wing politics to Tucker and make it personal.”

And so they did. They rang Carlson’s doorbell and chanted outside the house. Neither Carlson nor his kids were home, but Mrs. Carlson was. Understandably upset to find the dirtbag left on her doorstep, she claims she hid in the pantry, and a police squad car soon arrived. It’s hard not to empathize with Mrs. Carlson in that moment. What kind of a mob was this? Were they the emo doggie-bag-tossing type that recently ruined Mitch McConnell’s Havana Rumba experience? Or were they the Nazi-slugging agents of Antifa whom a terrified alt-right has imagineered into a ninja army of darkness?

Tucker Carlson told *The Washington Post*, “Someone started throwing himself against the front door and actually cracked the front door . . . It wasn’t a protest. It was a threat . . . They were threatening me and my family and telling me to leave my own neighborhood in the city that I grew up in.” They were? When police arrived, they found a dispersing protest that included invited legal observers and tambourine players and deserved mostly a stern tsk-tsking. Only the property damage caused by an inept attempt to spray paint an anarchy symbol on the Carlson driveway was seen to have crossed the line. Beyond that, the police found nothing like Carlson described, which their official report makes clear.

Over the next twenty-four hours, Carlson’s media colleagues, from fellow Fox personalities to his liberal counterparts—and in a *dude, who asked you anyway* moment, Stephen Colbert—rushed to make clear that protesting outside a family residence is off-limits. A whole class of

very successful people, who all have families and high-profile careers and driveways of their own to think about, put on their best Atticus Finch seersucker suits to let us know about a little thing called common decency. “Don’t ring doorbells, Scout. It’s common.”

Of course, no one should harass a public figure’s spouse or children. Mrs. Carlson may very well be a Mrs. Mussolini, or she may just be waiting for the last kid to go to college before walking out herself; either way, no one’s responsible for his words but him. And there’s no shortage of ways to target Tucker Carlson, from Michael Moore docu-stalking to boycotting his advertisers. Still, there was something a little unsettling about how quickly the wagons circled around Carlson, who has parlayed his former career as a green-pants-on-Easter-Sunday-wearing country club conservative into a gig as a Fox News apologist for the worst racism of the nationalist right. Yes, yes, a man’s home is his castle—but there’s a reason some castles have moats.

I’m taking a wild guess here, but I suspect that if activists found out where Ann Coulter or Sean Hannity live and protested outside their homes, it’s doubtful the political entertainment world would rally with the same indignation it has for Carlson. Hannity and Coulter have odious views, too. They are Americans (100 percent goddammit), and they have First Amendment rights. Like Carlson, Hannity is also a Fox star, and Coulter is a ubiquitous presence on the network. Both have been far more successful than Tucker Carlson for a long time. But we also accept that Hannity and Coulter are trolls. They’ve offered up decades of smirking, racist, garbage views. As a direct result of her brand, Coulter needs bodyguards when appearing on liberal college campuses—and even then, more than one of her events has been shut down due to threats of violence and fears for community safety. Before we dismiss that as a necessary response to unhinged liberal mobs, it’s worth pointing out that she has also shouted out her bodyguard at CPAC—where one would think the goblin queen safe in her Mordor.

As for Hannity, he likes to make it known that he has a concealed carry permit for his firearms and a license to use them in five states. He also claims to have mastered his own unique fighting style: “Not Kung Fu. Krav Maga, Kempo, Jui Jitsu,” he once tweeted. “Eclectic blend of Arts, ‘Street Martial Arts’ Blade, Sticks, Firearms.” This shouldn’t come as a surprise. Hannity and Coulter don’t live lives like other right-wing pundits. It’s hard to imagine Morton Kondracke loading a Glock before talking estate tax outrages at the Cato Institute, and most likely, Peggy Noonan doesn’t need to roll thirty deep into the Heritage Foundation to get misty about Ronald Reagan.

That’s because, as much as you might disagree with Kondracke, Noonan, and their ilk, they’re not in your face, baiting you about how your race or ethnicity or religion or sexuality mean you don’t belong in “their” country. They’re not on TV lying about caravans or spreading conspiracy theory about the death of Seth Rich—or, in Coulter’s case, using an off-camera moment where an airline ousted her from a seat she reserved to doxx two women of color involved in the incident across social media.

But Tucker Carlson? For nearly twenty years he was known mainly as an ineffectual but affable chubby-cheeked cable conservative, albeit one whose voice seemed to have never fully changed. He was never a blowtorch like O’Reilly. Confrontational? If anything, Carlson became infamous for his 2004 punching bag moment on CNN’s *Crossfire*, when *The Daily Show*’s Jon Stewart lashed out at Carlson (and co-host Paul Begala, but mainly Carlson) and steamrolled him.

Stewart: How old are you?

Carlson: Thirty-five.

Stewart: And you wear a bow tie . . . So this is theater.

Carlson: I know, I know, you're right.

Stewart: The thing is, you're doing theater when you should be doing debate.

Stewart's tirade contributed to the cancellation of *Crossfire*, reducing its shouty format to self-parody. Less than a year later, Carlson was at MSNBC hosting *The Situation with Tucker Carlson*, a chatty if rudderless hour of segments ranging from "Crime Blotter," a Tucker as Nancy Grace segment, to "The Outsider," perhaps the most honest cable news segment ever done, in which sports commentator Max Kellerman admittedly took positions he often didn't really hold, just to make sure cable news fans did not suffer a single squabble-free moment. A one-man local news crew, Carlson hosted live from Beirut during the 2006 Lebanon-Israel War and somehow found time to pop up with legal views on *Verdict with Dan Abrams*. All that was missing were "Tucker On Your Side" consumer justice pieces exposing deluxe car wash waxing scams. A stint on *Dancing with the Stars* ended in the first week with Carlson eliminated for a remarkably tepid cha-cha. After three years and no brand, MSNBC cancelled him, and this time not even his bow-tie survived. In an interview with Alex Jones, Carlson recalled, "if you wear a bow tie, it's like [wearing] a middle finger around your neck; you're just inviting scorn and ridicule . . . the number of people screaming the F-word at me . . . it wore me down after a while so I gave in and became conventional."

MSNBC cancelled him. Perhaps the low point for Carlson was his memorable 2009 appearance at CPAC, where he lectured his fellow movement conservatives about things they did not want to hear about, like spelling:

I'm as conservative as any person in this room. I am literally in the process of stockpiling food and moving to Idaho, so I am not in any way going to take a second seat to anyone in this room ideologically. But I will say, honestly, if you create a news organization whose primary objective is not to deliver accurate news, you will fail. You will fail. *The New York Times* is a liberal paper. But it's also—and it is to its core a liberal paper—it's also a paper that cares about whether they spell people's names right, by and large. It's a paper that actually cares about accuracy. Conservatives need to build institutions that mirror those institutions. [*Boos*] That's the truth! You don't believe me? [*More boos*].

We'll have to wait for the authoritative Carlson biography (titled, one hopes, *Tucker Unbowed*) for an account of what that kind of tribal rejection felt like. No doubt Carlson walked into that room fancying himself a red meat conservative, not red meat *for* conservatives. They do not want news, no matter how facty. They want *narrative*. They want a counter-narrative to the fact-based news that Carlson at one time admired and even tried to emulate in the conservative world.

CPAC was Carlson's *Full Metal Jacket* moment—when his fellow recruits held him down to the bed a la Vincent D'Onofrio's jelly doughnut-scarfing Private Pyle and beat him with soap bars in towels until he woke up the next morning . . . changed. That year, Fox hired Tucker as a utility commentator, and not long after, Tucker co-founded his own online warehouse of truth-optional right-wing narratives, *The Daily Caller*.

In 2017, Tucker won Megyn Kelly's abandoned hour, then O'Reilly's, and came out a new Private Pyle: a lean marine, a Fox killing machine, a white nationalist reporting on Trump fanaticism like the imaginary slaughter of white South African farmers by the country's black-majority government. If the judges on *Dancing with the Stars* had no use for him, Carlson now got high scores from new fans like Richard Spencer and David Duke. He clearly saw a major growth demographic in Trump's mail bomber fringe and ran with it, becoming a bona fide cable news star for the first time in his budget Bill Buckley career.

It's important to have this backstory in view because nearly everyone condemning Smash Racism left it out. They *believed* Carlson. But Carlson shed his bow tie, and the kind of deferential comportment it symbolized, years ago. When he covered the mail bomb sent to George Soros recently, he smirked and guffawed his way through the segment. Specifically, he derided the idea that President Trump's conspiratorial rhetoric about Soros could possibly have led to that bomb ending up on Soros's mailbox. It turns out, of course, that that's exactly what happened.

Tucker Carlson has become the worst kind of media shill, selling the worst possible ideas. But he and his allies still want him treated as if he's the visiting Robert Novak Fellow at the Whittaker Chambers Institute. He's not George Will or S.E. Cupp or David Brooks, not anymore; he's a smug hate merchant in the Coulter-Hannity mold. And that's how he handled this political protest, with their kind of distortion and dishonesty, to the *Washington Post* no less, describing a demonstrably peaceful protest as a violent mob.

And now, like his fellow travelers Hannity and Coulter, Carlson's finding out that trafficking in that world has costs. Carlson is no doubt considering bodyguards, a gated community, or maybe even some target practice with Shaolin Hannity himself. Perhaps if Roger Ailes were with us now, he could mentor his flustered protégé as another visionary, Hyman Roth, once advised Michael Corleone in *The Godfather, Part II*: "This is the business we've chosen."

It's an ugly way to live, but it's also a choice.