

The New York Times

How Tucker Carlson stoked white fear to conquer cable

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May 1, 2022

Tucker Carlson burst through the doors of Charlie Palmer Steak, enfolded in an entourage of producers and assistants, cellphone pressed to his ear. On the other end was Lachlan Murdoch, chair of the Fox empire and his de facto boss.

Most of Fox’s Washington bureau, along with the cable network’s top executives, had gathered at the power-class steakhouse, a few blocks from the office, for their annual holiday party. Days earlier, Carlson had set off an uproar, claiming on air that mass immigration made America “poor and dirtier.” Blue-chip advertisers were fleeing. Within Fox, Carlson was widely viewed to have finally crossed some kind of line. Many wondered what price he might pay.

The answer became clear that night in December 2018: absolutely none.

When “Tucker Carlson Tonight” aired, Carlson doubled down, playing video of his earlier comments and citing a report from an Arizona government agency that said each illegal border crossing left up to 8 pounds of litter in the desert. Afterward, on the way to the Christmas party, Carlson spoke directly with Murdoch, who praised his counterattack, according to a former Fox employee told of the exchange.

“We’re good,” Carlson said, grinning triumphantly as he walked into the restaurant.

In the years since, Carlson has constructed what may be the most racist show in the history of cable news — and also, by some measures, the most successful. Although he frequently declares himself an enemy of prejudice — “We don’t judge them by group, and we don’t judge them on their race,” Carlson explained to an interviewer a few weeks before accusing impoverished immigrants of making America dirty — his show teaches loathing and fear. Night after night, hour by hour, Carlson warns his viewers that they inhabit a civilization under siege — by violent Black Lives Matter protesters in American cities, by diseased migrants from south of the border, by refugees importing alien cultures, and by tech companies and cultural elites who will silence them or label them racist if they complain. When refugees from Africa, numbering in the hundreds, began crossing into Texas from Mexico during the Trump administration, he warned that the continent’s high birthrates meant the new arrivals might soon “overwhelm our country and change it completely and forever.” Amid nationwide outrage over George Floyd’s murder by a Minneapolis police officer, Carlson dismissed those protesting the killing as “criminal mobs.”

Companies like Angie’s List and Papa John’s dropped their ads. The following month, “Tucker Carlson Tonight” became the highest-rated cable news show in history.

His encyclopedia of provocations has only expanded. Since the 2020 presidential election, Carlson has become the most visible and voluble defender of those who violently stormed the U.S. Capitol to keep Donald Trump in office, playing down the presence of white nationalists in the crowd and claiming the attack “barely rates as a footnote.” In February, as Western pundits and politicians lined up to condemn the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, for his impending invasion of Ukraine, Carlson invited his viewers to shift focus back to the true enemy at home. “Why do I hate Putin so much? Has Putin ever called me a racist?” Carlson asked. “Has he threatened to get me fired for disagreeing with him?” He was roundly labeled an apologist and Putin cheerleader, only to press ahead with segments that parroted Russian talking points and promoted Kremlin propaganda about purported Ukrainian bioweapons labs.

Alchemizing media power into political influence, Carlson stands in a nativist American tradition that runs from Father Coughlin to Patrick J. Buchanan. Now Carlson’s on-air technique — gleefully courting blowback, then fashioning himself as his aggrieved viewers’ partner in victimhood — has helped position him, as much as anyone, to inherit the populist movement that grew up around Trump. At a moment when white backlash is the jet fuel of a Republican Party striving to return to power in Washington, he has become the preeminent champion of Americans who feel most threatened by the rising power of Black and brown citizens. To channel their fear into ratings, Carlson has adopted the rhetorical tropes and exotic fixations of white nationalists, who have watched gleefully from the fringes of public life as he popularizes their ideas. Carlson sometimes refers to “legacy Americans,” a dog-whistle term that, before he began using it on his show in the fall, appeared almost exclusively in white nationalist outlets like *The Daily Stormer*, *The New York Times* found. He takes up storylines otherwise relegated to far-right or nativist websites like *VDare*: “Tucker Carlson Tonight” has featured a string of segments about the gruesome murders of white farmers in South Africa, which Carlson suggested were part of a concerted campaign by that country’s Black-led government. Last April, Carlson set off yet another uproar, borrowing from a racist conspiracy theory known as “the great replacement” to argue that Democrats were deliberately importing “more obedient voters from the Third World” to “replace” the current electorate and keep themselves in power. But a *Times* analysis of 1,150 episodes of his show found that it was far from the first time Carlson had done so.

“Tucker is ultimately on our side,” Scott Greer, a former deputy editor at the Carlson-founded *Daily Caller*, who cut ties with the publication in 2018 after his past writings for a white nationalist site were unearthed, said on his podcast last spring. “He can get millions and millions of boomers to nod along with talking points that would have only been seen on *VDare* or *American Renaissance* a few years ago.”

That pattern is no accident. To a degree not broadly appreciated outside Fox, “Tucker Carlson Tonight” is the apex of a programming and editorial strategy that transformed the network during the Trump era, according to interviews with dozens of current and former Fox executives, producers and journalists. Like the Republican Party itself, Fox has sought to wring rising returns out of a slowly declining audience: the older white conservatives who make up Trump’s base and much of Fox’s core viewership. To minimize content that might tempt them to change the channel, Fox News has sidelined Trump-averse or left-leaning contributors. It has lost some of

its most respected news journalists — most recently Chris Wallace, the longtime host of Fox’s flagship Sunday show. During the same period, according to former employees and journalists there, Fox has leaned harder into stories of immigrants living in this country without legal permission or nonwhite Americans caught in acts of crime or violence, often plucked from local news sites and turbocharged by the channel’s vast digital news operation. Network executives ordered up such coverage so relentlessly during the Trump years that some employees referred to it by a grim nickname: “brown menace.”

A Fox spokesperson rejected those characterizations of the network’s strategy, pointing to coverage of stories like President Joe Biden’s inauguration and the war in Ukraine, where a Fox cameraperson was killed in March while on assignment. In a statement, Justin Wells, a senior executive producer overseeing Carlson’s show, defended the host’s rhetoric and choice of topics: “Tucker Carlson programming embraces diversity of thought and presents various points of view in an industry where contrarian thought and the search for truth are often ignored. Stories in ‘Tucker Carlson Tonight’ broadcasts and ‘Tucker Carlson Originals’ documentaries undergo a rigorous editorial process. We’re also proud of our ongoing original reporting at a time when most in the media amplify only one point of view.”

Carlson has led the network’s on-air transformation, becoming Fox’s most influential employee. Outside Fox, Carlson is bandied about as a potential candidate for president. Inside the network, he answers solely to the Murdochs themselves. With seeming impunity, Carlson has used his broadcast to attack Fox’s own news coverage, helping drive some journalists off the air and others, like veteran Fox anchor Shepard Smith, to leave the network entirely. In Australia, the editors of some Murdoch-owned newspapers watch Carlson’s show religiously, believing it provides clues to Murdoch’s own views. According to former senior Fox employees, Carlson boasts of rarely speaking with Fox’s CEO, Suzanne Scott, but talking or texting regularly with Murdoch. And in an extraordinary departure from the old Fox code, Carlson is exempt from the network’s fearsome media relations department, which under Roger Ailes, Fox’s founder, served to both defend the channel’s image and keep its talent in line.

Carlson is powerful at Fox not merely because he is the network’s face but because he is also its future — a star whose intensity and paranoid style work to bind viewers more closely to the Fox brand, helping lead them through the fragmented post-cable landscape. Last year, Carlson began producing original content for the network’s nascent streaming service, Fox Nation, and quickly emerged as one of the few Fox stars whose presence could lure viewers to fork over additional dollars. Fox does not divulge audience numbers for the service, but last May, Murdoch told investors that his star had helped increase Fox Nation subscriptions by 40%. Executives talk openly about Fox Nation as a boycott-proof version of Fox News — a walled garden where Fox can collect revenue directly from its viewers as carriage fees from cable providers decline. The services’ executives have called those viewers “fans” of Fox’s “lifestyle brand.”

But Fox Nation is also a kind of programming cocoon. Its lineup has included shows about patriotism and national parks, the nostalgic series “Who Can Forget?” and a category called, simply, “Conspiracies.” In September, it acquired “Cops,” the police reality show canceled by its previous owner in the wake of the Floyd protests. There is almost no traditional news at all on Fox Nation, but lots of Carlson — a thrice-weekly talk show called “Tucker Carlson Today” and goading documentaries like “Patriot Purge,” which presented the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection as a

false-flag operation by shadowy actors determined to persecute innocent Americans; two longtime Fox contributors quit in protest.

For most of his adult life, Carlson lived and worked in a very different bubble: the cosmopolitan precincts of Washington. His turn to flagrantly racist ideas has baffled and saddened some longtime associates there, spurring a veritable cottage industry of profiles exploring whether Carlson's show is merely lucrative theater or an expression of his true values. But a close reading of Carlson's decades in television and journalism, and interviews with dozens of friends and former colleagues, show that "Tucker Carlson Tonight" is both.

Almost from the beginning of his career, he has been marching away from the puckish libertarianism of his young adulthood. Increasingly sympathetic to the nativist currents raging through American politics after the 9/11 attacks and twice cast from the heights of cable news stardom, Carlson ultimately turned on the old conservative intelligentsia, his hometown and many of his friends. His fall and rise trace the transformation of American conservatism itself. When Trump ran for president and won, thrusting anti-immigration fervor to the heart of American politics, Carlson finally found his moment. At Fox, he found his platform.

Carlson declined to be interviewed for this article. Virtually everyone who did speak asked to remain anonymous in order to speak candidly about Carlson or his employer; the host is vengeful toward critics, and officials or media figures Carlson attacks on his show are sometimes threatened with violence. On his show Thursday night, shortly before the Times received Fox's statement praising the program, Carlson sought to weave this article into his nightly narrative. He called journalists at the newspaper "obedient little establishment defenders" and asked, "Why do they keep calling us racist? Well, to make us shut up, obviously."

After a two-decade run of international reporting trips and regular steakhouse lunches at the Palm, Carlson now surveys the world from behind an anchor's desk and rarely goes out to eat. He professes not to use social media or own a television and communicates with friends and colleagues via late-night texting marathons.

He now lives much of the year in an old family vacation place in a rural, blue-collar corner of Maine. His neighbors today are the kind of people who watch his show, rather than the kind of people who confront him in public about it. At the height of his influence, Carlson exists in a carefully constructed bubble of his own — a retreat, and a bunker.

You vs. Them

On many nights, the highest-rated cable news show in prime time airs from a converted town garage in the village of Bryant Pond, Maine, not far from Carlson's home. Like many rural places, Bryant Pond is less busy than it used to be. On a visit in the fall, a few large Trump flags still dotted the road into town, and no one bothered with masks at the convenience store. Carlson's studio, which is decorated like a cozy cabin in the woods, sits behind a peeling and deserted old grange hall. It is the shiniest, best-kept building in sight.

Each morning, Carlson sends his staff a memo laying out the night's lead story and which guests he wants to book, he told conservative YouTube host Dave Rubin last year. His senior executive producer, Wells, oversees a tight-knit team of about two dozen people, some of whom occasionally stay with Carlson in Maine. Most afternoons, Carlson sits in his sauna and thinks

about what he wants to say. A few hours before his show, he has a cup of coffee and begins writing his monologue, working out of a barn that also houses his boats and his wife's Peloton.

Carlson spent a decade writing magazine articles, and he thinks of his television show as a continuous story about America. "I'm a writer, so that's how I think — in terms of chapters, serials," he said in the YouTube interview. "I'll give you one installment today, another tomorrow." Like Trump, he is a winking pugilist who rails against elites even as he shapes a movement. Carlson likes to address his audience directly: "You" are decent, generous, deserving. "They" — the pro-war, pro-China, anti-American "ruling class" — are out to get you. "They'd rather put your life in peril than appear insensitive," Carlson says of this ruling class, adding, "They literally don't care about you, and yet they are still in charge." He delivers these grim sermons with peppy good cheer and shameless overstatement. On "Tucker Carlson Tonight," events of the day are further evidence of truths already established; virtually any piece of news can be steered back to the themes of elite corruption, conspiracy and censorship, from gun control to marijuana legalization to paper drinking straws.

Carlson's producers often trawl the web for supporting material, scouring widely read Trumpian sites like Breitbart and The Federalist, obscure right-wing blogs and other corners of the internet. Early on, clips would sometimes be sent to the network's research team, an Ailes creation known as the Brain Room, for further fact-checking. When Carlson's team requested statistics or original research, it frequently revolved around immigration or race — for instance, the respective percentages of Asian-descended and Black people in college. According to one former employee who interacted with Carlson's team, the Brain Room would occasionally discover that a story had actually originated further afield, on a racist or neo-Nazi site like Stormfront. Sometimes the Brain Room suggested that "Tucker Carlson Tonight" look for a different source, and over the years, the researchers there heard less and less from Carlson's team. "They weren't digging," the former Fox employee said. "They were looking for outrageous stories to outrage their audiences."

Accuracy isn't the point on "Tucker Carlson Tonight." On the air, Carlson piles up narrative-confirming falsehoods and misleading statements so rapidly — about Floyd's death, white supremacists who took part in the Jan. 6 riot, falling testosterone levels in men, COVID-19 vaccines, the Texas power grid and more — that The Washington Post's media critic, Erik Wemple, has made a sideline of cataloging them. Although Carlson claims his show to be "the sworn enemy of lying," Fox's lawyers acknowledged in 2020, in a lawsuit accusing the host of slander, that "spirited debate on talk show programs does not lend itself well to statements of actual fact."

But if Carlson has not always been truthful, he has been remarkably consistent. Almost from the beginning, "Tucker Carlson Tonight" has presented a dominant narrative, recasting American racism to present white Americans as an oppressed caste. The ruling class uses fentanyl and other opioids to addict and kill legacy Americans, anti-white racism to cast them as bigots, feminism to degrade their self-esteem, immigration to erode their political power. Republican elites, however improbably, help to import the voters Democrats require at the ballot box. The United States, Carlson tells his viewers, is "ruled by mercenaries who feel no long-term obligation to the people they rule."

He leaves little doubt who these mercenaries are. Among the most frequent recurring characters on "Tucker Carlson Tonight" are Black politicians like Democratic Reps. Maxine Waters and

Ilhan Omar and Vice President Kamala Harris, whom Carlson has portrayed, against the available evidence, as a kind of shadow president. He regularly disparages Black women as stupid or undeserving of their positions. “No one outside of her own neighborhood had ever heard of Kamala Harris before she showed up as Willie Brown’s girlfriend,” Carlson said in November, referring to Harris’ long-ago relationship with the California politician. “Then a few years later, she became Montel Williams’ girlfriend. Interesting.” When Biden nominated Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson to the Supreme Court, Carlson demanded that the White House release her law school admissions test scores to prove she was qualified.

Seemingly every social ill is laid at the feet of immigrants and refugees — not just working-class unemployment, but rising home prices, out-of-wedlock births among native-born Americans, even the supposedly sorry state of his favorite Beltway fishing spots. With pastoral care, Carlson reassures his viewers. “It’s OK for you to say, ‘What is this?’ and, ‘Maybe I don’t want to live in a country that looks nothing like the country I grew up in,’” Carlson told a guest in 2017. “Is that bigoted?”

Like his counterparts on the fringe, Carlson obsesses over Somali immigrants, who represent a tiny fraction of first-generation Americans but are at once Black, Muslim and foreign-born. One of the largest communities of Somali Americans, numbering several thousand people, lives less than an hour from his home in Maine, in the old mill city of Lewiston. In Carlson’s hands — as on sites like American Renaissance, which promotes “the biological reality of race” — Lewiston is a parable of replacement. Carlson has repeatedly depicted Somalis as threatening strangers deposited in a small, struggling city without the consent of its citizenry. “Go to Lowell, Mass., or Lewiston, Maine, or anyplace where large numbers of immigrants have been moved into a poor community, and it hasn’t become richer,” Carlson lectured a guest in 2017. “It’s become poorer. That’s real.”

In fact, according to Maine’s Labor Department, Lewiston’s unemployment rate has generally tracked that of the rest of the state, and the city has experienced neither a significant drop nor a surge in economic growth since the first Somalis arrived. And economists broadly reject Carlson’s central argument that immigration to the United States “drives down wages for low-skilled workers nationwide,” as he said in a 2019 segment. As one review of the relevant literature put it, “Decades of research have provided little support for the claim that immigrants depress wages by competing with native workers.” Immigrants compete for jobs but also help generate new ones, not only by raising demand for goods and services but also by helping fill out workplaces as they expand to hire native-born workers with different skills. While some studies have found that earlier waves of low-skill immigration may have had short-term effects on the wages of one relatively small group — high school dropouts — other studies have found “small to zero effects,” as a landmark analysis by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine stated in 2017.

But as televised theater, the formula works. Carlson reliably draws more than 3 million viewers. When he defended the idea of demographic “replacement” on a different Fox show in April, the Anti-Defamation League, a Jewish civil rights group, called for his firing, noting that the same concept had helped fuel a string of terrorist attacks, including the 2018 mass shooting at a Pittsburgh synagogue. But when Carlson ran a clip of his comments on his own prime-time show a few days later, according to Nielsen data, the segment got 14% more viewers in the advertiser-sweet “demo” of 24- to 54-year-olds than Carlson’s average for the year.

Every cable network cares about ratings, but none more so than Fox, whose post-Ailes slogan stresses neither fairness nor balance but sheer audience dominance: “Most Watched, Most Trusted.” And at Fox, according to former employees, no host scrutinizes his ratings more closely than Carlson. He learned how to succeed on television, in part, by failing there.

Unhumble Beginnings

The talk show host who rails against immigrants and the tech barons of a new Gilded Age is himself the descendant of a German immigrant who became one of the great ranching barons of the old Gilded Age. Henry Miller landed in New York in 1850 and built a successful butcher business in San Francisco; along with a partner, he went on to assemble a land empire spanning three states. They obtained some parcels simply by bribing government officials. Others were wrung from cash-poor Mexican Californians who, following the Mexican-American War, now lived in a newly expanded United States and couldn't afford to defend their old Mexican land grants in court against speculators like Carlson's ancestor. Through the early 20th century, Miller's land and cattle empire “was utterly dependent on immigrant labor,” said David Igler, a historian at the University of California, Irvine, and author of a history of the Miller empire.

Over the years, the Miller fortune dispersed, as great fortunes often do, into a fractious array of family branches. Carlson's mother, Lisa McNear Lombardi, was born to a third-generation Miller heir, debuted in San Francisco society and met Richard Carlson, a successful local television journalist, in the 1960s. They eloped to Reno, Nevada, in 1967; Tucker McNear Carlson was born two years later, followed by his brother, Buckley. The family moved to the Los Angeles area, where Richard Carlson took a job at the local ABC affiliate, but the Carlsons' marriage grew rocky, and the station fired him a few years later. In early 1976, he moved to San Diego to take a new television job. The boys went with him — according to court records, their parents had agreed it would be temporary — and commuted to Los Angeles on weekends while he and Lisa tried to work out their differences.

But a few months later, just days after the boys returned from a Hawaii vacation with their mother, Richard Carlson began divorce proceedings and sought full custody of the children. In court filings, Lisa claimed he had blindsided her and left her virtually penniless. The couple separated and began fighting over custody and spousal support. Richard Carlson alleged that his wife had “repeated difficulties with abuse of alcohol, marijuana, cocaine and amphetamines” and that he had grown concerned about both her mental state and her treatment of the boys. On at least one occasion, he asserted, the boys had walked off the plane in San Diego without shoes; the mother's own family members, he said, had urged him not to let her see the children unsupervised. He won custody when Tucker Carlson was 8, at a hearing Lisa did not attend: According to court records, she had left the country. She eventually settled in France, never to see her sons again. A few years later, Richard Carlson married Patricia Swanson, an heir to the frozen-food fortune, who adopted both boys.

For many years, Tucker Carlson was tight-lipped about the rupture. In a *New Yorker* profile in 2017, not long after his show debuted, he described his mother's departure as a “totally bizarre situation — which I never talk about, because it was actually not really part of my life at all.” But as controversy and criticism engulfed his show, Carlson began to describe his early life in darker tones, painting the California of his youth as a countercultural dystopia and his mother as abusive and erratic. In 2019, speaking on a podcast with right-leaning comedian Adam Carolla, Carlson said his mother had forced drugs on her children. “She was like, doing real drugs around

us when we were little, and getting us to do it, and just, like, being a nutcase,” Carlson said. By his account, his mother made clear to her two young sons that she had little affection for them. “When you realize your own mother doesn’t like you, when she says that, it’s like, oh, gosh,” he told Carolla, adding that he “felt all kinds of rage about it.”

Carlson was a heavy drinker until his 30s, something he has attributed in part to his early childhood. But by his own account, his mother’s abandonment also provided him with a kind of preemptive defense against the attacks that have rained down on his Fox show. “Criticism from people who hate me doesn’t really mean anything to me,” Carlson told Megyn Kelly, a former Fox anchor, on her podcast last fall. He went on to say, “I’m not giving those people emotional control over me. I’ve been through that. I lived through that as a child.” One lesson from his youth, Carlson told one interviewer, was that “you should only care about the opinions of people who care about you.”

The remaining Carlsons placed a high premium on family loyalty, and Carlson formed an exceptionally tight bond with his brother and father. The elder Carlson began a political career in San Diego Republican circles — Pete Wilson, a future California governor, was a frequent guest at their dinner table — and eventually moved the family to Washington, where he led Voice of America in the Reagan administration. Tucker Carlson, an avid reader but indifferent student, went to boarding school in Rhode Island, where he met his future wife, Susie Andrews, the headmaster’s daughter. They married when he was 22 and had four children. “I wanted a totally happy family, where everyone’s close and everyone’s named after someone else and everyone gets together all the time,” Carlson has said. After college, he followed his father’s footsteps into journalism.

He took a junior position at Policy Review, a conservative journal, where he wrote earnest, plodding articles on the Washington police department and the decline of a predominantly Black high school. Later, after begging his way to a job at the newly launched, Murdoch-backed Weekly Standard, Carlson emerged as a gifted observational reporter, turning out punchy riffs on Monica Lewinsky’s oversharing therapist and Ross Perot’s dalliance with Marxists. He was sometimes mean but usually funny, with a knack for getting people to talk, and assignments piled up from glossy magazines in New York. He also became a regular on CNN and C-SPAN, a side gig that would quickly become his consuming ambition. On television, he mocked Buchanan, a populist commentator and failed presidential candidate, as “kooky,” noting with a smirk that when Buchanan was attacked, he invariably claimed that “the tiny cabal that controls American politics doesn’t like me because I speak truth to power.”

Like many up-and-coming conservative writers in the 1990s, Carlson had vaguely libertarian politics — or, at least, a vaguely libertarian sensibility. In a 1997 opinion essay for The Wall Street Journal, he attacked the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a leading anti-immigration group, spotlighting its links to eugenicists and alarmist portrayals of Latin American immigration. “FAIR itself has made a conscious play for the support of social conservatives, running ads that blame immigration for ‘multiculturalism,’ ‘multilingualism,’ ‘increasing ethnic tension’ and ‘middle-class flight,’” Carlson wrote. He singled out FAIR’s executive director, Dan Stein, who had once argued that immigrants’ higher birthrates would eventually give them too much political power, a situation he had likened to “competitive breeding.” Carlson wondered why “conservatives seem to be making common cause with Mr. Stein and FAIR.”

Within just a few years, he would be one of them.

Crossing the Border

As Carlson's star rose, illegal immigration was exploding. Border apprehensions approached nearly record levels during the late 1990s; in Washington, Democrats and Republicans debated what to do about the millions of people already living in the country illegally. In 1999, Buchanan left CNN to mount a campaign for president, pledging to build a "Buchanan fence" on the Southern border and make English the official language; the race was won by George W. Bush, who campaigned in Spanish and took a gentler tone on illegal immigration. In 2001, Carlson took over Buchanan's old "Crossfire" seat at CNN, and when Buchanan reappeared on the show a few months later, to debate the new president's immigration policy, the two men were united in opposition. "Both parties, looking for votes, are for it. Big business, which is always looking for cheaper labor, is for it," Carlson argued. "But it turns out the average person isn't for it."

A few days later, hijackers flew two planes into the twin towers in New York. Anti-Muslim hate crimes skyrocketed, and millions of Americans turned sharply against immigration. On CNN, Carlson took up their cause. "Are they racists? No," he said. "They understand a basic truth: that the 19 hijackers who came here and destroyed the World Trade Centers, hit the Pentagon, came here because they were able to, because it's easy, because we have virtually no control at the border." One of his guests that day was Stein, the FAIR official, now welcomed as an important voice in an increasingly urgent debate.

Carlson has never written extensively about exactly when and why his views changed, but clues are sprinkled through his writing and TV appearances. He has spoken about how, in his view, immigration transformed California for the worse during the 1990s, ushering in an era of Democratic-led decline and decay. He seemed to take Latino support for Democrats there as a demographic inevitability, rather than a specific response to policies and rhetoric promoted by California Republicans like Wilson, who won reelection, in part, by embracing a ballot initiative barring those living in the country illegally from public benefits. (Other successful Republicans of the era, including Bush, won a significant share of the Hispanic vote; Trump increased his share of Hispanic voters in 2020 despite advocating more restrictive immigration policies.) "I was always very pro-immigration, always," Carlson told a guest on Fox in 2017. "And watching this happen in California really made me pause."

His politics were evolving in other ways, too. After the 9/11 attacks, he dutifully defended the Bush administration's turn to war and backed the invasion of Iraq. But after the fall of Baghdad, he traveled there for *Esquire* and found it a tinderbox of trigger-happy contractors and resentful Iraqis. Carlson later described the trip as a transformative experience, the seed of his broader shift away from the establishment Republicanism of the day. "I arrived a tepid supporter of the war, and of neoconservatism more generally," Carlson wrote recently in a new collection of his magazine reportage. "I returned home a determined opponent of both."

In 2004, while still at CNN, he started a short-lived talk show on PBS. He told *The New York Observer* that it would allow more voices that didn't fit neatly into the mainstream. "I was thinking this morning: 'Diversity is the strength of our country.' Oh, yeah?" Carlson said, trying out a line that would become one of his go-to attacks on "Tucker Carlson Tonight." "How's that? I mean, is diversity the strength of the Balkans? No."

At "Crossfire," Carlson told colleagues he felt overproduced and trapped by the rigid left-right debate format. The show was drawing dwindling audiences, and after it was canceled in early 2005, he moved to MSNBC with a new show, "The Situation With Tucker Carlson." (The writer

of this article is an MSNBC contributor.) Carlson dropped his signature bow tie and took an even sharper turn against immigration, adopting the resentful, combative language of the Republican Party's increasingly vocal nativist wing. "We didn't take our lands from Mexico," said Henry Miller's great-great-grandson, adding, "This is our country. That is their country."

Illegal immigration, he now insisted, was not merely a political or economic matter, but a civilizational threat. He defended billboards in California that read "Stop the Invasion, Secure Our Borders." ("It's an invasion," he said. "I don't know what's wrong with saying so.") In the spring and summer of 2006, as Bush tried to revive his plan to offer legal status to millions of people living in the country illegally, Carlson inveighed against it. "You're talking about completely changing the nature of the country," he claimed.

A revolt by Republican lawmakers ultimately doomed Bush's immigration plan; in ways not yet fully appreciated by Republican leaders, immigration was becoming their party's animating issue. At the time, though, Carlson's viewpoint seemed to be on the wane. His MSNBC show cycled through three time slots and two names without finding a big audience. He was canceled — again — in 2008 as the network's prime-time lineup began to shift left. Carlson retreated to Maine, where he spent a few months fishing.

That fall, Barack Obama won election as the country's first Black president, seeming to validate the ascent of an increasingly multiracial electorate. Carlson eventually snagged a pundit contract at Fox and an unpaid fellowship at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. But his days as a TV star seemed at an end. With four school-age children, the Carlsons sold their \$4 million Washington home, and he had what he later described as a kind of meltdown. "I was living in that world, and I was not succeeding," he said. "It forced me to think about what I had done wrong, because I had no choice, because I had no money."

Tabloid Impresario

Over lunch at the Palm one day with his college roommate, a former White House aide named Neil Patel, Carlson gamed out his next act. They imagined a new right-leaning digital tabloid, one that would be conservative without being partisan. The website, The Daily Caller, went live in 2010, in a right-wing media landscape dominated by the Drudge Report, Fox itself and the vast analog domain of talk radio. The Caller promised to emphasize original reporting. "Our goal is not to get Republicans elected," Carlson said. "Our goal is to explain what your government is doing."

The Caller was eclectic and boisterous, with an office beer keg and a staff that was underpaid, largely inexperienced and overwhelmingly young. Carlson was by most accounts a loyal and generous boss. He enjoyed stirring people up and getting them arguing with one another — or with him. He also liked to hire outrageous personalities and set them loose to write whatever they wanted. He wasn't so much hiring a newsroom, he sometimes told his staff, as filling out a pledge class or casting a sitcom. "I like to have this character and that character," he later recalled in a 2015 podcast interview with a Caller colleague. "I always want a fat character, always."

Patel sometimes described the Caller as an experiment in libertarian management principles. No one really had a permanent editor, and although the staff prided itself on breaking news, some of its biggest scoops imploded under scrutiny: an article that the Environmental Protection Agency planned to hire thousands of new bureaucrats to enforce greenhouse gas regulations, for

example, or reports that a Democratic senator had paid for sex while visiting a campaign donor in the Dominican Republic.

Carlson seemed to relish the criticism, treating it as proof that the Caller was needed. The site embraced what Eric Owens, a former writer and editor there, called a “gently anti-PC atmosphere.” To boost traffic, it frequently featured slideshows of swimsuit model Kate Upton. Owens, who covered education, wrote dozens of articles about female teachers having sex with minor male students. The Caller framed these stories with mock outrage, under the rubric “Teacher Sex,” suggesting that the boys probably enjoyed the experience. “Tucker loved those stories, because they were funny and got a lot of traffic,” Owens said in an interview. “The theory was: Let’s give people what they want. Whatever is working, let’s give them more of that.”

Patel focused relentlessly on audience metrics, and within a couple of years, the Caller was turning a small profit. Carlson, though, still harbored dreams of succeeding on TV. In 2013, Fox gave him a shot in its minor leagues as a weekend co-host of “Fox and Friends,” the popular morning show. The hours were terrible — Carlson, a night owl, once fell asleep on air — and the work sometimes fluffy. But it put him back in the game, and it helped pay the bills. His media career had given him adventures and an exciting life, he told a Caller colleague in 2015, but it had been hard to earn the kind of living he aspired to. “I’ve sweated a lot about money, a lot,” he said. “And continue to, probably more than a 45-year-old should.”

At the time, Carlson was locked in an increasingly bitter inheritance battle. His mother had died a few years earlier in France, apparently without a will, leaving her sons and her second husband, Michael Vaughan, to divide up her estate. Alongside her paintings and jewelry were the dregs of the Miller ranching fortune — a share of mineral rights sprinkled over 68,000 acres of inland central California and valued at around \$37,000.

The orderly disposal of the estate was interrupted in the fall of 2013, according to court records in California, when one of Vaughan’s daughters from a prior marriage discovered a handwritten will that left everything to him. It also included a one-sentence codicil: “I leave my sons Tucker Swanson McNear Carlson and Buckley Swanson Peck Carlson one dollar each.”

Tucker Carlson and his brother sued, alleging that the will was a forgery; a forensics specialist brought in to examine it stated that it was probably authentic. Carlson’s uncle asserted that the “discovery” of his sister’s will occurred only after a new well on the family’s California property began pumping out hundreds of barrels of oil. In court filings, the Vaughans now valued the estate’s mineral assets at \$2.6 million. The litigation was still going on years later when Carlson showed up on Carolla’s podcast to hawk “Ship of Fools,” his Fox-era jeremiad about America’s selfish elites. “She didn’t raise us, she was horrible, and then she dies and causes all these problems,” Carlson told the host, describing a conversation with his brother. “And he goes, ‘It’s just perfect; she’s a bitch from the grave.’”

But another, more consequential family feud was unfolding inside the Caller. At the start of Obama’s second term, a bipartisan group of senators known as the Gang of Eight tried to resurrect immigration reform. Carlson was already known to his staff as an immigration hawk; in office debates, he would sometimes invoke Lewiston as a kind of personal turning point, telling colleagues that he had watched Somali refugees ruin the city. In 2013, he met Stephen Miller — future architect of the Trump administration’s immigration policies, then a congressional aide

working to defeat the Gang of Eight — and found in him a kindred spirit. Although Carlson allowed the Caller’s pro-immigration writers free rein, the site’s news coverage of immigration reform, led by a reporter named Neil Munro, was relentlessly hostile. Miller and his allies on the Hill fed Munro a steady diet of tips and story suggestions. The Caller’s audience loved it.

“Immigration was always the most animating thing; it wasn’t even close,” said a former Caller employee familiar with the site’s readership metrics, who requested anonymity for fear of antagonizing Carlson.

But the Caller’s immigration coverage set off intense debates among writers and editors there, reflecting the battle that would soon remake the Republican Party itself. One former writer recalled filing pieces about immigration that would come back from editors with supportive quotes stripped out. Some Caller staff members viewed Munro’s news articles as little more than opinion columns, with an obvious slant and often factual problems. Patel, himself an immigrant, pushed editors for more balanced coverage; Carlson, though, usually defended Munro’s stories and plainly agreed with them, as did many of the Caller’s younger employees, former staff members said. On a group email list for editors, one argument culminated in a frustrated message from a longtime editor, Jamie Weinstein, asking whether the Caller now had an official editorial position against immigration.

The Caller had always attracted young writers with more or less conventional conservative politics. But in the years before Trump declared for president, the site’s free-for-all atmosphere and low barriers to entry also attracted other types — people with short resumes and edgy views on race and American identity. “Whatever sort of was fashionable among smart young conservatives tended to be the trend in the office,” said Jim Antle, a former editor and writer at the Caller. “When the Caller started, most smart young conservatives were libertarian. Within a few years after that, a lot of them were populist, nationalist types — which also meant that they were sometimes attracted to things that were much worse than that.”

‘What We Pretend to Be’

One of the new arrivals was a young Dartmouth College graduate named Blake Neff, who joined the Caller in 2014. Neff, who grew up in South Dakota, was smart but awkward, with a callous streak that most of his colleagues excused as cluelessness. He sometimes complained that women only liked men with looks or money. Once, according to two former Caller employees, he told a colleague she would need to find her future husband before she reached her 30s, then walked over to a whiteboard to chart out the years, months and days she had left. Neff, who declined to be interviewed for this article, covered education, which mostly meant churning out pieces on far-left professors (“Professor Blames Whites for Her Menstrual Problems”) and strident student protesters (“Hispanic Students at Duke Demand a Nicer Office, Free Trophies”).

Carlson soon took Neff under his wing. In August 2015, the two traveled together to the Albany, New York, wedding of a Caller colleague. After they returned, Carlson raved about Neff’s intelligence. He told others he enjoyed Neff’s writing style — especially his satires, among them an imagined Trump stump speech about Jesus that Neff wrote the month after Trump entered the race. (“I mean, he got out-dealed by Pontius Pilate, a loser if I ever saw one.”) Later, when Carlson got his own Fox show, he brought Neff along as a writer. “Anything he’s reading off the teleprompter, the first draft was written by me,” Neff told his college alumni magazine.

In his downtime, he liked to post on AutoAdmit, an online forum popular with law students and one of the many digital watering holes where young men egg one another on to be outrageous and offensive. He started one thread titled “Urban business idea: He Didn’t Do Muffin!” referring to a racist joke that arose on Reddit in the wake of the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and he mocked a female acquaintance as an “Azn megashrew,” using a slang term for “Asian.”) In 2020, after CNN revealed Neff as the posts’ author, Carlson distanced himself, saying they “have no connection” to “Tucker Carlson Tonight.” Neff’s AutoAdmit posts, however, do not appear to have been a closely kept secret at the Caller. His fellow education writer, Owens, recalled him bragging about his exploits on the site. “It struck me as, this is just a kid who doesn’t understand why he shouldn’t say this, and he’ll grow out of it,” Owens said.

In an email to the Times, Neff denied making disparaging comments about women to his colleagues and dismissed criticism of his AutoAdmit posts, which he said Carlson was unaware of. “I make no apologies for now-ancient posts on an anonymous message board which offended no one,” Neff said.

Neff didn’t stop posting, and he wasn’t alone. Over the next several years, almost a dozen Caller employees or regular contributors would be outed for posting racist material elsewhere online, or for their connections to an underground clique of next-generation white nationalists in and around Washington. At the Caller, they wrote articles claiming that people living in this country illegally were predisposed to rape, highlighting a grisly MS-13 murder or mocking diversity consultants. On their own time, according to exposés in *The Atlantic*, *Splinter*, *ProPublica* and other outlets, they wrote under pseudonyms for white nationalist websites, went to conferences organized by leaders of the “alt-right” or traded antisemitic jokes on an email list titled “Morning Hate.” In interviews, two former Caller employees, recalling the cascade of revelations, each quoted a line from the Kurt Vonnegut novel “*Mother Night*”: “We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.”

In 2015, Caller employees came across a picture of an intern named Ashley Rae Goldenberg standing with a young white nationalist leader named Matthew Heimbach, who carried a flag dating from imperial Germany, now a neo-Nazi emblem. The circumstances of the picture were unclear, and according to Owens, Carlson decided not to fire her, arguing that she was only an intern and doing so would only bring more attention to the matter. When white nationalists carried torches in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 to protest the removal of a Confederate statue, the Caller’s reporter on the scene turned out to be one of the rally’s speakers; the Caller later scrubbed his bylines from the site.

That summer, the Southern Poverty Law Center published pictures showing that Greer, the Caller deputy editor, had mingled with members of the Wolves of Vinland and Youth for Western Civilization, groups the center has linked to white nationalism. Greer told his editors that the pictures were from heavy metal shows he had gone to in college. The Caller would only sever ties with him later, after *The Atlantic* revealed that he had also written pseudonymous posts about “Indo-European virtue” and the threat of “non-White hordes” for an alt-right website.

By then, Carlson had stepped away from day-to-day management of the Caller to focus on his Fox show. In an email to the Times, Patel said that he would “admit freely that we should have screened writers better in our earlier years.” He added, “The truth is, I did not imagine those

white-identity types trying to join us. I still believe that represents the tiniest minority of conservative America.”

But even outside the Caller’s office, the border that once separated mainstream conservatism from the cranks and nativists of the far-right had thinned. While white nationalists infiltrated the Caller in private, Trump began taking over the Republican Party in public, casting Mexican migrants as rapists and criminals and promising to bar Muslims from entering the country. Trump said the things you weren’t supposed to say and found that millions of voters were eager to listen. The political markets were moving, and Carlson took note. In early 2016, as Republican leaders scrambled to figure out how to stop Trump, Carlson sat down in his kitchen in Washington to explain why they would fail.

He pounded out a piece for Politico, the Beltway-insider bible, pausing occasionally to read passages to his wife. “It seemed obvious that Trump could win the nomination and be president,” Carlson later explained. “I wanted to predict that in print before it happened.” He excoriated the Republican elite — the lobbyists and think tank experts and congressional leaders, his neighbors and onetime friends — for betraying the party’s voters. Friends and colleagues would come to think of the essay as Carlson’s personal declaration of war on the conservative establishment that had long nurtured him, and where his father had built a second career. “They’re the ones who’ve been advocating for open borders, and nation-building in countries whose populations hate us, and trade deals that eliminated jobs while enriching their donors,” he wrote. Trump was loved because he told the truth, Carlson wrote, and he could win because no one else did.

“It’s thrilling to hear someone say what he really thinks, even if you believe he’s wrong,” Carlson wrote. “It’s especially exciting when you suspect he’s right.”