

# Chasing FOX

IN THE SPRING of 2006, a year and a half after he was hired to run CNN/U.S., Jonathan Klein went to his boss Jim Walton with an idea. CNN was in trouble. While the network remained a profit engine and an iconic brand, prime-time ratings were stalled. Fox News had surged ahead in the cable-news race, and now, alarmingly, Keith Olbermann was coming on strong. His anti-Bush broadsides were transforming his 8 P.M. MSNBC show, *Countdown*, into a bombastic counterweight to Fox's Bill O'Reilly, and combined, both personalities were drowning out CNN's Paula Zahn, the respected television veteran who was anchoring a standard newscast during the 8 P.M. slot. ¶ And so Klein set out to poach Olbermann. At the time, Olbermann had a window to negotiate in his MSNBC contract and Klein made a hard sell. He told Olbermann he could bring *Countdown* to CNN—the two even discussed which members of Olbermann's staff would make the move with him. "Jon and I were in very deep discussions on a regular basis for me to go over there," says Olbermann. "One of the premises was we would have put MSNBC out of business." ¶ Ted Turner's vision of the primacy of the news remained something of a religion at CNN. But Klein was

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By **GABRIEL  
SHERMAN**

ILLUSTRATION BY GLUEKIT







hired to take risks. A former executive vice-president at CBS News, Klein had a reputation as an expletive-spouting showman. He was based at CNN's offices in the Time Warner Center, lunched frequently at Gabriel's and Porter House New York, and enjoyed reading his quotes in the *Times*. When he took the job in 2004, he insisted CNN give him the title of president. It was a style that didn't always sit well with Walton and senior executives in Atlanta, which had been the power center that imbued the network with a folksy, cautious sensibility. A CNN lifer who had joined the network as a 23-year-old video journalist, Walton cast himself as a protector of CNN tradition.

Walton pushed back on Klein's plan to hire Olbermann. "I'm not gonna be the guy who's gonna turn CNN into an opinion network," he told executives in meetings. But in Klein's view, CNN already was an opinion network. For an hour each night, Walton tolerated Lou Dobbs's anti-immigration tirades. Klein pressed Walton to reconsider, but Walton held firm. "I bailed out when it became apparent that the people above [Klein] were less than sanguine about this," Olbermann tells me.

There has been plenty of movement since then at CNN: Campbell Brown came and went; Lou Dobbs was finally forced out; Larry King at long last retired. But ratings have mostly flowed in one direction: downward—down 40 percent since 2009.

Klein faced a possibly insoluble cable-news riddle: How do you build the kind of excitement that draws in viewers without being partisan? At a Time Warner board meeting this spring, Walton was forced to defend CNN's ratings issues. The pressure on Klein ratcheted up. In April, Klein began talks with British talk-show personality Piers Morgan. In June, he announced that he would hire the famously black-socked and disgraced former governor Eliot Spitzer. Klein faced stiff internal resistance to hiring Spitzer. When one CNN executive expressed to Klein the concern that viewers risked being turned off by Spitzer's hooker scandal, Klein had snapped, "I don't give a fuck."

Pairing him with a female co-host was delicate. "They were concerned a young, beautiful co-host wouldn't work," said one source familiar with the show's development. Finally, they settled on Kathleen Parker, an attractive 59-year-old Pulitzer Prize-winning conservative columnist. The *Parker Spitzer* show debuts on October 4.

Klein thought his place at the network was secure. Six weeks ago, CNN signed him to a new contract. But late last month, Walton made his move. Klein was planning to head to a rehearsal for the *Parker Spitzer* show when he stopped by Walton's office.

In a five-minute conversation, Walton told Klein he was out. "You're the best president CNN has ever had, but we're making a change," he told him. In Klein's place, Walton was bringing in longtime CNN executive Ken Jautz, a former CNN Berlin bureau chief who had successfully juiced the ratings of sister network HLN by taking it down-market and tabloid. For now, Jautz is staying the course. "Our business model is based on quality journalism and nonpartisan programming," he says. "Don't get me wrong; we have a ratings challenge in prime time."

**THE RISE OF** Fox News on the right and MSNBC's follow-up pincer movement on the left have trapped and isolated CNN inside its brand, desperate to find a way forward. There are still times—presidential elections, global catastrophes—when news as it was traditionally understood can still win the ratings game. And CNN, because of its premium advertising rates, international networks, affiliates, and websites, is still surprisingly profitable: Last year, CNN generated \$500 million in profit, its best year ever. But it's a television commandment that thou must succeed in prime time. Even in prime time, CNN actually gets plenty of viewers, but they tend to click through rather than linger. And Fox's secret is that viewers stay. That's because Fox's rightward flanking maneuver, capturing a disenfranchised part of the audience, was only part of its strategy. The news, especially political news, wasn't something that happened. It was something that you shaped out of the raw data, brought out of the clay of zhlubby, boring politics, reborn with heroes and villains, triumphs and reverses, never-ending story lines—what TV executives call "flow." And the beauty of it was that the viewers—the voters—were the protagonists, victims of evil Kenyan socialist overlords, or rebels, coming to take the government back. There was none of the on-the-one-hand, on-the-

other-hand relativity crossfire that mirrors the journalism-school ideal of objectivity. All the fire went one way. The viewers, on their couches, were flattered as the most important participants, the foot soldiers in Fox's army; some of them even voted.

"Fox figured it out that you have to stand for something in cable," MSNBC president Phil Griffin says. Since Griffin was appointed in 2008, the network has adopted much of the Fox News playbook. "What we're doing is targeting an audience," Griffin says. "In television, and in particular cable television, brand is everything," NBC Universal CEO Jeff Zucker told me, before he announced his departure two weeks ago. "For a long time, MSNBC floundered with its identity."

The cable-news business is creating politics in its own cartoonish, desperate, loopy, egomaniacal image. While Zucker and Griffin are both liberals, they got in the politics business for the ratings, and MSNBC's new identity has been a ratings boon. Its audience is less than half the size of Fox's, partly because liberals tend to pride themselves on being part of the fact-based community and may prefer media products like the *New York Times*, or the *PBS NewsHour*, which make their points without shouting. Griffin, now that he's found ratings religion, is doubling down. In April 2009, he hired the liberal radio host Ed Schultz for a 6 p.m. show. This past summer, MSNBC announced it was developing a 10 p.m. show for Lawrence O'Donnell to replace reruns of Olbermann. Recently, MSNBC tried to buy the *Huffington Post* (*Huffington Post* founder Ken Lerer rejected the offer). The network hired Spike Lee to shoot a multi-million-dollar advertising campaign and developed its own obtuse slogan: "Lean Forward."

MSNBC has not penetrated politics quite to the degree of Fox, with its four prospective presidential candidates on payroll. But it may just be a matter of time. Recently, Joe Scarborough quietly called political advisers after his name was circulated as a possible candidate in the blogosphere, but he was counseled against it. "Everyone says the same thing," Scarborough tells me. "Why do you leave where you are to be the 99th-ranking member of the United States Senate?" Last year, Chris Matthews gave serious thought to running for the Senate from his home state of Pennsylvania in 2010. And already the opposition treats them like political powers. In March, Scott Brown sent a fund-raiser e-mail to supporters that claimed Rachel Maddow was being recruited to run against him in 2012. "Rachel Maddow has a nightly platform to push her far-left agenda. What about you?" Brown's e-mail ominously read. And this summer, Florida tea-party darling Marco

**"All I hear is talk, and I'm not seeing it," said Jon Klein's boss. "I don't want to hear you talk, I want to see results."**



*Cable couple  
Eliot Spitzer and  
Kathleen Parker.*

Rubio commissioned an ad saying: “How do you know [Rubio’s] plan is right? Rachel Maddow thinks it’s wrong.” Amazingly, now that he’s been pushed out, even Jeff Zucker is rumored to be contemplating a run for the Senate. After doing TV, how hard can it be?

The game may be destroying American politics—but it’s the only game in town, and CNN, thus far, is out of it. “Being a passionate centrist is always a bit harder than a raving lunatic on each side,” Eliot Spitzer told me. “They do not recognize a reality that Fox and MSNBC recognize,” says a former senior CNN staffer. “You have to be real showmen and hook into America, which is blue collar and angry. The CNN culture is still very strange. You walk into that building, you think you’re the Jesuits and you’re protecting a certain legacy. They still look at Fox as a carnival—not Fox as a brilliant marketing entity. It’s weird. They’re decades into it, and they’ll protect it to the end.”

Piers Morgan, coming in, knows he has to polarize, even if he’s not partisan. “I want to be that guy in a year’s time who’s the most loved or the most hated,” he says.

**THE CABLE CHANNELS** are in politicians’ heads as never before (and who’s even thinking about network anchors nowadays? They’re yesterday’s news). In an interview published last week, President Obama told *Rolling Stone* that Fox is part of a worldview that is “destructive for the long-term growth” of the country. Later that day, White House spokesman Bill Burton praised MSNBC’s pundits, telling reporters that Olbermann and Rachel Maddow are some of “the folks who help to keep our government honest.”

And the cable folks have never been more certain of their place at the table. “I said this to [Obama], and I said this on the air, that he acts like Lincoln wanted to act in his second term, not realizing the better analogy [is that] he’s Lincoln in his first term,” Olbermann says. “It’s a freaking war out here on the left-versus-right battleground.”

Olbermann is sitting at his desk at 30 Rock on an August afternoon, dressed in baggy cargo shorts, a billowy white shirt, and rubberized socks designed for running barefoot. A prim blonde assistant silently deposited a venti Starbucks cup on his desk before scurrying from the room. “I’m an inveterate tea drinker, ironically given my opposition to the tea party,” he says. “I’ll out-tea them any day of the week.”

Olbermann may be at war with the right, but today he’s been drawn into a skirmish with his brothers on the left. Earlier that morning, White House press secretary Robert Gibbs sparked outrage among progressives when he labeled liberals critical of Obama “the professional left.” The ensuing

fracas exposed a long-simmering rift between Obama and the liberal commentariat. “Maybe Gibbs is blasting me personally,” he says. “Apparently we’re the professional left. I didn’t know that until being defined this morning by Mr. Gibbs. I suppose that makes them the unprofessional left.”

Olbermann’s tiff with the White House was minor, a “superficial” issue, he assures me. His true enemies will always be the right and Fox News, which, in Olbermann’s eyes, are one and the same. “The standard false equivalency in the coverage of cable news is that this is a left-wing version of Fox,” Olbermann says. “I get no talking points. It illustrates the core difference between us and the guys down the street.”

With the explosion of anti-Bush rage after Hurricane Katrina, Olbermann saw an opening. “I wanted to take over this little corner of the world,” he says. He blasted onto the scene by practicing the well-worn political tactic of punching up, attacking Bill O’Reilly, who, at the time—it’s hard to remember now—was TV’s king right-winger. “O’Reilly punched down on Olbermann and brought attention to Keith,” Phil Griffin tells me. Tensions got so bad that in 2009, Zucker and then-Murdoch adviser Gary Ginsberg discussed a secret truce after O’Reilly began attacking G.E. CEO Jeff Immelt. But these days, Olbermann largely ignores his old foe. “There’s just something missing. There’s some fire that’s gone,” Olbermann says. “He looks tired, he sounds tired.” Olbermann has refocused his artillery on Glenn Beck. “He is the spearhead of the moment. It underscores where the right is,” Olbermann says. “He really is the definition of the demagogue.”

Olbermann’s nightly numbers—*Countdown* tripled MSNBC’s audience in the 8 p.m. slot—give him immense power at the network and force his bosses to tolerate his mountain-size ego. MSNBC president Phil

**“The problem at CNN is a television problem,” says Keith Olbermann. “They’re going to please neither side.”**

Griffin, who has worked with Olbermann on and off since their first days at CNN in the early eighties, acknowledges there have been issues. “It’s always complex because of management and Keith,” he says.

There’s tension between morning and night at MSNBC. “I don’t have an hour to waste for someone just reading Democratic or Republican Party talking points,” says *Morning Joe* host Joe Scarborough, who’s positioned himself as a moderate. “We’ve created a safe house,” he says of his show.

“I have no comment about him,” Olbermann says.

Sometimes the stories that circulate about Olbermann are hard to believe, and certainly they’re fueled by competitive jealousies that dominate the halls of television news. But Olbermann can take his eccentricities to extremes. There’s a story that he told his producers to communicate with him by leaving notes in a small box positioned outside his office. Last spring, after David Shuster tweeted that he was guest-hosting *Countdown* while Olbermann was out sick, Olbermann erupted when a blog mentioned Shuster’s tweet and he fired off an e-mail to him saying, “Don’t ever talk about me and medical issues again.” Olbermann’s executive producer later told Shuster that there’s a rule against mentioning Olbermann on Twitter.

Griffin, a master politician with talent, says that Olbermann’s influence is overstated. “Keith doesn’t run the show,” he says. “I do a lot of things he doesn’t like. I do a lot of things he does.”

**DESPERATE TO GET CNN** back in the game, Klein called Kathleen Parker one morning this spring. A longtime print journalist, with debutante features and long, flaxen hair, Parker had been a regular guest on Chris Matthews’s Sunday-morning show on NBC, but she had no ambitions to host a television show. Klein explained he was thinking of launching a new program, and would she be interested in hosting? Parker remembers Klein wouldn’t divulge who her potential co-host would be, but the offer piqued her interest. Parker and Klein met twice, but both times Klein kept the name of her co-host secret. Finally, during a third phone call, Parker asked Klein, “Are you going to tell me who?”

“Eliot Spitzer,” Klein responded.

Silence.

“Bold,” Parker responded.

Parker’s reaction was better than many of Klein’s CNN colleagues. Spitzer’s scandal baggage was a big turnoff, especially for senior female executives. And the move also seemed to undermine Klein’s own philosophy. “If you have Eliot Spitzer and his right-wing foil, why did you cancel *Cross-*



fire?" one frustrated producer asks me.

But Klein believed that there was space in the middle to counterprogram to O'Reilly and Olbermann (while copping their style—he tried to hire Maddow's executive producer, Bill Wolff). "We've gone for intelligence, and we're betting on that," Klein told me before he was fired. "Intelligence driven by a sense of, say, adventure."

Klein first had the idea to hire Spitzer after reading his financial-reform columns in *Slate*. He developed a concept for a show called *The Investigators*. When I visited Klein this summer, he still had the idea for the show marked on a whiteboard in his office. Listed alongside Spitzer's name was TARP special inspector general Neil Barofsky, Bernie Madoff whistle-blower Harry Markopolos, and Elizabeth Warren. "What if you got them all together and every week they get together and they hold people accountable?" Klein asks me excitedly. Spitzer didn't think the idea could be pulled off. "Eliot's reaction was, 'Well, as attorney general, I had subpoena power.'"

Klein developed a backup plan. He talked to Howard Dean and MSNBC's Lawrence O'Donnell. But Klein remained interested in Spitzer and arranged for the two to meet, and in the late spring Parker took the Acela to New York and showed up at Spitzer's office. "It was one of the strangest dates ever," Parker tells me. "We joked this is closest either of us will get to an arranged marriage."

On a recent morning, Parker is sitting opposite Spitzer and their executive producer Liza McGuirk at a corner table inside the cavernous tenth-floor CNN cafeteria, with Columbus Circle filling the window.

"Well, you were approving me or checking me out," Parker says teasingly.

Spitzer shifts uncomfortably. "I wouldn't use those phrases."

The pair have a surprising, adult chemistry, simultaneously flirty and professional. In our conversation, Parker plays the teasing office wife humbling Spitzer, who playfully takes the abuse.

Spitzer says the goal for the show is consensus.

"Oh, no," Parker interjects. "There is a right and wrong here, and I'm right."

"And that's why I will go home every night shaking my head and drinking heavily."

This past May, Klein conducted a secret survey of about 700 people. "Of course we tested to make sure we're not fucking crazy," he told me. At first, Spitzer scored abysmally on likability and awareness. Outside of New York, many people simply didn't know who he was. But after viewing a series of

two-minute clips of Spitzer guest-hosting for Dylan Ratigan on MSNBC that spring, Spitzer's scores improved. Survey participants liked Spitzer's strong anti-Wall Street views.

But the notion of a talk show with two clashing points of view is very much passé in prime-time television. "CNN is struggling because the audience knows where things stand and it becomes almost embarrassing to sit at home and watch hosts who don't know where things stand," says MSNBC's O'Donnell. "That's why they're struggling. Why would you watch that?"

Olbermann echoes O'Donnell's analysis. "I don't want to make it sound like everything should be an echo chamber, but the idea that you're not an opinion channel because it's not just one opinion is just ludicrous," Olbermann said. "James Carville is an opinion, nothing but an opinion, and he's on all the damn time. The flaw over at



Walter Cronkite.  
And that's the way it was,  
a long time ago.

CNN is a television flaw. It's not opinion versus non-opinion. They're going to please neither side. I would argue it's much more dishonest intellectually to say the moon is a thing largely made out of rock and is in the sky and makes this circle around the Earth and spins in a certain direction and we can see it in the distance, and to answer that, the man who says the moon is made entirely out of green cheese."

**ON A RECENT** Friday, Rachel Maddow is standing at a whiteboard twirling a green Sharpie and looking disapprovingly at an array of stories listed in front of her. There's a segment about the Obama White House's failure to win the PR war, another segment about a new political ad by Florida Republican Senate candidate Marco Rubio that features Maddow as a punch line, and a segment on the congressional hearings into the BP spill. Maddow scans the whiteboard. The Shirley Sherrod scan-

dal, which had been dominating the news all week, isn't on the lineup, and she wants to cover it tonight. Five days into the scandal, the story had shifted to the ideological battlefield of cable news, and Maddow is now a target. The previous night on Fox, O'Reilly lashed into Maddow and NBC News for charging Fox with stirring the racial pot. "I mean, one NBC News loon actually said on the air that the coverage of ACORN, the Black Panthers, and Ms. Sherrod was designed to make white Americans scared of black Americans. Who is sponsoring this stuff, *Mad* magazine?" O'Reilly roared. He then recast the debate in business terms, portraying MSNBC as a desperate competitor. "NBC News is getting crushed by FNC—crushed," O'Reilly told his audience. That's why [NBC News president Steve] Capus and his character assassins do what they do. If you can't beat them, slime them."

Maddow thinks she's settled on the appropriate comeback. "I want to wear a loon suit," she says, flashing a raffish grin. She turns to her staff and pretends to address O'Reilly as a duck. "Sorry, you really hurt my feelings, I am a loon. I'm on the Canadian dollar bill. It's awful"—she pauses—"but you, however, are also a race-baiting fuck."

The room explodes in laughter. Maddow's executive producer, Bill Wolff, has doubts about the bit and pushes Maddow to take on Rubio, not Fox. "My feeling is, Rubio is news. Rubio is trying to be the senator from Florida. O'Reilly is a media schmuck."

"But it's the Sherrod story," Maddow counters. "I have leveled a serious charge about what's happening with making white people afraid of black people as a political tactic by political activists, by people who want to harm the administration, and by Fox News as a political organization."

On cable, schoolyard rules rule. "You should always get the last word," Maddow reminds her team. "Right now, we don't have the last word. Right now, the last word is loon."

Early on, Phil Griffin didn't think Rachel Maddow had any chance in television when she debuted on the network, in 2005, as a commentator. A boyish-looking, openly gay liberal with short-cropped brown hair, blocky Elvis Costello-style glasses, and an aversion to makeup unless she's on-camera, Maddow didn't resemble the airbrushed fembots that populated cable-news programming, especially at Fox News. Executives gave Maddow a new wardrobe, and soon racks (Continued on page 91)

of pantsuits and blazers were wheeled into the office vacated by former anchor Connie Chung. A fast-talking, overly caffeinated television executive, Griffin has a loud, coarse voice and a fondness for towel-snapping, locker-room jokes. It's a tribal sense of humor that, far from sparing his fellow Democrats and their sacred cows, seems to target them. Around the network, staffers call him "Buddy." When he refers to Ed Schultz as a "used-tire salesman," his staffers can hardly keep a straight face. He's politically incorrect, a programmer and a businessman obsessed with ratings and his main rival. "Cable is for angry white males," he's been heard to say, though he told me he's taking a different path. "It's a knife fight for every viewer," Griffin tells me one morning in his office on the third floor at 30 Rock. He has a large, bald dome of a head and looks like a lean Terry Bradshaw when he crouches forward, sleeves rolled, to press a point, usually about boosting his network's ratings. "For a long time, we were sort of a subsidiary of NBC News, the little brother, the triple-A ball club. Over the last three years—we love NBC News—but we're partners. We share resources, but we are independent. We are our own channel."

Griffin's satisfaction with MSNBC's recent success is born of the decade he spent at the network when it was in last place. "To throw things up, which we did for many years and see if it sticks, is not a strategy. And I'll never do it again," he tells me. "It's too painful."

Griffin met Jeff Zucker at the *Today* show in the early nineties; Griffin went onto be a senior producer for Tom Brokaw at the *Nightly News*. In the spring of 1996, the then-NBC News president, Andy Lack, told Griffin he wanted him to work on a fledgling cable channel that NBC was launching with Microsoft.

To many inside the halls of 30 Rock, Griffin's jump to cable news played like a demotion from his perch at *Nightly News*, where he globe-trotted to Somalia and Moscow on assignment. But even though his new job was in Secaucus, Griffin didn't see his posting at MSNBC as an exile to Siberia. "I'm not a news snob," Griffin says. "Never have been. I love it all. I love reading about Lindsay Lohan and I love the Whatchamacallit Leaks. I love it all. Life's interesting!"

For years, the values of news snobs held considerable sway at MSNBC. "There was a question, Could the subsidiary take a political position?" remembers a former senior executive. Tim Russert, then NBC News's Washington bureau chief and moderator of *Meet the Press*, was an Olympian figure inside NBC News, an information hub, a

kingmaker, and the scorekeeper to official Washington. To Russert, the rise of a free-wheeling cable channel attached to NBC News was worrisome. In response to Chris Matthews's relentless attacks on the Clintons following the Lewinsky scandal, the White House had threatened to pull guests off *Meet the Press*. Congressmen would complain, too. "Then Tim would call Andy Lack or Tom Brokaw and say, 'What the hell?'" the executive recalls. Brokaw would often call Griffin and tell him to rein in Matthews. Around this time, G.E. CEO Immelt confronted NBC News head Neal Shapiro. "MSNBC is a dot on the side of a pool ball," Immelt told Shapiro, "but it's embarrassing. I don't like being No. 3." And with the surge in patriotism following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, NBC CEO Bob Wright told Shapiro that MSNBC should try and outflank Fox on the right. "We have to be more conservative than they are," Wright told Shapiro pointedly. Swirling graphics of the American flag soon became a fixture on the network along with the tagline "America's News Channel."

Despite the network's emphasis on flag waving, MSNBC showed how little it understood the Fox model when, with Griffin as MSNBC's prime time head, it hired the liberal Phil Donahue, who'd been Griffin's childhood idol, out of retirement in April 2002 to anchor an 8 p.m. prime-time talk show that would challenge O'Reilly. The show debuted with the highest ratings ever for an MSNBC program, attracting more than a million viewers in its first night. But within a month, the audience was cut in half. At the same time, executives expressed increasing unease about his vocal opposition to the looming war in Iraq. At a time when red-meat patriotism prevailed, Donahue booked antiwar guests like Michael Moore, Rosie O'Donnell, Susan Sarandon, and Tim Robbins. Soon the Donahue problem threatened Griffin's job. In a tense phone conversation, Shapiro told MSNBC president Erik Sorenson to fire Griffin, but Sorenson pushed back.

"I'm not going to do that," he told Shapiro. "No. 1: Phil's been loyal to me for a long time. I don't think it's right. And No. 2: We're short-handed. We have all this talent, and he's the one who's managing it."

As a compromise, Griffin's job was spared but he was stripped of responsibility for the show. The new producer insisted on a precise numerical balance between liberals and conservatives. Donahue's problems only increased when Chris Matthews let it be known that he wanted Donahue off the air. Matthews was a rising force at the network, with a reported salary of \$5 million. He cultivated former G.E. CEO Jack Welch and had the ear of NBC CEO Bob Wright (the two summered together on Nantucket).

Matthews saw himself as MSNBC's biggest star, and he was upset that the network was pumping significant resources into Donahue's show. In the fall of 2002, *U.S. News & World Report* ran a gossip item that had Matthews saying over lunch in Washington that if Donahue stays on the air, he could bring down the network.

After the item was published, Matthews showed up at Donahue's office and apologized. "He didn't deny it," Donahue remembers. With the war looming, Sorenson and Griffin decided to take him off the air to make way for 24/7 war coverage. (Matthews told me he had nothing to do with the decision.) For Griffin, the firing of his childhood idol was a painful experience. "The guy that got me into TV probably hates my guts, and I wish he didn't because I love the guy," Griffin says.

In the spring of 2005, Griffin's friendship with Zucker paid off when Zucker, then the CEO of NBC Universal Television Group, brought Griffin back to 30 Rock to a new senior role overseeing the *Today* show. After nearly a decade at MSNBC, Griffin wanted to return to the NBC mother ship. If nothing else, he despised his daily commute across the Hudson. "I'm not a fan," he says. "Thirty Rock? Secaucus, New Jersey? Take your pick."

Griffin's proximity to Zucker also gave him leverage over his former boss Rick Kaplan, who was brought in the year before to run MSNBC. Griffin let it be known he had no love for Kaplan. "I have to sit here and listen to this guy?" he groaned to a senior producer after one meeting with Kaplan. In 2006, Kaplan was canned, and Zucker put Griffin in charge. Griffin was happily ensconced at 30 Rock. To run the cable channel day-to-day in Secaucus, Dan Abrams, an NBC legal analyst and host of the now-defunct prime-time MSNBC show called *The Abrams Report*, was promoted to the position of MSNBC general manager. It was an odd move. Abrams had no management experience and had landed the job on the basis of writing a six-page memo about his plans for the network. It also helped that Abrams, like Griffin, was a Zucker friend and attended the same Hamptons parties as he did.

Abrams's lack of experience soon became evident. He blew up at producers if a particular graphic or camera shot was off. He micromanaged decisions. During one conference call shortly after he got the job, Abrams shocked *Hardball* producers when he told Chris Matthews what questions to ask a guest on that night's show. Adding to the toxic climate, the prime-time talent, most vocally Olbermann, didn't listen to him. "Dan never really ran it," Olbermann tells me. "He's always tried to ride my coat-tails." Staffers were in near open revolt after

Abrams proposed a new tagline, “MSNBC: Keepin’ It Real.”

**AT CNN**, there was a feeling in the ranks that news snobbery had blinded it to Fox’s power. “When I got there, I was stunned at how dismissive they were of Fox,” recalls former CNN anchor Aaron Brown. “They would say, ‘This is just talk radio on television.’” But Fox surpassed CNN in 2002 and was now outpacing the network in every prime-time hour by wide margins.

When Klein was installed as president in 2004, he faced many of the same problems CNN faces today. Morale was low, and the network was still digesting the disastrous merger between AOL and Time Warner. Klein moved swiftly to put his stamp on CNN, in ways that exhibited his programming and political instincts. On the morning of January 4, 2005, Tucker Carlson told CNN political director Sam Feist he had accepted a job at MSNBC and was resigning his post as co-host of the much-derided *Crossfire*. When Carlson left to go to lunch at the Palm, Klein issued a press release of his own that said he was canceling *Crossfire*, essentially spinning the story that he was ousting Carlson and canceling the show. At lunch, Carlson was surprised when he received a call from the *Times*’ Bill Carter asking him to respond to Klein’s press release. Carlson was livid, but there was nothing he could do. It was a PR masterstroke for Klein, who earned plaudits in the press for kneecapping *Crossfire*.

Ten months later, in November 2005, Klein made his next major move, when, only weeks after signing Aaron Brown to a new contract, he canceled Brown’s 10 P.M. show, *NewsNight*, and replaced it with Anderson Cooper’s program. Klein believed that Greta Van Susteren was Fox’s weakest link at 10 P.M., and he decided to marshal resources behind Cooper to try and unseat her, hoping that a win at that hour would lift ratings for the rest of CNN’s prime-time slate. CNN pushed a massive marketing campaign that made Cooper the brand of the network and his face a ubiquitous presence on Times Square billboards, and in magazine and television ads, spending as much as \$20 million, some say. The only problem was that the PR blitz failed to generate significantly higher ratings. Jim Walton, Klein’s boss, began to have creeping doubts about Cooper. “We may be creating a star, but not for us,” Walton remarked to a senior CNN executive.

In a senior-management meeting at CNN’s Atlanta offices with Walton and Turner Broadcasting CEO Phil Kent, Klein was in the middle of a presentation when Kent cut him off. “You’ve been in the job for a year,” Kent said icily, according to one

person in the room. “I don’t see results. All I hear is talk, and I’m not seeing it. I don’t want to hear you talk. I want to see results.”

**IN 2007**, Klein tried to tack upscale with Campbell Brown, a respected newswoman who’d been passed over for the high-profile *Today* slot. But her move to cable was troubled from the start. Brown was upset to find out that Klein had assigned Mitch Semel, who’d produced for Conan O’Brien and Nick at Night, to create her new show. After several control-room meltdowns, Klein pushed out Semel in favor of Anderson Cooper’s producer, David Doss. After the election season, the bottom started to fall out. Klein pestered Brown about conveying more emotion on-camera and to attack Olbermann and O’Reilly by name. When she confronted Indiana Republican Mike Pence and demanded to know what specific spending cuts he’d call for to balance the budget, Klein thought he saw an opening. “It was terrific to watch,” Klein tells me. “I came out of my office and said, ‘You should do that every day, have a different congressman on every day, Democrat or GOP, and say, ‘What would you cut?’” And it would become a viral feature of your show.”

Brown hated the idea; she felt it smacked of a stunt. “I am not sure that picking a fight every night just for the sake of picking a fight is good journalism,” she told me. It was, if one were needed, something of a last straw. Seeing the writing on the wall, Brown took control of the story line herself, releasing her own statement announcing she was leaving.

**ONE AFTERNOON** in January 2007, Griffin was in NBC News’s Washington bureau when Tim Russert called him into his office. “Griff, you’re gonna have the greatest election of our lifetime,” Russert told him. “This is going to be fantastic. Own it.”

The previous fall, Griffin debuted a new tagline—“The Place for Politics”—a phrase Russert had happened to say on the air. “It gave us the focus that we never had,” Griffin says. “We once branded ourselves ‘America’s News Channel.’ It was a lie! We weren’t.”

And with liberals ascendant in Washington, there was a new appetite for programming that tapped the fervor on the left. Zucker saw a business opportunity. “We’re failing,” he told Griffin. “We cannot fail. Have a sensibility. Put Keith out there.”

Griffin had had a long and tumultuous relationship with Keith Olbermann. But Griffin recognized Olbermann’s titanic personality could be channeled. And his ratings subsequently proved it. “What Keith Olbermann proved is that political programming with a point of view is what succeeds in prime time,” Lawrence O’Donnell says. “For

a while it was unclear whether it was a Fox News phenomenon or if this was something that could work outside right-wing TV.”

Circuslike though it may seem, now it’s reality. “There’s no more Uncle Walter to say ‘That’s the way it was,’” Chris Matthews tells me. “Uncle Walter didn’t know the way it was. He was an Establishment liberal.”

**FOR ALL HIS BLUSTER**, Klein’s frustration was building. As Olbermann zoomed past CNN, a senior CNN executive told him, “I think you’re in a no-win situation: You’re looking to an intellectual liberal audience who doesn’t watch cable news.”

“What else do I do?” Klein responded. “We can’t become the opposite of Fox News. I don’t know what else to do.”

This spring, CNN and CBS rekindled merger talks, but issues over editorial control and CBS’s thorny union contract couldn’t be resolved. And Klein was worried about losing Anderson Cooper, his biggest star, in prestige if not ratings, when his contract expires in mid-2011. This spring, he tried to strike a deal with CBS News that would essentially share Cooper between the networks, but CBS rejected the offer (last week Walton signed Cooper to a new multiyear deal, which includes a daytime talk show).

What might have made the most sense is to go upscale, sacrifice some numbers for prestige, keep Campbell Brown, hire Charlie Rose, show the advertisers how respected you are, let the rest of its unglamorous hours in far-flung places—hotels in Singapore and Mumbai, and just about anywhere you name—pay the bills. But this is TV, and nature took its course. “I got shot,” Klein told me. “People get shot in this business.”

Fox, meanwhile, seems on the verge of winning an election with the help of a movement—the tea party—it did much to create. But it, too, is increasingly riven by schisms that mirror those in the Republican Party itself. Bill O’Reilly has gone RINO, palling around with Jon Stewart. Beck, a one-man tea party, is going rogue, and the Establishment is pissed and worried. “People are uncomfortable with Beck,” one person working at Fox News says. “He gets 2 million at five o’clock? He would be dying at HLN. He’s not a popular guy within Fox. Hannity’s not really happy with Beck. Beck is a hired gun who’s benefiting from Fox News.”

And wisecracking, high-spirited Phil Griffin, though his patron Jeff Zucker is gone, and new bosses at Comcast are on the way, knows which side his bread is buttered on. “Barack Obama was good in the lead-up, but I do think that in life, in *Paradise Lost*, Satan comes across much better than God. Evil is always more interesting than good,” he says. “I’m not passing judgment. It’s just a fact.” ■