

# Two Principled and Admirable Fox News Departures



I've joked about this phenomenon a number of times over the years, but it really is uncanny. Literally every time I go on a family vacation, a news story unexpectedly breaks that I really want to weigh in on (in a manner more substantive than a tweet). Earlier this week, it was the Fox News departures of longtime contributors Stephen Hayes and Jonah Goldberg.

By now, most people who follow the national political-media scene know the story. Hayes and Goldberg (who co-founded the conservative news website *The Dispatch* two years ago) asked for their releases from the network after watching *Patriot Purge*, Tucker Carlson's three-part special that aired on Fox News's streaming service.

I'd describe the special myself, but I think the two did a pretty good job of it in a newsletter they sent out to Dispatch subscribers (including me) last Sunday:

"The special ... is presented in the style of an exposé, a

hard-hitting piece of investigative journalism. In reality, it is a collection of incoherent conspiracy-mongering, riddled with factual inaccuracies, half-truths, deceptive imagery, and damning omissions. And its message is clear: The U.S. government is targeting patriotic Americans in the same manner –and with the same tools–that it used to target al Qaeda.

‘The domestic war on terror is here. It’s coming after half of the country,’ says one protagonist. ‘The left is hunting the right, sticking them in Guantanamo Bay for American citizens–leaving them there to rot,’ says another, over video of an individual in an orange jumpsuit being waterboarded.”

Among the dangerously irresponsible conspiracy theories promoted in the special was the notion that the January 6 attack was a “false flag” operation carried out by the “Deep State” to frame Trump supporters.

The disinformation was so perverse, and counter to Fox News’s own hard-news reporting, that the network’s top news anchors, Bret Baier and Chris Wallace, reportedly expressed their concerns about the special to top FNC executives. They apparently lost that battle, but for Hayes and Goldberg, it was the last straw.

“Over the past five years, some of Fox’s top opinion hosts amplified the false claims and bizarre narratives of Donald Trump or offered up their own in his service,” the two wrote in their joint newsletter. “In this sense, the release of *Patriot Purge* wasn’t an isolated incident, it was merely the most egregious example of a longstanding trend.”

They’re right, of course, and it hasn’t been just the hosts. The same has been true of many of the network’s contributors. Having purged several conservative Trump critics and skeptics from its ranks in recent years, Fox has awarded more air-time

and network prominence to seemingly anyone of note willing to abandon their past positions and principles to serve as a Trump toady. I'm talking about individuals like Bill Bennett, Mollie Hemingway, Ben Domenech, and Dan Bongino (to name a few).

"The reality of Fox and similar institutions is that many of their leaders feel that the tight bond between Mr. Trump and their audiences or constituents leaves them little choice but to go along, whatever they believe," wrote the *New York Times's* Ben Smith in his coverage of Hayes and Goldberg's departure. "Fox employees often speak of this in terms of 'respecting the audience.' And in a polarized age, the greatest opportunities for ratings, money and attention, as politicians and media outlets left and right have demonstrated, are on the extreme edges of American politics."

Categorizing Trump sycophancy as "respecting the audience" may be how some at Fox have rationalized their behavior over the past five years, but it's a piss-poor excuse. If you *respect* someone, you tell them the sobering truth. You don't feed and prey off of their addiction.

Hayes and Goldberg managed to stay on the network's payroll, despite shooting straight on Donald Trump, but their air-time was dramatically reduced... sometimes to just once every couple of months. And on the rare occasions when they were invited onto shows like *Special Report* (where they used to be regulars), the topics they were asked about often seemed to carry the intent of steering them away from any potential Trump criticism. Other contributors of similar caliber met the same fate, and it's hard to imagine how even the great Charles Krauthammer could have remained a regular guest on today's Fox News programs.

These practices have not only damaged the network's credibility, but as Goldberg explained in a separate piece he wrote for the *L.A. Times*, they likely also hurt the Trump

presidency.

“Because Trump is a thin-skinned narcissist, he has no tolerance for criticism, and neither do his very vocal fans among the viewers and the punditocracy... Traditionally, conservatives—including conservative politicians—influence presidents by praising them when they make the right decisions and criticizing them when they don’t. Trump was impervious to criticism, and over time, many conservatives stopped offering it and Fox stopped providing opportunities to present any kind of critique... Such objections to Trump, however legitimate, were cast as left-wing propaganda or irrational Trump hatred – or both.”

For those who follow Hayes and Goldberg through their writing and podcasts, their sentiments about the ethical decline of FNC’s opinion programming are nothing new. They’ve been voicing them for years.

Why, then, didn’t they leave sooner? Part of the reason is that they hoped to help right the ship in the post-Trump era. In fact, as they stated in their newsletter, they used to believe that the country “needed” Fox News.

“Whether you call it liberal media bias or simply a form of groupthink around certain narratives,” they wrote, “having a news network that brought different assumptions and asked different questions—while still providing real reporting and insightful conservative analysis and opinion—was good for the country and journalism. Fox News still does real reporting, and there are still responsible conservatives providing valuable opinion and analysis. But the voices of the responsible are being drowned out by the irresponsible.”

According to Goldberg, he’d felt assured from conversations at Fox that “the network would try to recover some of its independence...”

This was certainly a shared hope from others I know who still

work at Fox, but a year out from Trump's electoral defeat, and with Fox still giving a platform to sickening propaganda in service to the former president and his interests, I doubt that hope still exists.

What I can say for certain, having become quite familiar with Hayes and Goldberg over the years, is that they're men of principle and integrity, who've once again demonstrated both. Ironically, what I've come to appreciate the most about the great institution they've created in The Dispatch is that the outlet reflects (and has expanded on) several of Fox News's best qualities from back in the pre-Trump era. It's become a vital source of quality reporting and insightful conservative analysis.

So, in the spirit of Thanksgiving, I'll close this piece by offering my thanks to these two guys for not only taking a brave stand for what's right, but also filling a void for news consumers like me.

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