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Fox on the Run. How will the signature news channel of the Bush era steer clear of becoming a lame duck?

ON SUPER TUESDAY, BUSH'S FORMER BRAIN, Karl Rove, debuted on Fox News Channel as a political analyst. Genteel, wry and armed with terabytes of political minutiae, he won critical raves. ("One of the best things in television news right now," said the *New York Times*, the equivalent of a Westminster Dog Show hopeful getting endorsed by *Cat Fancy*.) But there was something poignantly valedictory about the old warrior playing referee: the lion, if not in winter, then in a petting zoo.

You could say the same thing lately for Fox News Channel itself. Fox hasn't gone soft, but from watching its coverage lately, I get a sense that the haven for conservative hosts, and viewers alienated by liberal news, needs to figure out its next act. Fox News is not simply a mouthpiece for the Bush White House: it rose with Bush after 2000 and 9/11, was played on TVs in his White House and reflected the same surety and flag-lapel-pin confidence in its tone and star-spangled look. It was not just a hit; it was the network of the moment.

Now, with two Democrats locked in what seems like a general-election campaign and lame-duck Bush fading from the headlines, it has to figure out how not to seem like yesterday's news. At times recently, the network has appeared uncertain about its focus. Its primary-night coverage has felt staid and listless. Sometimes it has gone tabloid with celebrity-news, true-crime and scandal stories (WEBSITES POSTING SEXY PICS LIFTED FROM FACEBOOK). At other times it has

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retreated into a kind of war-on-terrorism news-talgia, playing up threatening chatter and new missives from al-Qaeda leaders while its rivals are doing the election 24/7; flipping to Fox can feel like time-traveling to 2002.

Fox is still the top-rated news channel, but there are signs it's plateauing. Its ratings started to lag in 2006, and in February, CNN's prime time (boosted by several presidential debates) beat Fox among 25-to-54-year-olds for the first time since 2001. (CNN and TIME are owned by Time Warner.) Maybe even more galling, the



network has lately faded in the ephemeral category of buzz. MSNBC—with far fewer viewers—has been the political-media obsession of the 2008 primary, largely because of feuds between the Clinton campaign and the network for its perceived pro-Obama bias.

Ratings shmatings: if a Rupert Murdoch network cannot dominate the field of ticking off the Clintons, that has to sting.

Now let's not jump the gun. Somewhere in a cabinet at Fox headquarters, there must be a bulging file of the premature obituaries written for it. Fox debuted in 1996 and quickly flourished

in the Clinton era. After Bush won, some thought the channel—and Rush Limbaugh et al.—would suffer from an outrage deficit.

Not exactly! Instead, it adopted a sexy, muscular triumphalism through 9/11 and Iraq. It wasn't just the politics; it was the aesthetics. News on Fox looks like a video game, full of bluster, blondes and blaring graphics. Ideology aside, Fox makes the news urgent, even when nothing's going on.

But for better or for worse, Fox became the signal cultural artifact of the Bush era, so it will need to remodel itself again. A President McCain could actually represent the trickiest shift. No matter how he has repositioned himself since 2000, he's still the Republican who knocked Rumsfeld

and criticized 24, on Fox's sibling broadcast network, for glamorizing torture. Worst of all, the "liberal media" like him, which would play havoc with Fox's us-vs.-them, fair-and-balanced formula.

And if a Democrat wins? A Clinton restoration would give Fox the devil—or demonized figure—it knows. But TV abhors a rerun, and the challenge would be to make it fresh. As for Obama, the network is still figuring out how to palatably antagonize him. While the Jeremiah Wright story was a gift—Fox turned him into a dashiki-clad screen saver—Fox's Chris Wallace embarrassingly chastised the hosts of *Fox*

and Friends on-air for "distorting" Obama's words. And Bill O'Reilly caught flak for using the phrase "lynching party" in a critique of Michelle Obama.

As it wades through the *fin de régime*, Fox News will have one important asset: its loyal viewer base. But even for them, it will need to shake up its comfortable Bush-era routine, perhaps by cultivating new hosts, perhaps by taking a page from McCain and branding itself as the channel of maverick authenticity, not of establishment dogma. The viewers are Fox's to keep. It just has to figure out what's going to make them mad starting in 2009. ■