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Open Letter by Martha Nichols

Let's All Stand up to Bullies—and Stop Blaming the Victim

UPDATE (September 6, 2016): 21st Century Fox announced today that it had settled the lawsuit with Gretchen Carlson. The company apologized, stating that "Gretchen was not treated with the respect and dignity that she and all of our colleagues deserve"; sources report a \$20-million settlement.



Dear Ms. Carlson:

I want to thank you for publicly denouncing the sexual harassment you experienced during your eleven years at Fox News. The fall of Roger Ailes, the puppet master of right-wing media, is long overdue—there's no question it thrills me—but you deserve far more kudos than you've received for facing down the ultimate bully.

Your lawyer filed “Gretchen Carlson v. Roger Ailes” on July 6, 2016, soon after you’d lost your job. Within weeks, more than twenty other women had come forward with their own stories of harassment at Fox News, and CEO Ailes got the boot. Since then, commentators on the left and right have chattered with shock, but most of the focus has been on the debacle at Fox and the Life and Times of Roger Ailes. Meanwhile, the response to you has been ambivalent, as if working for a conservative news network and being pretty and blonde mean you should have known better.

My response? *This woman has guts*. The fact that you were once Miss America seems irrelevant, and your long silence on the job understandable. As soon as I heard about the lawsuit, I figured you’d been putting up with crap for eons, your anger at a slow boil. I knew you wouldn’t risk public embarrassment without good reason, which is why I’m saddened when I hear anyone belittling your achievement.

A quick recap: You joined Fox News in 2005 after a stint at CBS. For almost eight years, you anchored the morning news show *Fox & Friends*. But in 2009, you told your supervisor that co-host Steve Doocy had turned the show into “a hostile work environment.” According to “Count One” of your legal complaint:

Doocy engaged in a pattern and practice of severe and pervasive sexual harassment of Carlson, including, but not limited to, mocking her during commercial breaks, shunning her off air, refusing to engage with her on air, belittling her contributions to the show, and generally attempting to put her in her place by refusing to accept and treat her as an intelligent and insightful female journalist rather than a blond female prop.

When Roger Ailes heard about your trouble with Doocy, he allegedly called you “a man hater” and told you to “get along with the boys.” But Ailes’s most damning action a few years later, the complaint argues, came with this now much-quoted takedown:

When Carlson met with Ailes to discuss the discriminatory treatment to which she was being subjected, Ailes stated: ‘I think you and I should have had a sexual relationship a long time ago and then you’d be good and better and I’d be good and better,’ adding that ‘sometimes problems are easier to solve’ that way. Carlson rebuffed Ailes’ sexual demands at that meeting, and nine months later, Ailes ended her career at Fox News.

When your lawsuit first went public, a slew of Fox coworkers threw you under the bus. “I wouldn’t stick around if this were a weird place like that,” said former lawyer Greta Van Susteren. Others called your claims “sick” (Neil Cavuto) and defended Ailes as a “terrific boss” (Martha MacCallum) and a “father figure” (Ainsley Earhardt). Jeanine Pirro, another former lawyer, insisted that Ailes is a “decent man...a genius” who had been unfairly accused. “This guy is doing eight million things a day. You really think that he’s chasing *her* around?” she added in a July 7 interview.

Given that Ailes was kicked out on July 21, just two weeks later, it’s now obvious he was anything but decent or a terrific boss. Several recent features in *Vanity Fair* have pointed up his paranoia, secretiveness, and penchant for threatening both employees and enemies. As one unnamed source at Fox News told reporter Sarah Ellison, “So much of it happened in plain view.... It’s hard to believe that executive management didn’t know what Roger Ailes was up to and how he conducted himself.”

Such statements implicate 21st Century Fox, the Murdoch empire that owns Fox News, a publicly traded \$60-billion-plus media corporation with a current market cap of over \$40 billion. Calling out sexual harassment and discrimination with such impact, as you have, Ms. Carlson, is whistle-blowing of the highest order. By the end of July, some fellow broadcasters were rightfully lauding your “chutzpah” and “courage” (Michaela Pereira of HLN).

Yet, applause for your role remains muted, particularly among liberals. A July 7 *Mother Jones* piece that included a “highlight” video clip of sexist remarks you endured on *Fox & Friends* drew comments like this: “As we say here in Texas: ‘You lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas.’” As of this writing, there are almost a thousand comments on the July 6 *New York Times* report about the lawsuit, and while some are supportive, many blame you for signing on with Fox in the first place. For instance, here’s Dana of Santa Monica:

I can't recall Ms. Carlson ever being a champion of women's rights and gender equality. For such a brilliant, accomplished woman she sadly played dumb or worse on these issues. Now it affects her so she's on board. Conservatives always do this—silent or on the wrong side of social issues until they personally are affected.

On July 7, CS of Stillwater, New York, commented:

Maybe she's not a bimbo, but she certainly chose a career playing one on TV, on Fox News, no less, the only news with a 'leg cam,' according to NPR reporting.... This isn't blaming the victim. But she sure [shone] her sunny smile upon that poisonous tree and helped it grow.

A week later, a post on the *Media Matters* blog—about the "familiar victim-blaming" tactics of Carlson's ex-colleagues—spawned this exchange:

Mybarkingdog:

This puts all of us in the unenviable position of having to support Gretchen Carlson. But, when you consider the line-up of idiots attacking her, it makes it a lot easier to be on her side.

Martin Pollard:

I'm not on her side. I'm against his side. A subtle, yet important distinction. No one deserves to be the target of sexual harassment (or victim-shaming), but that being said, the amount of sympathy I have for the Ex-Fox Bubble-Headed Bleached Blonde is so infinitesimal that you can't even see it with the world's best electron microscope.

The lefty reaction to your lawsuit and the precipitous resignation of Ailes (who still claims he did nothing) often includes some version of "I don't want to blame the victim, but...." In fact, this *is* blaming the victim—or disappearing the victim. The *New York Times* story about Ailes leaving Fox on July 21 generated close to 600 comments, but of the ten highlighted as "NYT Picks," only one mentioned you by name.

Men accused of sexual harassment and their supporters almost always argue that the woman is lying, brought it on herself, or delayed lodging a formal complaint because she gained some benefit from putting up with it. She's supposedly motivated to sue the guy by the loss of her job—or by irrational rage. Or she's taking the whole thing too *seriously*. Throw all those birds and bees together—or conservative nitwits and scum, in the liberal reading of this story—and what do you expect?

What these assumptions miss, often in the most crass and sexist way, is how hard it is to talk about sexual harassment. Most women I know, whether they're former beauty queens or glamour avoiders who opt for pants and comfortable shoes, have experienced unwanted sexual advances or teasing in the workplace. Women are harassed in any other public venue you can think of—classrooms, parks, cafes, sporting events, concerts, buses, grocery stores—everywhere.

In the 1980s, when I was a twenty-something San Franciscan, men on several occasions grabbed one of my breasts or slapped my butt while I was jogging. I yelled at them to back off, but I was the one who felt embarrassed. Once, when this happened in the parking lot of a local market, I went inside to complain to the store manager. He just laughed and said, "Calm down. Maybe I should do the same thing."

Another time, two tween boys on bikes grabbed for me, and I swung around and shouted, "Oh, *come on!* You know better." They giggled, although they did look abashed that I'd called them out. I was old enough to be their mother.

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Women stay silent or put up with harassment for lots of reasons, especially if it's just talk or can be mercifully forgotten. But lack of consequences for the harasser can make even a loudmouth like me feel muzzled. The shame can dull a woman's sense of self and ambition. If there's any "but" to your story, Ms. Carlson, it's this: I loathe Fox News, but what you did was awesome. It's the most feminist damn thing I've seen since Anita Hill *over two decades ago*, and the guy she accused is still sitting on the Supreme Court.

When I read liberal commenters damning you with faint praise, I see unconscious attitudes about women exposed—ugly ideas about which of us bimbos, bra-burners, or ladies have a right to complain. Such responses are a kind of harassment, too. At this cultural moment, we're beset by so much bullying in the public arena that most instances of sexual harassment may seem routine, even tame. Yet, none of it feels tame to the woman experiencing it.

That's because harassment isn't just about sex. It's a form of bullying, a connection I believe needs to be made loudly and clearly. Harassment is about strong-arming somebody. It's about forcing those who have less power than you to do what you want, even if it's abusive, unethical, or flat-out crazy.

Men experience bullying in the workplace, too—not only at Fox News but in other companies with paranoid, narcissistic bosses. Steve Jobs was a legendary horrible boss. He regularly screamed and cursed at Apple employees, in some cases firing them in public. Walter Isaacson's 2011 biography includes an anecdote about the young Jobs interviewing a male job candidate, asking questions like "How old were you when you lost your virginity?"

More than ever, we need to call out bullies of all kinds, even if they're hailed as geniuses or become presidential candidates or hide their nastiness behind anonymous avatars online. Shame and self-blame keep too many of us silent, because there *are* repercussions for confronting powerful men like Roger Ailes. When I hear about women like you, Ms. Carlson, women with their careers at stake who still say such behavior is unacceptable, I'm cheering to the skies. It's time for everyone to remember your "not gonna take it anymore" story. It should encourage us all, women and men, to fight back.

With great respect for your bravery,

Martha Nichols

Publishing Information

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- (Update) ["21st Century Fox Settles Lawsuit with Gretchen Carlson."](#) [7] press release from 21st Century Fox, September 6, 2016.
- ["Gretchen Carlson, Plaintiff, v. Roger Ailes, Defendant"](#) [8], "civil complaint filed by attorney Nancy Erika Smith of Smith Mullin, P.C., in the Superior Court of New Jersey (Bergen County), July 6, 2016.
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- [Gretchen Carlson, Bill Kilmeade, and Steve Doocy on the Flight Deck of USS New York](#) [22]; United States Marine Corps; public domain (cropped).



Martha Nichols is Editor in Chief of *Talking Writing*. She's also a contributing editor at *Women's Review of Books* and a faculty instructor in the journalism program at the Harvard University Extension School.

Martha's "First Person" column, about media and publishing trends, appears regularly in *Talking Writing*.

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