

Bombshell invents a ruling-class hero

By Erik Schreiber
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Directed by Jay Roach; written by Charles Randolph
Bombshell tells the story of the sexual harassment accusations that led to Roger Ailes's resignation as CEO of Fox News in 2016. Ailes began his lengthy, filthy career as a media adviser for Richard Nixon in the 1960s and subsequently served as a media consultant for Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

Directed by Jay Roach (*Trumbo*), *Bombshell* seeks to offer its audience both sensation and "empowerment." It shows the sexist, "locker room" atmosphere prevalent at Fox, and one remarkable scene powerfully conveys the trauma of sexual harassment. We see the efforts of anchor Megyn Kelly (Charlize Theron) and other women to speak out against the poisonous atmosphere. The high-profile cast also includes Nicole Kidman, Margot Robbie, John Lithgow, Connie Britton and Allison Janney.

Yet the movie minimizes the reactionary, warmongering politics of Fox News (and of its main characters) and fails to examine how these politics enable the disgusting behavior of Ailes and others. *Bombshell* obscures the class-based politics of its characters and promotes the politics of gender. The film's depiction of Kelly as a champion of women's rights rings false.

In the film's opening, Kelly (Theron) introduces herself and describes the origin and operations of Fox News, as well as the roles of Ailes and Australian media mogul Rupert Murdoch. But she fails to explain how Murdoch has used his stable of newspapers and television networks to support right-wing governments in the US and the UK, along with bloody neo-colonial wars in the Middle East and Central Asia. We hear nothing about Ailes's role as a consultant to Nixon, Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

Bombshell treats the ultra-right views and activities of its main characters, and that of Fox News as a whole, as a mere joke.

One character defines a Fox News story as whatever "scares your grandmother and pisses off your grandfather," but this quip is not explored or substantiated. Furthermore, *Bombshell* mentions only in passing that Ailes and Murdoch ultimately decide to support Trump. The moral and political implications of this decision, as well as its logical continuity with Ailes's and Murdoch's orientation, are left unexplored.

The film's action begins with the first Republican debate during the presidential campaign of 2016. Kelly is quickly presented as a fighter for justice when she asks the loutish Trump whether his demeaning comments about women sound presidential. Kelly's question is apt, but probably a better example of responsible journalism than of heroism. Although Trump sidesteps the question, Kelly praises his response in a subsequent scene. Furthermore, *Bombshell* refers only fleetingly and sparingly to Kelly's own repugnant comments, such as her consistent promotion of racist stereotypes on air. She defended, for example, the use of blackface and regularly invited racist ex-policeman Mark Fuhrman to discuss racial issues. Rather than addressing Kelly's backwardness, *Bombshell* offers occasional "unfortunate" utterances (e.g., "I'm not a feminist.") and quickly moves on.

Kelly's question at the debate prompts Trump to attack her on Twitter for being "unfair." When she betrays anxiety about the episode in a conversation with Ailes, he assures her that it was "good TV." But Kelly soon is receiving threats and being confronted by Trump supporters. She and her family even catch a photographer taking pictures of their house. To end her persecution, Kelly does a softball interview with Trump and, as her husband puts it, lets him "get off with an 'Oops!'" Kelly angrily responds to this criticism that she wants to keep her job and continue

paying the bills.

Bombshell offers a fragmentary portrayal of Ailes. He runs the newsroom like a tyrant, and his employees live in fear of his wrath. He surveils the offices with cameras, and sometimes exhibits paranoia. He asserts, for example, that the Obama administration is plotting to kill him. He makes sexist remarks and harasses his female employees. But in general, Ailes is portrayed as a cranky, yet likable businessman with good sense and shrewd instincts. Kelly expresses her affection and respect for Ailes several times, even though she admits that he made unwanted advances toward her early in her career. The various sides of Ailes's personality seem like dots that are left unconnected. Part of the reason for this jumble is the film's refusal to examine Ailes's politics, the patronage of Murdoch, and the effects of these factors on Ailes's behavior.

Although morning show hostess Gretchen Carlson filed the lawsuit that led to Ailes's downfall, she is a secondary character in *Bombshell*. In Kidman's portrayal, Carlson is wholesome and prim, yet sometimes steely-eyed. In flashbacks, we see Carlson's male co-hosts making endless on-air comments about her looks and her clothing. To encourage girls to be themselves on International Day of the Girl, Carlson appears on air without makeup. Ailes is irate. Makeup stops the audience from seeing someone sweat, he yells. "Nobody wants to see a middle-aged woman sweat her way through menopause!"

Robbie plays Kayla Pospisil, a character that was invented for the movie. Pospisil is a sheltered young evangelical who lands a low-level job at Fox News. Her ambition to appear on air ultimately gets her a private meeting in Ailes's office. When Ailes asks her to explain Fox News's "fair and balanced" motto, Pospisil characterizes the network's news coverage as fair and its editorials as providing balance to a supposedly liberal media landscape. The movie never challenges Pospisil's description of its reporting as fair. Nor does it give any indication that the network actively misinforms viewers and spreads government propaganda.

But what follows this conversation is the most effective scene of the movie. After having Pospisil stand up and spin around, Ailes asks her to hike up her skirt. She is startled, but complies by raising it slightly. Ailes continues goading her until Pospisil has raised

her skirt enough to reveal her underwear. Robbie's facial expression in this moment viscerally conveys the embarrassment, shame, and belittlement that victims of sexual harassment experience.

This powerful scene, however, contrasts starkly with the rest of the movie, which is far more superficial and less believable. Several characters, such as Kelly and Susan Estrich (Ailes's lawyer, played by Allison Janney), speak in a mannered way that is distracting and grating. Geraldo Rivera, Sean Hannity, Bill O'Reilly, and Rudy Giuliani are portrayed briefly in clownish caricatures. Pospisil has an improbable tryst with the lone lesbian liberal employee of Fox News in an episode that strains credulity.

Bombshell also undercuts its own goal of presenting Kelly as a heroine. Kelly often shows cowardice or callousness instead of heroism. After Carlson's lawsuit becomes public, Kelly hesitates to defend her or denounce Ailes until she knows that other women are willing to speak out, too. Kelly is unwilling to risk her career, even though she herself is one of Ailes's victims. In one scene, Pospisil pointedly asks Kelly why she did not warn her about Ailes. Kelly snaps, "It's not my job to protect you."

In Kelly, the movie offers a one-dimensional heroine whose only stated principle is self-interest, much like the ruling class for which she speaks. A deeper, less ideological examination of the characters, as well as a fuller depiction of the cesspool of reaction that is Fox News, would have produced a richer, truer and more insightful movie.

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