

Megyn Kelly

“THE EASY PLAY IS TO JUST GO BACK”: WITH MEGYN KELLY OUT, THE *TODAY* SHOW SUCCESSION DRAMA BEGINS

Kelly wants to stay in the game. But as one veteran TV news executive said, “Once you’ve said blackface is O.K., you can’t work anywhere except Fox.”

BY JOE POMPEO

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Megyn Kelly on the *Today* show set, June 23, 2017.

By Nathan Congleton/NBC/NBCU Photo Bank/Getty Images.

Last year, on Friday, September 22, **Al Roker**, **Dylan Dreyer**, and **Sheinelle Jones** appeared together for what was presumably the last time as the co-anchors of the *Today* show’s 9 A.M. slot, then known as *Today’s Take*. Clutching Champagne glasses, they brought the entire crew onto the set for an emotional farewell toast. “The fact is, the *Today* show is about family, and this family has been the best,” said Roker. He also introduced the newest member of the *Today* family, **Megyn Kelly**, who would be taking over the vaunted broadcast’s third hour that Monday. The outgoing hosts, who were to remain a part of the larger *Today* roster, welcomed Kelly to the fold with all the signature hokeyness of morning television—they presented her with gag gifts (an alarm clock and a bottle of Ketel One) and trotted out a horse so they could literally hand off the reins to their successor. As the whole gang yucked it up for the cameras, Roker joked, “What could possibly go wrong?”

The answer, as it turned out, was everything. Thirteen months later, Kelly is negotiating an exit from her staggering three-year NBC contract reportedly worth \$69 million. She is covered in mud from her notorious blackface remarks, which ignited a scandal on Tuesday morning, and her future career prospects have been suddenly thrown into uncertainty. The episode was the culmination of a rocky tenure at NBC, which hired Kelly away from Fox News last year in one of the most talked-about talent poaches in the annals of TV news. As I noted earlier this week, Kelly was never quite a comfortable fit within 30 Rock, and after more than a year of tepid ratings, on-air gaffes, tabloid leaks, tensions with management, and icy relations with colleagues at the Peacock, it was starkly apparent to both sides that the time had come to part ways. (Kelly vigorously apologized to both colleagues and viewers, admitting that she had not been attuned to the cultural sensitivities surrounding the history of white people dressing up as African Americans.)

Now, Kelly and NBC are haggling over the terms of her departure. Sources familiar with the state of play told me that her attorney, Hollywood-based entertainment lawyer **Bryan Freedman**, and NBC’s attorneys were negotiating by phone on Friday. (Freedman was initially expected to make a trip to New York.) NBC, one presumes, will end up having to pay out the remainder of Kelly’s contract.

Viewers, meanwhile, are wondering what’s next for the *Today* show at 9 A.M. NBC confirmed publicly on Friday that *Megyn Kelly Today* had been canceled and that the 9 A.M. hour on Monday would be hosted by other *Today* anchors, whom it didn’t name. Someone familiar with the matter told me no decision has been made about a long-term plan for the hour. But 30 Rock insiders I spoke with seemed to be in agreement that the most logical thing to do would be to get the old band back together. “I think the easy play is to just go back to Al, Dylan, and Sheinelle,” one source said, noting that the network would save money both in terms of salary and studio costs, since Kelly was paid a fortune and her show was taped in front of a live audience. “Rather than doing something splashy again, it makes sense to go back to what was there.” There are, of course, other *Today* personalities who will presumably be in the mix—**Craig Melvin**, for instance, or **Jenna Bush Hager**.

Regardless of the route NBC decides to take, it’s safe to say *Today* will recover from whatever damage it has incurred as a result of the Kelly disaster. Overall, the ratings are still strong, and during the show’s tentpole early-morning hours, **Savannah Guthrie** and **Hoda Kotb** are thriving as the main co-hosts nearly a year after the far more existential crisis of **Matt Lauer’s** firing over sexual misconduct. At the same time, the incident has put the spotlight back on NBC News Chairman **Andy Lack**, who had championed Kelly’s hiring in the first place, and who has recently faced scrutiny over NBC News’s handling of **Ronan Farrow’s Harvey Weinstein** reporting, as well as allegations in a **sweeping Daily Beast report** that Lack has a history of being soft on workplace H.R. complaints. (NBCUniversal C.E.O. **Steve Burke** defended Lack, telling the *Beast* that Lack “has my complete support.”) In a sign that things were poised to get ugly, reports said Freedman had requested Farrow’s presence for the meeting with NBC management. Lack, for his part, came down hard on Kelly’s remarks during an internal town-hall meeting on Wednesday: “There is no other way to put this: I condemn those remarks; there is no place on our air or in this workplace for them.”

Kelly, meanwhile, is faced with the arguably more challenging task of finding a new job. She’s without an agent—having dropped CAA for UTA, which decided not to move forward with representing her—and is now just working with Freedman. As one veteran TV news executive put it to me, “Once you’ve said blackface is O.K., you can’t work anywhere except Fox.” Indeed, two Fox News sources told my colleague **Gabriel Sherman** on Thursday that Kelly had recently expressed interest in returning to her old stomping grounds, where she was a breakout star of the 2016 election cycle. A source close to **Lachlan Murdoch**, who runs Fox News Channel’s parent company, appeared to splash cold water on that notion, telling Sherman that Murdoch is “extremely pleased with the current lineup.” But Kelly apparently has some support at her former network. “Since she’s made an apparently heartfelt apology for grossly misguided remarks, how about showing some mercy to an otherwise good person?”

Geraldo Rivera tweeted. “Hope she comes back to Fox.”

Whatever happens, a friend of Kelly’s told me that she very much wants to stay in the game. “She’s a fighter, she’s going to fight for everything,” the friend said. “She wants to work. She wants to stay in news.” This person also pointed me to the kicker quote of an **interview** with Kelly from the October 15 issue of *New York* magazine. “I need to work. I need to financially, but I need to for my own sanity,” Kelly said. “Have I found the perfect balance? Not quite. I’m working on it.”

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