

COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

The future of media is here

The Washington Times takes a giant step -- backwards -- Wes Pruden rides again. Watch his words - Tom McDevitt

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Since their recent electoral drubbing, many Republicans are rethinking their party's relationship (or lack of one) to blacks and Hispanics, and embracing what Rick Santorum calls "a broader, bolder and more inclusive vision of freedom and opportunity." One sign of this is the sea change on immigration policy. Just days ago, four prominent Republican senators, including heavyweights John McCain and Marco Rubio, joined a bipartisan coalition to unfurl a broad roadmap for reform. One of the pillars was a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. This is a far cry from just a few months ago, when the GOP's presidential nominee was peddling "self deportation" as the answer to our immigration quandary.

But while some conservative leaders are courting minority groups, one of the movement's ideological lodestars is taking a hard turn in the other direction. Last month, The Washington Times tapped Wesley Pruden, its one-time editor in chief, who was pushed out amid allegations that he allowed racism to fester in the newsroom, to run its Commentary section. Pruden's return -- part of a wide-ranging shakeup following the death of the Times's founder -- is a troubling sign for the opinion pages, long a key pipeline for conservative ideas and a training ground for right-of-center pundits.

Under Pruden's leadership, from 1992 to 2008, the Times became a forum for the racist hard right, including white nationalists, neo-Confederates, and anti-immigrant scare mongers (all of which the Southern Poverty Law Center and The Nation magazine have documented at length). Pruden's own column, Pruden on Politics, was occasionally tinged with racial animus, too. In 2005, for instance, he lambasted the Senate for succumbing to "manufactured remorse" and passing a resolution of apology for blocking anti-lynching laws during the Jim Crow era.

Many Times insiders fear his return will stain the paper's image, especially in the current political climate. "It's a huge blow to the influence and credibility of the paper," says a senior Times official who worked closely with Pruden during his earlier reign.

Pruden's predecessor in the Commentary section, Brett Decker, came to the Times from The Wall Street Journal. Like William F. Buckley, who mentored him early in his career, Decker sought to kindle debate by bringing various factions of the conservative movement together on his pages. Decker also recruited writers and editors with deep political connections, and encouraged them to mine their rolodexes to track emerging issues and woo big-name conservatives to write for their pages. According to Jonathan Slevin, who was the Times president and publisher from 2009 to 2010, this approach "brought new life into the section." So much life that Slevin agreed to add two people to Decker's team even as he was slashing other departments to the bone. "The one place where I could keep the identity and the relevancy of the Times was the Commentary section," Slevin said. "It was a really vibrant place, and the staff was very connected. Decker's perspective was you go out and function as a reporter and really get yourself into the mix, so you're not just writing from an ivory tower." Readers seemed to like the approach, too. Commentary pieces often dominated the most-read list on the paper's website.

But Decker butted heads with Slevin's successor, Tom McDevitt. According to current and former Times officials, eight of whom were interviewed for this story, this is partly because McDevitt didn't care for Decker's editorial approach, and partly because the two didn't see eye to eye on journalistic ethics. (McDevitt did not respond to emails seeking comment.)

One flashpoint was Arnaud de Borchgrave, a decorated former Newsweek correspondent who had served as the Times's editor in chief from 1985 to 1991. (He remains an editor at large). In mid 2011, Decker's staff discovered that the veteran journalist, who writes a weekly Times column, was lifting passages verbatim or almost verbatim from the work of other writers. Decker repeatedly alerted McDevitt and the rest of the executive team to the problem. In one particularly pointed email, he warned that de Borchgrave's "outright plagiarism" and "lack of respect for the most basic journalistic ethics" was "putting the reputation of The Washington Times brand and the individual professional careers of TWT journalists at risk." He added, "Action needs to be taken to protect this institution from further harm." Still, de Borchgrave was kept on.

After trying to manage the situation by having staffers scour de Borchgrave's work for suspect verbiage, Decker unilaterally suspended de Borchgrave's column in early 2012. But it later resurfaced in the paper's

news pages. Meanwhile, according to internal Times emails, McDevitt and the Times's then-board chairman met with Decker and warned him that his job was in danger. While recounting the incident in a March 23 report to the paper's human resources department, Decker noted, "I believe I could be fired in retaliation for blowing the whistle on plagiarism by TWT Editor-at-Large Arnaud de Borchgrave, who is known to be a close advisor to the president of the company and is seen as having connections to potential investors."

In fact, Decker was not immediately let go. But it was clear that changes were afoot. In early June, McDevitt announced that he had enlisted a group of consultants to pursue unspecified business goals for the paper. Among them was a former State Department flack, David Jackson, and a longtime McDevitt ally, John Solomon, who had served as Times executive editor from 2008 to 2009. During his tenure, Solomon ushered in sweeping changes and launched a raft of bold revenue-generating schemes, most of which either lost money or never got off the ground.

Shortly after his return, Times officials say, Solomon began picking up his old management duties, which stirred fear that another wave of major shifts was coming. Solomon also ran a competing news site called The Washington Guardian, which some viewed as a conflict of interest. (Solomon did not return emails seeking comment.)

This was the state of play in early September when news broke that the paper's 92-year-old founder, Rev. Moon -- the self-proclaimed Messiah turned business tycoon -- had succumbed to pneumonia. His death was a major blow. While the Times maintains that Moon didn't meddle in daily coverage, its editorial stance on issues ranging from communism to gay marriage was rooted in, or at least compatible with, his teachings. The paper is also reliant on subsidies from Moon-founded enterprises -- many of which are now in the hands of his son, Justin Moon, who doesn't share his father's passion for conservative politics. According to two Times officials, he has clamped down on funds and threatened to cut them off altogether. What's more, insiders say the elder Moon's death has created an accountability vacuum, and that some executives appear to be angling for position. "The ultimate problem, the ultimate cancer is that the owners don't care about the paper," says a senior Times official. "There's nobody watching the ship. Some people are taking advantage of this situation." All of which may help explain the chain of events that followed.

The month after Moon's death, McDevitt was promoted to chairman of the board, after which there was a shakeup at the top of the masthead and Executive Editor Ed Kelley, who was at loggerheads with Solomon, stepped down. David Jackson was later tapped to replace him, despite scant newspaper experience and a spotty recent journalistic track record. Jackson's most recent journalism job was as director of Voice of America, from 2002 to 2006, where he earned a reputation for ruthless cost cutting and pushing journalists to twist facts to fit the government line. During the bloody crescendo of the Iraq war, he reportedly went as far as barring the news department from reporting on the car bombings and terrorist attacks.

From his new perch, Jackson quickly began altering the Times's political coverage. According to The Washington Post's Erik Wemple, at one point he demanded that the paper run a story about the Benghazi affair on page A1 every day. Times insiders say he also marched into the Commentary department and began handing out assignments and floating ideas for restructuring the section -- including getting rid of unsigned editorials altogether. Decker, who up until this point reported directly to the president of the company, let it be known that he had no intention of answering to Jackson, after which the paper announced that Decker had tendered his resignation, though recently departed Commentary editors insist he did no such thing.

After Decker's departure, three of his six editorial staffers stepped down without notice, including his then-deputy Anneke Green, who penned a scathing resignation letter. "The Washington Times today is the most unprofessional and dishonest organization I have ever encountered," she wrote. "I can't continue to spend the lion's share of my professional time fighting unethical practices being pushed by top leaders in the company."

As it turns out, the turmoil in Commentary presaged a larger shakeup. On Jan. 4, the paper reportedly handed pink slips to roughly 20 of its 90 newsroom employees. Among the casualties was Robert Morton, a respected Times veteran who ran the National Weekly Edition -- the paper's lone profitable arm, according to insiders. Morton had also pressed executives to rein in Solomon's growing clout. Three days later, Solomon was named chief digital officer. By this time, the paper was regularly running stories from the Solomon-run Washington Guardian, which stoked fears that more jobs would be cut and replaced with outsourced content. It was also at this point that Pruden -- whose column is syndicated by a related Solomon-run company -- was brought on to oversee the restructuring of the editorial pages.

Wesley Pruden hails from Arkansas, where his father, a Baptist minister, led the charge against the integration of Little Rock's Central High School, a key battle in the often-violent struggle over desegregation. While Pruden is less strident, he has made no secret of his affection for the Confederacy or

his disdain for the Civil Rights movement. He once called Jesse Helms his political hero. Pruden's closest advisor, Francis B. Coombs, who was national editor until being tapped as Pruden's deputy in 2002, held even more extreme racial views. According to an internal Times investigation -- which was conducted by the law firm Nixon Peabody and quoted in the book, *Journalism is War*, by the paper's longtime investigative reporter, George Archibald -- Coombs told subordinates that blacks were born with IQs 15 to 20 points lower than whites. The probe also found that Coombs was a vocal supporter of abortion because "it disproportionately impacts blacks and minorities" and "helps to keep the black and minority population down." (In an interview with CJR, Coombs, who is now the managing editor of *Rasmussen Reports*, dismissed these allegations as "absurd.")

These biases seeped into the paper's news pages. Between 1998 and 2004, the Times covered each of the biennial American Renaissance conferences, hosted by the white supremacist New Century Foundation. What's more, the paper's coverage of these events -- which are hotbeds for holocaust deniers, neo-Nazis, and eugenicists -- was stunningly one sided. One 1998 story, called "Whites Ponder Future of Their Race," was patched together largely from presentations by firebrand researchers who defended discredited theories on the genetic gap between races and argued that human beings are genetically programmed to prefer their own ethnicity. There was also a quote from a woman named Susan Huck, who was cast as an ordinary conference goer, though she worked as an editor of a white supremacist paramilitary newsletter that was read by Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh. After claiming she was "not really that much into race," Huck noted that she feared for her nieces and nephews growing up in the "hell" of multi-racial America. "They can't even hold their heads up in their own civilization," she complained. Other than mentioning that KKK leader David Duke was in attendance, the story didn't offer the faintest hint that these ideas might be controversial.

Four years later, the Times ran a piece based solely on an American Renaissance speech by Glenn Spencer, who founded the anti-immigrant hate group, American Border Patrol, and has called immigrants a "cultural cancer." It warned that the Latino migrants flooding into California were part of a secret plot to re-conquer the American southwest and turn it into "an independent Hispanic territory." Similarly, under Pruden, the paper's Culture Briefs section regularly printed excerpts from racist hard-right publications, such as *VDARE* and *American Renaissance* magazine, along with rants from Bill White, the infamous neo-Nazi. One typical Culture Briefs snippet from 2006 argued that "genetic diversity" caused by the mixing of races was "a threat to civilization." During the Pruden era, an entire page in each week's Saturday edition was also reserved for the Civil War, with many articles devoted to glorifying the Confederacy.

According to Mark Potok of The Southern Poverty Law Center, this kind of coverage helped push fringe ideas into the mainstream. As Potok puts it, "The Washington Times helped to legitimize a white nationalist narrative that has spread through much of the political discourse in this country." The Times's nativist leanings also sowed anguish in the newsroom, as did Pruden's brash editing. Among other things, Pruden was infamous for rewriting stories to fit his ideological bent -- a practice known as "Prudenizing." (Pruden declined to be interviewed for this story.)

His and Coombs' heavy-handed style took a toll on the paper. By the early aughts it was hemorrhaging talent, and its once-outsized influence was dwindling. Then, in late 2006, *The Nation* published a devastating investigation, which exposed rampant racism in the newsroom and dredged up other unsavory allegations, including sexual harassment complaints against Coombs. Around this time, the paper's parent company, News World Communications, enlisted Nixon Peabody and launched its own probe, which reportedly bore out most of the *The Nation's* findings. It also began hunting for Pruden's replacement. Under pressure, Pruden stepped down in early 2008 -- though the paper has continued to run his columns in its news pages.

If those columns are any guide, Pruden still has strong opinions about race. In 2009, for instance, Pruden penned a handful of pieces arguing that President Barack Obama was incapable of understanding America's heritage. "He is our first president without an instinctive appreciation of the culture, history, tradition, common law, and literature whence America sprang," he wrote. "The genetic imprint writ large in his 43 predecessors is missing from the Obama DNA." In another piece, Pruden argued that Obama had "no natural instinct or blood impulse" for what America was about because he was "sired by a Kenyan father" and "born to a mother attracted to men of the Third World."

These musings touched off an uproar, after which David Mastio, then the Deputy Editorial Page Editor, was assigned to edit Pruden's work. Mastio says Pruden's drafts were often sprinkled with subtle racism and pro-Confederate language. "He was constantly re-litigating the Civil War, and attacking the historical figures on the right side of the war, Lincoln and Grant being his favorites," Mastio explains. "He also used terms with animal implications when referring to blacks" -- "sired" being a prime example. Part of Mastio's job was to strip the offending language.

Now it is Pruden wielding the red pen.

Already, his influence is apparent in the paper's opinion pages. Pruden is a gifted prose stylist who is more interested in bludgeoning opponents than in reasoned debate. Under his leadership, the writing in Commentary has become snappier and more colorful, but also more strident and less thoughtful. Rather than offer a mix of perspectives, it continually hammers the same issue from similar angles. Pruden's nativist leanings have also crept back into the Times's pages. In a column last week, he tackled the renewed immigration-reform push. Pruden is against it, of course, but his take on Republicans who support it is telling. What's driving them, he argues, is a desire to tap the "abundance of voters drawn to welfare-state" programs -- meaning, presumably, that immigrants tend to be freeloaders bent on milking the government.

Just a few months ago, this kind of rhetoric abounded. But in the aftermath of the 2012 elections, the tone among the right-leaning punditocracy has shifted, especially on immigration. Rupert Murdoch, the conservative media kingpin, has called for "sweeping, generous immigration reform." Sean Hannity and Lou Dobbs, who led the charge against George W. Bush's ill-fated 2007 immigration-overhaul plan, have endorsed the Senate blueprint. So has Bill O'Reilly. Even Rush Limbaugh has signaled that he might be persuadable, by praising co-author Marco Rubio's efforts as "admirable and noteworthy." Against this backdrop, Pruden's mud slinging -- which in another era might have swayed public opinion -- only make the Times seem out of step.