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OPINION DECLARATIONS

# *A Lament for the Washington Post*

The most powerful capital in the world has no major fully functioning newspaper. That's a huge absence.



By **Peggy Noonan** [Follow](#)

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KEN CEDENO/REUTERS

The diminishment of the Washington Post hits hard because it feels like another demoralizing thing in our national life. Our public life as a nation—how we are together, how we talk to each other, the sound of us—isn't what it was. It's gone down and we all feel this, all the grown-ups.

The Post was a pillar. The sweeping layoffs and narrowing of coverage announced this week followed years of buyouts and shrinking sections. None of this feels like the restructuring of a paper or a rearranging of priorities, but like the doing-in of a paper, a great one, a thing of journalistic grandeur from some point in the 1960s through some

point in the 2020s. I feel it damaged itself when, under the pressure of the pandemic, George Floyd and huge technological and journalistic changes, it wobbled—and not in the opinion section but on the news side. But I kept my subscription because that is a way of trusting, of giving a great paper time to steady itself. (And there would always be an important David Ignatius column, or a great scoop on some governmental scandal that made it worth the cost.)

But the Post's diminishment, which looks like its demise, isn't just a "media story." Reaction shouldn't break down along ideological lines, in which the left feels journalism is its precinct and is sad, and the right feels journalism is its hulking enemy and isn't sad. Treat it that way and we'll fail to see the story for its true significance. The capital of the most powerful nation on earth appears to be without a vital, fully functioning newspaper to cover it. That isn't the occasion of jokes, it's a disaster.

I fear sometimes that few people really care about journalism, but we are dead without it. Someday something bad will happen, something terrible on a national scale, and the thing we'll need most, literally to survive, is information. Reliable information—a way to get it, and then to get it to the public. That is what journalism is, getting the information.

You have to think of it as part of your country's survival system. Maybe the government will or won't tell you the truth about what's going on, maybe the Pentagon will or won't, but if you know you've got this fabulous island of broken toys, professional journalists working for a reputable news organization, you've got a real chance of learning what's true.

It takes years to make good reporters—people who are trained, who love getting the story so much, who love the *news* so much, that they will wade into the fire, run to the sound of the guns. They are grown only in newsrooms, not at home with laptops. They are taught by older craftsmen and professionals, through stories and lore.

The Post's greatness and expertise can't easily be replaced and perhaps can't be replaced at all, or at least not for decades of committed building.

It is possible what we're witnessing is an owner, Jeff Bezos, deciding that his newspaper is a 20th-century structure in a 21st-century world, that it couldn't be changed or gradually moderated, so he and his executives are tearing it down to the studs. Maybe he'll sell it, maybe he'll keep it and rebuild it. But that will take a long, long time. You can't

immediately get or win back the stature of a thing, the presence, the professionalism. You can't snap your fingers, wash away a whole world, erect a new one, and have it work well and quickly.

And this will have an impact on our democracy.

Why is the end of a great newspaper not good for democracy? Let's journey back to Thomas Jefferson, in Paris in 1787, as American minister to France. Back home they were debating the U.S. Constitution. In a letter dated Jan. 16 to his friend Edward Carrington, a member of the Continental Congress, his thoughts: "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." He wasn't being flip. He understood journalism was a defense against tyranny.

Government by its nature always wants to accumulate power and use it. A watchful press slows this process, sometimes stops it, by exposing its abuses.

If citizens are informed, they can self-govern from a rough baseline of realism. "The good sense of the people," Jefferson wrote, is always "the best army." True, they can be "led astray," but their mistakes will be limited and can be corrected through information that can "penetrate the whole mass of the people." When the public is uninformed, those running government "shall all become wolves."

He absolutely knew those who report could produce work that was partisan, inaccurate, sensationalistic. He himself became quite the mischievous manipulator of the press. But again, the process could self-correct, especially if a nation had a big, burgeoning information culture, with everyone keeping an eye on everyone else.

In any case he was certain a free press was safer for the republic than what would otherwise become government censorship and propaganda.

This is so self-evidently true—and so pertinent to this moment!—that it becomes obvious that the capital of the most powerful nation in the world, operating without a big main newspaper to monitor it, is a danger and a threat.

I do not understand the figure of Mr. Bezos. Nice man, met him, always treated as kind of business visionary, and fair enough! But what is he about right now? I can't believe the fourth-wealthiest person in the world (and in history) would dash his own historic

reputation to curry favor with the Trump administration. For what, more contracts? He's got enough contracts! It's so small-time, so penny-ante. What matters is honor, that's the thing that lasts, what history says of you, how you helped your country.

As for those who execute diminishment, we are in the midst of a continuing technological revolution, the internet upended the business model, it's hard out there. But I'll tell you, I have been meeting the same media executives for 20 years, and there's something wrong. Their eyes light up as they offer lengthy, detailed explanations of the challenges to modern journalism—why it's dying, why nothing works. When talk turns to what to do, how to negotiate the landscape, their eyes turn dead. It isn't just that they don't know how, it's that they've fallen in love with the doom loop. Their only creativity is in describing everything that is killing their company, and they have vivid words for it—"strangling," "pummeling." They have no words for coming alive and enduring. Might this be part of the problem?

Finally, losing the one major newspaper left in the great nation's capital—and during the Trump administration no less, during a time of the easy abuse of standards and traditions, of inching up to and then inching over the law, in a pattern that promises not to get better but worse—is more than a Jeffersonian nightmare, it is a kind of sin. The kind history doesn't easily forgive.

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