

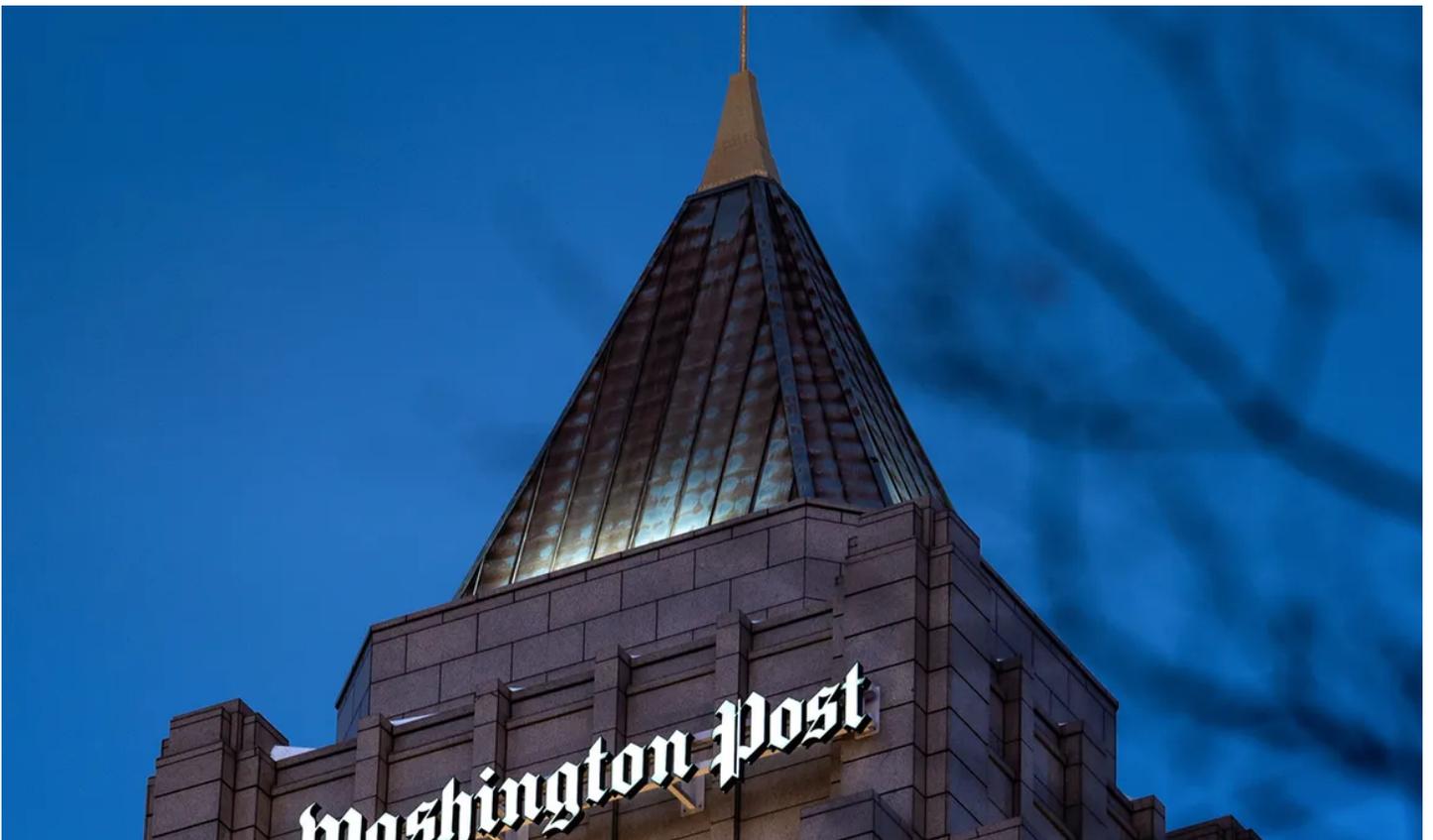
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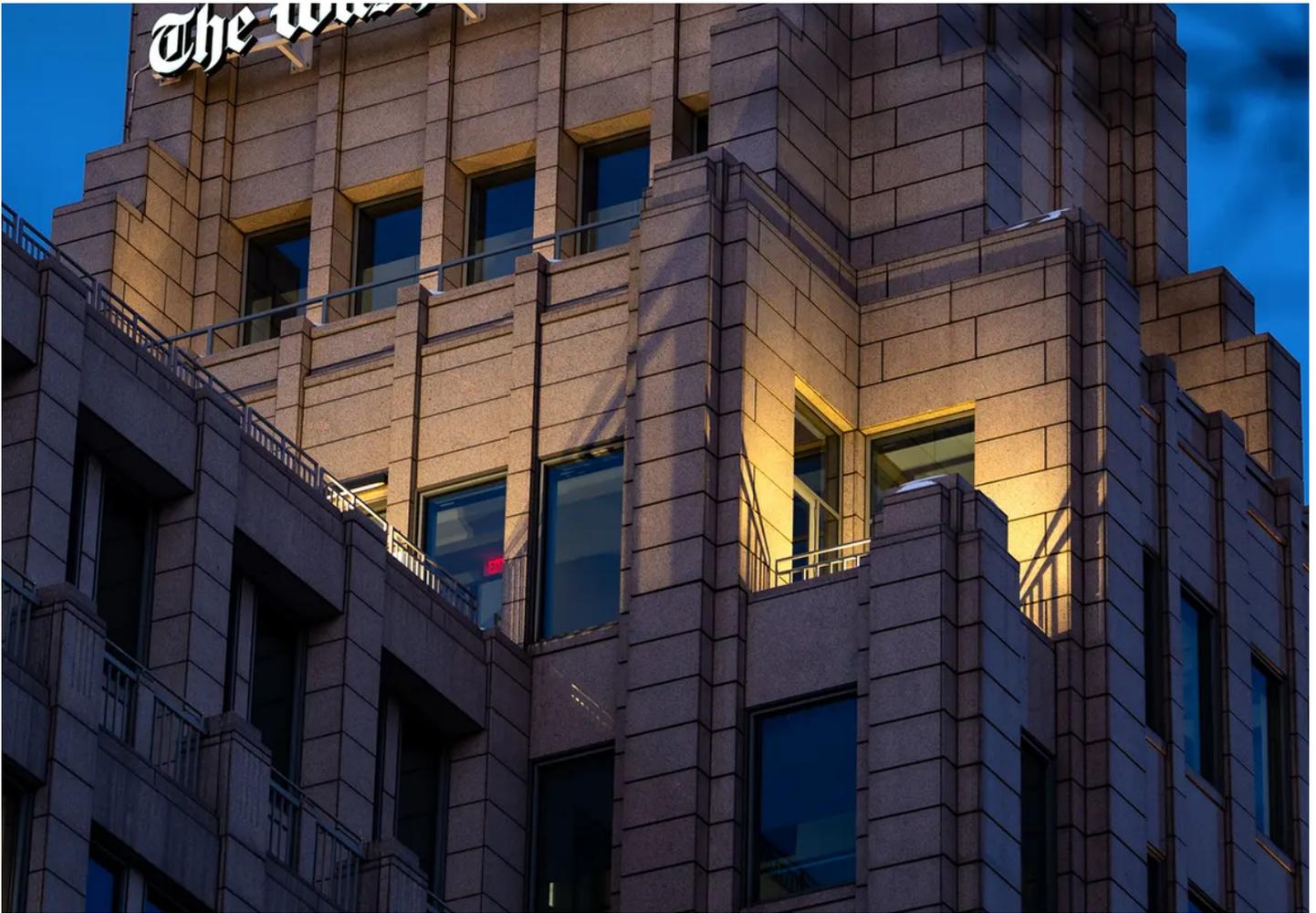
HOW JEFF BEZOS BROUGHT DOWN THE WASHINGTON POST

The Amazon founder bought the paper to save it. Instead, with a mass layoff, he's forced it into severe decline.

By Ruth Marcus

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Photograph by Kent Nishimura / Bloomberg / Getty

On September 4, 2013, the Amazon founder Jeff Bezos held his first meeting with the staff of the *Washington Post*, the newspaper he had agreed to purchase a month earlier from the Graham family, for two hundred and fifty million dollars. It had been a long and unsettling stretch for the paper’s staff. We—I was a deputy editor of the editorial page at the time—had suffered through years of retrenchment. We trusted that Don Graham would place us in capable hands, but we did not know this new owner, and he did not know or love our business in the way that the Graham family had. Bezos’s words at that meeting, about “a new golden era for the *Washington Post*,” were

reassuring. Bob Woodward asked why he had purchased the paper, and Bezos was clear about the commitment he was prepared to make. “I finally concluded that I could provide runway—financial runway—because I don’t think you can keep shrinking the business,” he said. “You can be profitable and shrinking. And that’s a survival strategy, but it ultimately leads to irrelevance, at best. And, at worst, it leads to extinction.”

To look back on that moment is to wonder: How could it have come to this? The paper had some profitable years under Bezos, sparked by the 2016 election and the first Trump term. But it began losing enormous sums: seventy-seven million dollars in 2023, another hundred million in 2024. The owner who once offered runway was unwilling to tolerate losses of that magnitude. And so, after years of Bezos-fuelled growth, the *Post* endured two punishing rounds of voluntary buyouts, in 2023 and 2025, that reduced its newsroom from more than a thousand staffers to under eight hundred, and cost the *Post* some of its best writers and editors. Then, early Wednesday morning, newsroom employees received an e-mail announcing “some significant actions.” They were instructed to stay home and attend a “Zoom webinar at 8:30 A.M.” Everyone knew what was coming—mass layoffs.

The scale of the demolition, though, was staggering—reportedly more than three hundred newsroom staffers. The announcement was left to the executive editor, Matt Murray, and human-relations chief Wayne Connell; the newspaper’s publisher, Will Lewis, was nowhere to be seen as the grim news was unveiled. In

what Murray termed a “broad strategic reset,” the *Post*’s storied sports department was shuttered “in its current form”; several reporters will now cover sports as a “cultural and societal phenomenon.” The metro staff, already cut to about forty staffers during the past five years, has been shrunk to about twelve; the foreign desks will be reduced to approximately twelve locations from more than twenty; Peter Finn, the international editor, told me that he asked to be laid off. The books section and the flagship podcast, “Post Reports,” will end. Shortly after the meeting, staffers received individualized e-mails letting them know whether they would stay or go. Murray said the retrenched *Post* would “concentrate on areas that demonstrate authority, distinctiveness, and impact,” focussing on areas such as politics and national security. This strategy, a kind of *Politico*-lite, would be more convincing if so many of the most talented players were not already gone.

Graham, who has previously been resolutely silent about changes at the paper, posted a message on Facebook that pulsed with anguish. “It’s a bad day,” he wrote, adding, “I am sad that so many excellent reporters and editors—and old friends—are losing their jobs. My first concern is for them; I will do anything I can to help.” As for himself, Graham, who once edited the sports section, said, “I will have to learn a new way to read the paper, since I have started with the sports page since the late

1940's.”

What happened to the Bezos of 2013, a self-proclaimed optimist who seemed to have absorbed the importance of the *Post* in the nation's journalistic ecosystem? In 2016, dedicating the paper's new headquarters, he boasted that it had become “a little more swashbuckling” and had a “little more swagger.” As recently as December, 2024, at the New York *Times*' DealBook Summit, Bezos expressed his commitment to nurturing the paper: “The advantage I bring to the *Post* is when they need financial resources, I'm available. I'm like that. I'm the doting parent in that regard.” Not long ago, he envisioned attracting as many as a hundred million paying subscribers to the *Post*. With these brutal cuts, he seems content to let the paper limp along, diminished in size and ambition.

📖 the beginning, he was wonderful,” Sally Quinn, the veteran *Post* contributor and wife of its legendary executive editor, Ben Bradlee, told me of Bezos. “He was smart and funny and kind and interested. He was joyful. He was a person of integrity and conscience. He really meant it when he said this was a sacred trust, to buy the *Post*. And now I don't know who this person is.”

The author David Maraniss was with the *Post* for forty-eight years. He resigned as an associate editor in 2024, after Bezos killed the editorial page's planned endorsement of Kamala Harris. “He bought the *Post* thinking that it would give him some gravitas and grace that he couldn't get just from billions of dollars, and then the world changed,” Maraniss said of Bezos.

“Now I don’t think he gives us—I don’t think he gives a flying fuck.”

I asked Maraniss what cuts of this magnitude would mean for the institution. “I don’t even want to call it the *Washington Post*,” he said. “I don’t know what it’ll be without all of that.”

The first sign of impending layoffs came in late January, when the sports staff was informed that plans to send writers to Italy to cover the Winter Olympics had been cancelled. (Management later agreed to send a smaller crew.) In the following days, as rumors began to spread of severe cuts, the paper’s reporters began posting messages directed at Bezos on X, with the plaintive hashtag #SaveThePost. “Our reporters on the ground drove exclusive coverage during pivotal moments of recent history,” the foreign staff wrote to Bezos. “We have so much left to do.” The local staff noted that it had already been slashed in half in the past five years. “Watergate,” they wrote, “started as a local story.”

It did not help the staff’s morale that Lewis and his team were hobnobbing in Davos, or that Bezos and his wife, Lauren Sánchez, were in Paris for Haute Couture Week. More troubling were reminders that Bezos, who once emblazoned “Democracy Dies in Darkness” on the paper’s masthead, appears to be

pursuing a policy of appeasement toward the Trump Administration. During the first Trump term, Bezos stood by the *Post* even when his stewardship threatened to cost him billions in government contracts. Now Bezos had not said a word about a recent F.B.I. raid on the home of the *Post* federal-government reporter Hannah Natanson, in which the agency seized her phones, laptops, and other devices. As the staff awaited the axe, the President and the First Lady celebrated the première of “Melania,” a documentary that Amazon had licensed for forty million dollars and was reported to be spending another thirty-five million to promote. The deal was inked after Bezos had dinner with the Trumps shortly before the Inauguration.

Martin Baron, who oversaw coverage at the paper that garnered eleven Pulitzer Prizes during his eight years as executive editor, said in a statement, “This ranks among the darkest days in the history of one of the world’s greatest news organizations. The *Washington Post*’s ambitions will be sharply diminished, its talented and brave staff will be further depleted, and the public will be denied the ground-level, fact-based reporting in our communities and around the world that is needed more than ever.” The news industry is in “a period of head-spinning change,” Baron told me. But the *Post*’s problems “were made infinitely worse by ill-conceived decisions that came from the very top.” He pointed to Bezos’s decision to kill the Harris endorsement—a “gutless order” that cost the paper more than two hundred fifty thousand subscribers. “Loyal readers, livid as they saw owner Jeff Bezos betraying the values he was supposed

to uphold, fled The Post. In truth, they were driven away, by the hundreds of thousands,” Baron said. “Bezos’s sickening efforts to curry favor with President Trump have left an especially ugly stain of their own. This is a case study in near-instant, self-inflicted brand destruction.”

I spent more than forty years at the *Post*, as a reporter, an editor, an editorial writer, and a columnist. I resigned last March, after Bezos announced that the Opinions section, where I worked, would henceforth be concentrating on the twin pillars of “personal liberties and free markets.” More alarming, Bezos advised, “Viewpoints opposing those pillars will be left to be published by others.” We had been an opinion section reflecting a wide range of views—which Bezos himself had encouraged. It seemed obvious that this change was deeply misguided.

I had written a column critical of the non-endorsement decision several months earlier. The paper published it without any substantive changes. But, when I wrote a column disagreeing with the no-dissent-allowed dictum, I was told that Lewis had killed it—it apparently didn’t meet the “high bar” for the *Post* to write about itself—and declined my request to meet. I submitted my letter of resignation. A new editorial-page editor went on to shift both unsigned editorials and signed opinion columns dramatically to the right, to the point that no liberal columnists remain. One recent editorial praised the President’s plan for a new ballroom and excused his unauthorized bulldozing of the East Wing, saying that “the blueprints would have faced death by a thousand papercuts.” Another endorsed the move to rename

the Defense Department the Department of War as “a worthy blow against government euphemism.” There are some editorials critical of Trump, but the inclination to fawning praise is unmistakable. Had I not defenestrated myself, I would, no doubt, have been advised to take my buyout and go.

But I am not—at least, I have not been—a Bezos-hater. I am grateful for the resources, financial and technological, that he devoted to the paper in his early years as owner. The surprise of Bezos’s tenure at the *Post* has been his bad business decisions. Fred Ryan, a former chief of staff to Ronald Reagan and founding president of *Politico*, was hired as the publisher and C.E.O. in 2014 and oversaw a period of spectacular growth. Buoyed by Bezos-funded expansion and the public’s fixation on the new Trump Administration, the number of digital subscribers soared from thirty-five thousand when he arrived to two and a half million when he left, in the summer of 2023. But Ryan failed to develop an adequate plan for how the newspaper would thrive in a post-Trump environment. As traffic and revenue plunged, Ryan found himself increasingly at odds with the newsroom. He held a year-end town-hall meeting in 2022 at which he announced that layoffs were coming, and then, to the consternation of the staff, left without taking questions. As Clare Malone reported for *The New Yorker*, Woodward beseeched Bezos to intercede. The owner made a rare visit to the paper in

January, 2023, for meetings with key staffers, taking notes on a legal pad as they poured out their anxiety.

Ryan left that summer, but Lewis, his eventual replacement, accomplished the feat of making the newsroom nostalgic for Ryan. A decade earlier, Lewis, then a senior executive in Rupert Murdoch's British-tabloid empire, had played a pivotal role in dealing with the fallout from the phone-hacking scandal at some of Murdoch's papers. Lewis had said that he was acting to protect "journalistic integrity," when the *Post* questioned him about his actions during that time, but in 2024 questions arose, fuelled by a civil lawsuit brought against the papers, about whether Lewis had sought to conceal evidence, including by carrying out a plan to delete millions of e-mails. (Lewis has said the allegations against him were "completely untrue.") At the *Post*, Lewis clashed with executive editor Sally Buzbee over coverage of the story, reportedly insisting that it was not newsworthy. Shortly afterward, Lewis announced Buzbee's departure, and his plan to replace her with Robert Winnett, a former colleague of his from London's *Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Times*. The *Post* and the *Times* both reported on how Lewis and Winnett had used fraudulently obtained material as the basis for articles. "His ambition outran his ethics," one of Lewis's former reporters told the *Times*. Winnett ended up withdrawing from the position, but the episode poisoned relations between Lewis and the newsroom.

The staff, meanwhile, became increasingly concerned that Lewis was offering corporate word salad in place of a vision to address

the *Post's* decline. “Fix it, build it, scale it” was his catchphrase when he arrived, in January, 2024. In June of that year came an amorphous plan for what Lewis called a “third newsroom.” (The second newsroom, we were surprised to learn, was the Opinions section.) First, it was to focus on social media and service journalism. Then it was rechristened WP Ventures and, according to a memo to staff, would “focus entirely on building personality-driven content and franchises around personalities.” By February, 2025, the situation had deteriorated to the point that two former top editors, Leonard Downie and Robert Kaiser, wrote to Bezos about Lewis. “Replacing him is a crucial first step in saving The Washington Post,” they urged in an e-mail. Bezos never responded.

Downie, who served as executive editor from 1991 to 2008, contrasted the paths of the *Times* and the *Post*. During the past decade, the *Times* transformed itself into a one-stop-shopping environment that lured readers with games such as Spelling Bee, a cooking app, and a shopping guide. By the end of 2025, it was reporting close to thirteen million digital subscribers and an operating profit of more than a hundred and ninety-two million dollars. The *Post* does not release information about its digital subscribers, but it was reported to have two and a half million digital subscribers at the time of the non-endorsement decision, in 2024.

“One of the big differences to me was that they hired a publisher”—Ryan—“who didn’t come up with any ideas,” Downie told me. “And then when he left . . . we knew that Bezos was losing money, and we were encouraged by the fact that they were looking for somebody who could improve the business side of the paper and the circulation side of the paper. And then they chose this guy who we hardly ever heard from, who had a checkered past in British journalism.”

Writing last month on a private Listserv for former *Post* employees, Paul Farhi, who as the media reporter for the *Post* covered Bezos’s acquisition of the paper, shared his “utter mystification and bafflement” about Bezos’s tolerance of Lewis. “Even as a hands-off boss,” he wondered, “could Bezos not see what was obvious to even casual observers within a few months of Will’s arrival—that Will was ill-suited to the *Post*, that he had alienated the newsroom, that he had an ethically suspect past, and—most important—that none of his big ideas was working or even being implemented?” (Farhi, who took a buyout in 2023, gave me permission to quote his message.)

Even before these new cuts, a parade of key staffers had left the *Post*. A beloved managing editor, Matea Gold, went to the *Times*. The national editor, Philip Rucker, decamped to CNN, and the political reporter Josh Dawsey to the *Wall Street Journal*. The *Atlantic* hired, among others, three stars of the paper’s White House team: Ashley Parker, Michael Scherer, and Toluse Olorunnipa. These are losses that would take years to rebuild—if the *Post* were in a rebuilding mode. The *Post*, Woodward said,

“lives and is doing an extraordinary reporting job on the political crisis that is Donald Trump”—including its scoop on the second strike to kill survivors of an attack on an alleged Venezuelan drug boat. But the print edition is a shadow of its former self, with metro, style, and sports melded into an anemic second section; daily print circulation is now below one hundred thousand. More pressingly, it’s unclear whether a newsroom so stripped of resources can sustain the quality of its work.

The sports columnist Sally Jenkins, who left the *Post* in August, 2025, as part of the second wave of buyouts, has been more supportive of management than many other *Post* veterans. So it was striking that, when we spoke recently, she was both passionate about the work of her newsroom colleagues and unsparing about how the business side had failed them. “When you whack at these sections, you’re whacking at the roots of the tree,” she told me. “We train great journalists in every section of the paper, and we train them to cover every subject on the globe. And when you whack whole sections of people away, you are really, really in danger of killing the whole tree.” When I asked how she felt about the losses, Jenkins said, “My heart is cracked in about five different pieces.”

Jenkins, who was in California covering Super Bowl week for the *Atlantic*, has spent a career studying what accounts for the

difference between winning teams and losing ones. Bezos, she said, had been generous with his money and laudable for never interfering in the work of the newsroom. But, she added, “making money at journalism, you have to break rocks with a shovel. You have to love thinking about journalism to the point that it wakes you up at night with an idea, and then you have to be willing to try it. And I don’t see a sense that he loves the business enough to think about it at night. It’s almost like he’s treated it like Pets.com—an interesting experiment that he’s willing to lose some money on until he’s not. But the difference with this business is it’s not Pets.com. It’s not a business that just disappears into the muck of venture capitalism. It’s a business that is essential to the survival of the Republic, for Christ’s sake. So you don’t fuck around with it like that.”

As *Post* staffers and alumni braced for the cuts, I called Kaiser, the former managing editor, who spent more than half a century at the paper. “Mr. Bezos’s personal system has failed him in a way I fear he doesn’t grasp,” Kaiser, now eighty-two, told me. “He has no sense of the damage that will be done to his reputation in history if he becomes seen as the man who destroyed the institution that Katharine Graham”—the famed publisher who led the paper from the sixties to the nineties—“and Ben Bradlee built.” Kaiser recalled arriving at the paper’s London bureau in 1964. “If I say, ‘I’m Kaiser from the Washington *Post*’—what’s that? They never heard of it.” A decade later, he was posted in Moscow, as Woodward and Carl Bernstein were breaking the Watergate story. “Explaining was

not necessary,” Kaiser said. “The Russians, in fact, had a gloriously exaggerated impression of the *Washington Post* as the king-maker and the king-destroyer.”

Bezos, Kaiser continued, “knew what the role was, acknowledged the role—those words ‘doting parent’—and then he walked away from it. What the hell?” The damage, he predicted, will reverberate beyond the immediate cuts. “What purpose does any honorable, attractive, competent journalist have for remaining at the *Post*? None.”

At one point, as we talked about the transformation of the *Post*, Kaiser stopped himself. “I’m going to cry,” he said, and paused. “Oh, God, it’s killing me.”

Bezos may be tiring of the *Post*, but he has not seemed inclined to sell the paper. Nor is it clear that would be a better, or at this point even feasible, outcome. Newspapers across the country are being bought up by private-equity firms that are essentially selling off the valuable parts. But there is another model for Bezos to consider: turning the *Post* into a nonprofit, endowed by Bezos but operating independently of him. For Bezos, this would reduce the role of the *Post* as a headache and a threat to other, more favored endeavors, such as his rocket company, Blue Origin. For the *Post*, assuming the endowment is sufficient, it would provide that continuing runway.

There are models for this approach. In Philadelphia, the late cable-television tycoon H. F. “Gerry” Lenfest purchased the *Inquirer*, the *Daily News*, and Philly.com in 2015, and the following year donated the publications to a charitable trust. “What would the city be without the *Inquirer* and the *Daily News*?” asked Lenfest, whose contribution to the endeavor has been valued at almost a hundred and thirty million dollars. In Utah, the investor Paul Huntsman bought the Salt Lake *Tribune* from the hedge fund Alden Global Capital in 2016; three years later, he transformed it into a nonprofit, supported in part by tax-deductible contributions from readers.

Writing in the *Columbia Journalism Review* in 2024, Steven Waldman suggested that Bezos follow a similar course. “‘Nonprofit’ does not mean ‘losing money,’ ” Waldman wrote. “Nonprofit news organizations can sell ads, offer subscriptions, and take donations. Done well, it is an especially strong business model, because it provides an extra revenue stream (philanthropy) and is deeply embedded in serving the community.” My quibble with Waldman’s pitch is that he asked Bezos to ante up a paltry hundred million. When Bezos purchased the *Post*, his net worth was about twenty-five billion; it is now an estimated two hundred fifty billion. Why not one per cent of that for the *Post*, enough to sustain the paper indefinitely? A pipe dream, I know, but this arrangement would make Bezos the savior of the *Post*, not the man who presided over its demise.

In the 1941 movie “Citizen Kane,” Charles Foster Kane, a

newspaper publisher who, like Bezos, is one of the richest men in the world, is confronted by his legal guardian, Walter Thatcher, about the folly of funding his paper. “Honestly, my boy, don’t you think it’s rather unwise to continue this philanthropic enterprise, this *Inquirer* that’s costing you a million dollars a year?” Thatcher demands. “You’re right, Mr. Thatcher. I did lose a million dollars last year,” Kane replies. “I expect to lose a million dollars this year. I expect to lose a million dollars next year. You know, Mr. Thatcher, at the rate of a million dollars a year, I’ll have to close this place in sixty years.” Update Kane’s outlays to assume losses of a hundred million annually, in perpetuity. By that math, Bezos would have more than two millennia before needing to turn out the lights. ♦

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