

The New Criterion

Features

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Pop goes the “Times”

by [William McGowan](#)

On the decline of the Gray Lady.

Is *The New York Times* a liberal newspaper? In 2004, Daniel Okrent, then the paper’s “public editor,” wrote a column asking that very question.^[1] His answer: “Of course it is.” Okrent noted that the word “postmodern” had been used “an average of four times a week” that year, and if this didn’t reflect a Manhattan as opposed to a mainstream sensibility, he remarked, “then I’m Noam Chomsky.” (In August 2010, the standards editor, Philip Corbett, urged the *Times* newsroom to limit the use of the word “hipster,” which he said had appeared 250 times in the last year alone.)

Okrent also noted that the culture pages of the *Times* “often feature forms of art, dance or theater that may pass for normal (or at least tolerable) in New York but might be pretty shocking in other places.” The *Times Magazine*, he said, featured photo essays of “models who look like they’re preparing to murder (or be murdered), and others arrayed in a mode you could call dominatrix chic.” In the Sunday Style section, he found “gay wedding announcements, of course, but also downtown sex clubs and T-shirts bearing the slogan, ‘I’m afraid of Americans.’ . . . The front page of the Metro section has featured a long piece best described by its subheadline, ‘Cross-Dressers Gladly Pay to Get in Touch with Their Feminine Side.’ ”

Okrent acknowledged that a newspaper has the right to decide what’s important and what’s not, but stipulated that some readers will think, “This does not represent me or my interests. In fact, it represents my enemy.” He finished his controversial meditation: “It’s one thing to make the paper’s pages a congenial home for editorial polemicists, conceptual artists, the fashion-forward, or other like-minded souls (European papers, aligned with specific political parties, have been doing it for centuries), and quite another to tell only the side of the story your co-religionists wish to hear.” For those with a different worldview than the one that dominates the *Times*, the paper must necessarily seem “like an alien beast.”

Arthur Sulzberger, Jr., the publisher, responded to a query from Okrent by saying that he preferred to call the paper’s viewpoint “urban.” The tumultuous, polyglot metropolitan environment that the *Times* occupies meant that “We’re less easily shocked,” Sulzberger said. He maintained that the paper reflected “a value system that recognizes the power of flexibility.” But the cat was out of the bag. An authoritative voice at the *Times* had said, in effect, that the paper’s views—especially in matters of culture—were characterized by moral relativism and a celebration of the transgressive over traditional American norms and values.

Indeed, the *New York Times* has been waging a war against the traditional culture. In its coverage and criticism of media, film, television, books, poetry, and music, the *Times* looks through a radical-chic lens, affirming marginal causes and communities at the expense of normative values,

and deriding what members of the academic community ridicule as “heteronormativity.” The *Times* has embraced postmodernism with a vengeance, along with a deconstructionist cultural agenda that has spread through the paper like a computer virus.

In its treatment of film, television, theater, music, and other arts, the *Times*’s politicization regularly involves ideological innuendo, radical-chic attitudinizing, and liberal “editorial needles,” as Abe Rosenthal called them. Sometimes these give way to naked political preaching. According to Peter Bart, a former *Times* man and now *Variety* editor, “The *Times* has vastly stepped up its coverage of popular culture and, in doing so, seems to be bending its normal rules of journalistic fairness.”

Movies about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the larger War on Terror may have failed at the box office, but they have succeeded at the *Times*. Manohla Dargis favorably reviewed *Lions for Lambs* (2007), a triptych involving two soldiers who die in a remote mountain area of Afghanistan, the college professor who influenced them to join the service, and a newswoman being briefed on a (doomed) forward outpost strategy by an unctuous U.S. senator. From this film, Dargis asserted, viewers will learn that “America is no longer only the land of the free, home of the brave, but also the opportunistic and the compromised.”

A. O. Scott hailed Brian DePalma’s *Redacted* (2007), about the rape of a teenage girl and the murder of her and her family by U.S. troops in Iraq, because it brought us “face to face with what we have been unable to see or acknowledge with a collage of raw feelings and angry arguments.” In his review of *Rendition* (2007), which thrust an innocent cia analyst into the black world of “torture, kidnapping and other abuses,” Scott wrote that the film used “the resources of mainstream movie-making to get viewers thinking about a moral crisis that many of us would prefer to ignore.” He added, however, that it was “inevitable that someone with a loud voice and a small mind will label *Rendition* anti-American.” In *Body of Lies* (2008), Scott saw a likeness between a heedless cia agent portrayed in the film and President George W. Bush: “It’s possible that this resemblance is meant to imply a parallel between the president and Hoffman, who is immune to self-doubt and allergic to second thoughts about the righteousness of his actions.” A feature on the film by Robert Mackay cited its themes of “ruthlessness, political expediency and moral bankruptcy.”

The Matt Damon vehicle *Green Zone* (2010) has a preposterous plot and flopped at the box office, but that didn’t stop *Times* critics and feature writers from praising it. The story involves an Army staff sergeant (Damon) who explores what A. O. Scott calls “the hidden history of manipulation and double dealing” in the quest for Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. Although a noncom, Damon’s character breaks the chain of command to search out the deception behind the wmd issue. He ends up being targeted for assassination by scheming civilian political appointees. Nevertheless, Scott hails *Green Zone* for its ability “to fictionalize without falsifying” and says that, while the film “may not be literally accurate in every particular, it has the rough authority of novelistic truth.” An arts feature by Robert Mackay gave the director, Paul Greengrass, a platform to explain that he wanted to tell the story of the invasion of Iraq because “This hugely difficult process by which we ended up going to war there, only then to find that the reason that we went to war was not true, left a huge legacy I think—a legacy of fear, paranoia and mistrust.”

The ideological messages are just as pronounced, maybe even more so, in the criticism, commentary, and feature coverage of documentaries. Stephen Holden said of *Trumbo* (2008), an homage to the blacklisted Communist screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, “If the story of the Hollywood blacklist and the lives it destroyed has been told many times before, it still bears repeating, especially in the post-9/11 climate of fearmongering, of Guantánamo, of flag pins as gauges of patriotism.”

Poetry and pop music can also become ideologically charged at the *Times*. In a review of *Poems from Guantanamo*, a volume containing twenty-two poems from prisoners at that camp, Dan Chiasson said,

You don't read this book for pleasure; you read it for evidence. And if you are an American citizen you read it for evidence of the violence your government is doing to total strangers in a distant place, some of whom (perhaps all of whom, since without due process how are we to tell?) are as innocent of crimes against our nation as you are.

According to the Pentagon, one of the poets praised by Chiasson was among the scores of former Guantanamo detainees who re-enlisted in terrorist activities once they were released and returned to their home countries.

With its taste for the transgressive, the *Times* even celebrates the political and pornographic dimensions of hip-hop and rap, which John McWhorter characterizes as “the most overtly and consistently misogynistic music ever produced in human history.” He puts the blame on “an academic establishment and intellectual elite that seems unwilling to judge the dynamics of black life by the standards that it applies to others.” The *Times*, a paragon of that intellectual elite, has averted its eyes from the harsher aspects of the music and the “gangsta” lifestyle its performers affect as a way of preserving street cred. In a July 2007 website Q&A, the culture editor Sam Sifton stood behind his paper's coverage of hip-hop “because it's an art form. You may find some of it trite and repetitious, crude and juvenile, but it is,” he said to one dubious reader, adding patronizingly, “It may be that you're just not listening hard enough.”

In addition to affirming the violent fantasies of rappers, *Times* critics are always alert to possible victories by the Left in the culture war. In 2003, as the war was growing fiercer because of the invasion of Iraq, the Sunday Week in Review section ran a piece about a possible literary upswing for progressives. “For the first time in recent memory,” Emily Eakin noted, “The *Times* [bestseller] list, the nation's most influential barometer of book sales, is pitting liberals and conservatives against each other in roughly equal numbers, ending what some publishing executives say is nearly a decade of dominance by right-wing authors.” Alongside such conservative best-selling authors as Bill O'Reilly, Ann Coulter, and Laura Ingraham were liberal-minded books like *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them* by Al Franken, *Bushwhacked* by Molly Ivins, *The Great Unraveling* by Paul Krugman, *Big Lies* by Joe Conason, and *Thieves in High Places* by Jim Hightower.

Eakin may have been right in calling the *Times Book Review*'s bestseller list “the nation's most influential barometer of book sales.” But its value as an objective measurement of American literary taste is compromised in view of the fact that all the liberal books Eakin noted had received reviews in that same publication, while none of the conservative authors did—in fact, dozens of conservative books have been studiously ignored by the *Times* despite their commercial success.

Since late 1970, when John Leonard as editor turned an entire issue over to Neil Sheehan as a forum to protest the Vietnam War, the *Times Book Review* (or tbr as it's called in the trade) has leaned to the left. The bias was especially pronounced from 1989 to 1994, when it was controlled by Rebecca Sinkler and became “ruthlessly partisan,” as the literary scholar John Ellis famously remarked. “The *Times* management has decided to donate the *Book Review* to the cause of political re-education,” Ellis wrote, turning it into “a lobby for political correctness” as well as “mindless bourgeois bashing and freakish sexual attitudes.”

Ellis described how “PC books are protected by assigning them to ideological clones of their author, while books that object to any aspect of pc ideology are given to the very people the book critiques, who respond with predictable animosity.” Among the liberal books that got sweetheart literary deals at the tbr, as Ellis noted, were Gloria Steinem's *Revolution from Within*, reviewed by *Mother Jones* editor Deirdre English; Susan Faludi's *Backlash*, reviewed by Ellen Goodman; and Michael Harrington's *Socialism: Past and Future*, reviewed by Paul Berman. “With matchmaking skills like these,” Ellis observed acidly, “Ms. Sinkler is wasted in journalism. She should run a dating service.”

Meanwhile, conservative authors such as Dinesh D'Souza, Thomas Sowell, and Shelby Steele, all of whom had "established themselves as major contributors to the national debate" on race, were assigned to antagonists and got reviews that either were nasty or dismissive, or that purposively ignored their central arguments.

Ellis also scored Sinkler for her love of the postmodern jargon of university cultural radicals, and for her obsession with radical feminism and the associated "discourse on gender that sustains it." Sinkler, he charged, had managed to make the tbr "a place where just as in Women's Studies Departments no reality check operates to slow the radical feminist slide into ever greater unreality."

In the Sinkler years, the tbr projected an unremitting hostility to anything resembling normative culture, especially if the book in question came from a high-profile conservative. Rush Limbaugh's *The Way Things Ought to Be* spent fifty-three weeks on the *Times* bestseller list, twenty-four of them as number one, but was not reviewed until a year after its first appearance on the list. And then it was derided by Walter Goodman, who said that Limbaugh's writing alternated "between slobberings of sincerity and slaverings of invective." Goodman was appalled that the book was aimed at "a part of middle America—call it the silent majority or The American People or the booboisie—that feels it has been on the receiving end of the droppings of the bicoastals as they wing first class from abortion-rights rallies to aids galas to save-the-pornographer parties."

Rebecca Sinkler was followed by Charles (Chip) McGrath, who institutionalized her double standards, praising liberals and penalizing conservatives. He ignored Ann Coulter's best-selling *High Crimes and Misdemeanors*, which was scalding in its criticism of President Clinton, while he affirmed such pro-Clinton books as Sidney Blumenthal's *The Clinton Wars* and Joe Klein's *The Natural: The Misunderstood Presidency of Bill Clinton*.

During the McGrath years, Regnery Books, which is based in Washington, D.C., and specializes in conservative titles, perfected the marketing art of doing an end run around the tbr. *Dereliction of Duty* by Robert Patterson, *Useful Idiots* by Mona Charen, and *The Politically Incorrect Guide to American History* and *Bias* by Bernard Goldberg all made it to the *Times* bestseller list, but none got a tbr review. Regnery's ability to promote the steak without getting the sizzle suggested that the tbr had become obsolete as a cultural arbiter because of its decision to participate in the culture wars rather than merely report on them.

In the immediate post-9/11 period, McGrath drew the lines on correctness ever more tightly. The tbr refuse to review Oriana Fallaci's European blockbuster, published in the United States as *The Rage and the Pride*, which attacked radical Islamic terrorism and much of Islam itself for being antidemocratic, misogynistic, and violent. (According to Fallaci, "to believe that a good Islam and a bad Islam exist goes against all reason.") Instead, the tbr reviewed Noam Chomsky's anti-American screed *Hegemony and Survival*, published about the same time as Fallaci's work. Samantha Power, a left-wing human rights scholar from Harvard, complained about Chomsky's "glib and caustic tone," but added respectfully that "his critiques have come to influence and reflect mainstream opinion elsewhere in the world," and closed her review by insisting that Chomsky was "right to demand that officials in Washington devote themselves more zealously to strengthening international institutions, curbing arms flows, and advancing human rights."

That the tbr would give so much space to someone whom Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., referred to as "an intellectual crook" was striking. But the real scandal of Power's Chomsky review is what she left out. Although she herself was the author of *The Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (which won a Pulitzer Prize), she failed to mention Chomsky's support for the French Holocaust denier Robert Faurisson, or his role in denying Pol Pot's systematic slaughter and starvation of between two and three million Cambodians.

In 2004, when the *Times* chose Sam Tanenhaus as McGrath's successor, many conservatives were surprised, and elated, because Tanenhaus was not identified as a Leftist. He had written a well-reviewed book about Whittaker Chambers and was working on a biography of William F. Buckley, Jr. Not only was he fluent in conservative ideas, he seemed at first to sympathize with some of them. Tanenhaus assigned reviews of some conservative books, including Jonah Goldberg's *Liberal Fascism*, which earned a mixed review from David Oshinsky. Fred Siegel's *Prince of the City: Giuliani, New York and the Genius of American Life* appeared on the front page.

It was not long, however, before the bloom was off the rose. James Piereson's book about the ideological impact of the JFK assassination, *Camelot and the Cultural Revolution*, was savaged in a sneering review by Jacob Heilbrunn. More and more, Tanenhaus simply ignored conservative titles. Like his predecessors, Tanenhaus continued to ignore Regnery Books, even those that climbed high on the *Times*'s own bestseller list, such as *America Alone* by Mark Steyn, *Power to the People* by Laura Ingraham, and *A Slobbering Love Affair* by Bernard Goldberg—likewise books from Encounter (whose publisher, Roger Kimball, also edits these pages). In June 2008, Encounter ran an open letter on its website declaring that it would no longer be sending review copies of its books to the *Times*. Two Encounter books had been on the *Times* extended bestseller list that month and yet no reviews were forthcoming. The tbr redlined books by conservative authors with provocative arguments that would have added much to the national conversation. One of these was Mark Krikorian's *The New Case Against Immigration: Both Legal and Illegal*, which received spectacular advance praise by people ranging from neoconservatives like William Bennett to the neoliberal super-blogger Mickey Kaus. Also ignored were books on Islamism, such as Andrew McCarthy's *Willful Blindness* (2008) and *The Grand Jihad* (2010), both of which made the *Times*'s extended bestseller list. Meanwhile, the tbr ran reviews of such fare as *Hung: A Meditation on the Measure of Black Men in America*, Jenna Jameson's *How to Make Love Like a Porn Star*, and *The Surrender*, a paean to sodomy by a former ballerina.

Bill O'Reilly's *Culture Warrior* got a review, but it was also by Jacob Heilbrunn, who dissed O'Reilly as "an expert at making mountains out of molehills" and as a reincarnation of Joe McCarthy and Father Coughlin. After five previous bestsellers, Ann Coulter finally got her first tbr review, for *Godless*. But it was by a self-proclaimed liberal, Liesl Schillinger, who wrote that the book was "loaded with recorded sound bites of conservative vitriol from the venomous vixen herself."

The tbr under Tanenhaus has continued to ignore the work of John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, specifically their blockbuster *Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB*, where they indisputably established that I. F. Stone was a paid agent for the kgb, along with numerous other Americans. While icing *Spies*, the tbr instead reviewed a pro-Stone biography, *The Life and Times of I. F. Stone* by David Gutterman, which weakly challenged the evidence that Stone "worked closely with the kgb in 1936 and 1938," and then went on to paint a mostly positive picture of the journalist.

Tanenhaus has also allowed a nasty edge to creep into reviews of conservative authors. When another former conservative, Damon Linker, reviewed two books about Norman Podhoretz, he closed by describing "the Brownsville Wunderkind" as an "embittered, paranoid crank, standing by and for himself alone." Surely a man who has a large body of important writing and editing behind him deserves more civility than that.

Part of the late 1970s Sectional Revolution, in which the *Times* became a multisection publication bulging with soft news and lifestyle journalism, was a greater use of market research and polling of target constituencies, especially in the area of cultural coverage. The research explained that the *Times* needed to "reach out to a new generation, people whose attention spans were shorter," as Warren Hoge, the assistant managing editor, told npr. It needed to replace its older readers with a

new generation, one that was educated but “aliterate,” meaning they did not read much. “We have to grab young readers by the lapels because they were less interested in reading,” Hoge said.

Over time, this transformation crowded out coverage of high culture in favor of an oddball, wink-and-nod popular culture. “The entire social and moral compass of the paper,” as the former *Time* *Times* art critic Hilton Kramer later said, was altered to conform to a liberal ethos infused with “the emancipatory ideologies of the 1960s” and drawing no distinction between “media-induced notoriety and significant issues of public life.” The *Times* took on more and more lightness of being. It became preoccupied with pop-culture trivia and *über* urban trends, reported on with moral relativism and without intellectual rigor.

The change was met by disaffection and derision within the paper’s newsroom. Grace Glueck, who ran the culture desk for a while as replacement editor, was one of the disaffected, and famously once asked, “Who do I have to f[. . .] to get out of this job?” Howard Kissel, the theater critic of the *Daily News*, said the new cultural pages reminded him of a middle-aged woman learning how to disco: “She put on a miniskirt and her varicose veins are showing.” Gerry Gold, a staff reporter, commented, “We do all these pieces on pop icons as if they are important *artistes*. In fact they are creations of the big record companies. Yet we try to intellectualize them.”

Lifestyle journalism and soft news got a big boost under the two-year tenure of Howell Raines (2001–2003), whose obsession with popular culture earned his regime the sobriquet “charge of the lite brigade.” When he took over, Raines wrote a piece for the *Atlantic Monthly* (published only after his dismissal over the Jayson Blair scandal) in which he expatiated on the role that popular culture had to play at the *Times*.

If you want to reach members of this quality audience who are between the ages of twenty and forty, you have to penetrate the worlds of style and popular culture. If the *Times*’s journalism continues to show contempt for the vernacular of those worlds, the paper will continue to lose subscribers. To explore every aspect of American and global experience does not mean pandering. It does mean that the serial ups and downs of a Britney Spears are a sociological and economic phenomenon that is, as a reflection of contemporary American culture, worthy of serious reporting. It means being astute enough about American society to understand that the deadly rap wars have nothing to do with what Snoop Dogg said about Suge Knight. The real story behind the rap wars is one of huge corporations like Sony and emi trying to save a multibillion-dollar industry in economic collapse.

The gravitas of the paper has suffered as a result of key appointments in the area of cultural news. One of them was the promotion of Sam Sifton from editor of the Dining section to cultural news editor in 2005. His intellectual pedigree was not in doubt: son of Elisabeth Sifton, a major figure in New York’s publishing community; grandson of Reinhold Niebuhr, the great Protestant theologian. But his obsession with pop-culture trivia came across full force in a 2007 online “Talk to the Newsroom” Q&A with readers, where he promised more video game reviews—a promise he certainly kept. In the same forum the previous year, he defended his paper’s coverage of Hollywood celebrities, and when a reader asked “Do you party? Do you rock and roll?” Sifton answered in a tone of desperate hipness by quoting Young Jeezy: “E’rybody know I rep these streets faithfully.”

But the problem at the *Times* is greater than the taste of the editors it hired. As the current editor Bill Keller has said, the *Times* puts out a daily newspaper “plus about 15 weekly magazines,” meaning the various freestanding sections in the paper. These fiefdoms are more and more devoted to lifestyle and less to news per se.

With a revived Style section appearing on both Sunday and Thursday, plus Home and Arts sections,

and magazine sections on fashion and design, soft news and lifestyle have come to define the paper as much or more than hard-news coverage. In a somewhat humorous—and devastating—*New Republic* article of April 2006, about the *Times*'s fascination with “lifestyle porn,” Michelle Cottle quoted Trip Gabriel, then editor of both Style sections, as saying that most of Thursday Styles “falls under the general category of coverage about appearance and image and what one sees looking in the mirror. . . . We are another department of basically consumerist pursuits—about the kinds of things that give people pleasure.” Cottle took it from there: “On any given Thursday, Styles fans are treated to a mélange of articles examining the hottest trends in looking good—everything from virtual personal trainers to ayurvedic massage to butt implants—with a whole lot of couture coverage in between. The front page features two or three longer pieces, including a photo-laden fashion spread and a nonshopping-related ‘lifestyle’ piece on topics like parenting or online dating.”

A lot of these lifestyle features deal with sex, often in a way that’s purposefully transgressive, even vulgar. In a feature on sex between clients and contractors in places like the Hamptons, “The Allure of the Tool Belt,” Joyce Wadler described one local as saying that the client-contractor affairs are relatively safe: there is no need to worry when the contractor’s car is seen in a woman’s driveway in the middle of the afternoon. And client-contractor love, from what he’s seen, rarely threatens marriages because when the job is over, the affair is over.

For some, the vulgarity and desperate hipness have been too much. As Joseph Epstein put it in *The Weekly Standard* in 2010, *The New York Times*'s traditional sobriquet, “the Gray Lady of American newspapers, . . . implied a certain stateliness, a sense of responsibility, the possession of high virtue. But the Gray Lady is far from the *grande dame* she once was. For years now she has been going heavy on the rouge, lipstick, and eyeliner, using a push-up bra, and gadding about in stiletto heels. She’s become a bit—perhaps more than a bit—of a slut, whoring after youth through pretending to be with-it. I’ve had it with the old broad; after nearly fifty years together, I’ve determined to cut her loose.”

[1] This essay is excerpted from *Gray Lady Down: What the Decline and Fall of “The New York Times” Means for America*, forthcoming from Encounter Books later this month.

William McGowan's latest book is *Gray Lady Down: What the Decline and Fall of “The New York Times” Means for America* (Encounter).

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