

IDEAS

WHERE JEFF BEZOS WENT WRONG WITH *THE WASHINGTON POST*

The billionaire handled his ownership admirably for more than a decade. But his courage failed him when he needed it most.

By Martin Baron



Illustration by Akshita Chandra / The Atlantic. Sources: Gareth Cattermole / Getty; Andrew Harnik / Getty.

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THE DAY THE WORLD LEARNED that Jeff Bezos would buy *The Washington Post*, the Amazon founder offered assurances that he would not cower when faced with threats from a vengeful president and his appointees.

He summoned memories of Richard Nixon's attorney general, John Mitchell, who warned that the legendary publisher Katharine Graham was "gonna get her tit caught in a big fat wringer" if the *Post* published one of its Watergate stories. "While I hope no one ever threatens to put one of my body parts through a wringer," Bezos wrote to the paper's anxious journalists in August 2013, "if they do, thanks to Mrs. Graham's example, I'll be ready."

I led the newsroom at the time Bezos bought the *Post*. For a long while, he fulfilled his promise to the paper and its readers, exceeding my expectations. Then he faltered badly.

Now we know that Bezos is no Katharine Graham. It has been sad and unnerving to watch Bezos fall so terribly short of her standard as he confronts the return of Donald Trump to the White House. It's been infuriating to observe the damage he has inflicted in recent months on the reputation of a newspaper whose investigative reporting has served as a bulwark against Trump's most transgressive impulses.

All the signs lately point to a determined effort by Bezos to either placate Trump or please him outright: quashing an editorial that backed Kamala Harris for president only 11 days before the election and ending a decades-long tradition of presidential endorsements. A gushing postelection message of congratulations to Trump on his "extraordinary political comeback," with no mention of Trump's sordid resistance to the peaceful transition of power, which marked a historic low in presidential politics. Having Amazon join other tech companies in donating \$1 million to the inauguration fund. Making a pilgrimage to Mar-a-Lago for a late-night dinner with Trump, where Bezos and Melania Trump discussed a documentary about her—a chat that led to a \$40 million licensing deal with Amazon, reportedly nearly three times the offer of the next-highest bidder. Sitting on the dais, as Trump's showpiece, during the inauguration ceremony. And, last week, a Bezos memo prohibiting any opinion articles in the *Post* that aren't aligned with his own ideology of "personal liberties and free markets," an imperious intervention that caused the editorial-page editor to resign. Trump himself disclosed that he'd dined with Bezos the very evening the *Post* owner issued his latest dictate.

Read: There are no more red lines

Hundreds of thousands of readers have canceled subscriptions, no longer confident that this great newspaper will keep faith with the mission implicit in its motto of “Democracy dies in darkness.” Many of the *Post*’s talented journalists have decamped to other media outlets, unsure of their paper’s strategy and its soul.

Thankfully, the news department continues to operate with admirable independence and vigor, delivering revelatory work about a second Trump administration. That makes it all the more dismaying to witness the *Post*’s public image repeatedly tarnished as its owner cozies up to Trump with the evident goal of avoiding the president’s wrath and winning his favor.

FOR MORE THAN A DECADE, it looked as if Bezos would defy the worst expectations of him as a media owner. He did the right thing, surprisingly and encouragingly. I highlighted his many instances of steadfastness and courage in the 2023 book I wrote about my eight-year tenure as the *Post*’s executive editor, which overlapped with Bezos’s ownership and the first iteration of Trump in the White House. “In all my interactions with him,” I recounted, “Bezos showed himself to have integrity and spine.”

He oversaw an editorial page that unflinchingly, and with just cause, called Trump “bigoted, ignorant, deceitful, narcissistic, vengeful, petty, misogynistic, fiscally reckless, intellectually lazy, contemptuous of democracy and enamored of America’s enemies.” That was in a 2016 presidential endorsement of Hillary Clinton. In 2020, the *Post*’s editorial page opposed his reelection, labeling him “the worst president of modern times.” After Trump’s triumph in 2016, many of us at the *Post* worried that Bezos would capitulate to Trump’s bullying as he acquired the fearsome powers of a president. And yet, Bezos allayed our concerns. He fully supported our news coverage, giving us complete journalistic independence. Never once did he interfere, even when stories provoked Trump to retaliate against Amazon and him personally. I admired that, and remain immensely grateful.

“Don’t worry about me,” he told the political staff. “I can take care of myself.” I recall him musing later, in a dinner we had with leaders of *The New York Times*, how someday we might have to march together in protest if Trump’s attacks on journalists endangered the constitutional right to a free and independent press.

With the passage of time, it’s easy to forget how often Bezos was viciously denounced by Trump over the course of his first presidential campaign and first term as president. With Bezos pegged as a political enemy solely because of the *Post*’s coverage, Trump pressed to raise postal rates for package deliveries, vowing, depending on the day, to double, triple, or quadruple rates paid by Amazon. He interfered in a \$10 billion cloud-computing contract for the Department of Defense with the goal of ensuring that it didn’t go to Amazon, which had been perceived to be the leading bidder. He endlessly, and falsely, taunted Bezos with accusations that he was using the “Amazon Washington Post” to lobby for government favors and avoid taxes. He mocked Bezos’s divorce and his extramarital affair, ridiculing him as “Jeff Bozo.”

Joshua Benton: Jeff Bezos’s hypocritical assertion of power

Against those attacks and others, Bezos pushed back. In May 2016, I interviewed him at a conference held in the *Post*’s Washington, D.C., headquarters. I gave his staff a heads-up that I would ask about Trump’s broadsides against him, and for the first time, Bezos addressed them. “Most of the world’s population,” Bezos said, “live in countries where, if you criticize the leader, you can go to jail. We live in the oldest and greatest democracy in the world, with the strongest free-speech protections in the world, and it’s something that we are, I think, rightly proud of ... We want a society where any of us, any individual in this country, any institution in this country, if they choose to, can scrutinize, examine, and criticize an elected official, especially a candidate for the highest office in the most powerful country on Earth.”

In a 2018 interview with the financier and philanthropist David Rubenstein, Bezos spoke out forcefully and eloquently against Trump’s assault on the press: “If you’re the president of the United States or a governor of a state or whatever, you don’t take that job thinking you’re not going to get scrutinized. You’re going to get scrutinized, and it’s healthy ... It’s dangerous to call the media lowlives. It’s dangerous to say that they’re the enemy of the people.” He commended the work I was doing as the *Post*’s editor in charge of news coverage and that of Fred Hiatt, who oversaw editorials and opinions. In slang expressing unreserved approval, and to robust applause in a cavernous ballroom, he said we were “killing it.”

Bezos also made the gutsy legal request to have Trump deposed over the loss of the Defense Department contract. “The question is whether the President of the United States should be allowed to use the budget of DoD to pursue his own personal and political ends,” Amazon’s lawyers wrote in late 2019. “President Trump’s animosity toward Mr. Bezos, Amazon, and the Washington Post is well known, and it originates

at least in part from his dissatisfaction with the Washington Post's coverage of him from before he assumed office."

YOU NO LONGER HEAR tough words like that from Bezos and his camp. At least as striking as his recent, highly publicized overtures to Trump is his drastic shift to highly accommodating language.

When Bezos spoke in December at the *Times*' DealBook conference, it was as if he were a different person. He looked different, more buff. He sounded different, more meek. There was no expression of appreciation for the *Post*'s coverage, nor anything about the importance of the *Post* or the media generally—only his intent to try to talk Trump “out of that idea” that the press is the enemy of the people. “I don’t think he’s going to see it the same way,” he added, elaborating a bit on that minimalist goal. “But maybe I’ll be wrong.” (Predictably, he was wrong—spectacularly so.) And then Bezos assessed that Trump was “calmer than he was the first time” and “more settled.” Bezos could not have believed the words he uttered.



Jeff Bezos sits next to U.S. Senate Majority Leader John Thune and Kimberly Thune during a luncheon following President Donald Trump's inauguration at the U.S. Capitol on January 20, 2025. (Kevin Dietsch / Getty)

George Packer: *The Washington Post* is dying a death of despair

The big question is why Bezos's language and behavior have changed so dramatically. I can't get into Bezos's head, of course, but one answer must lie in an indisputable fact: Trump is less calm, less settled, and far more vindictive. He campaigned for office pledging retribution against "the enemy from within"—in other words, anyone who opposed him. In August 2023, Trump wrote on Truth Social: "IF YOU GO AFTER ME, I'M COMING AFTER YOU." By October of last year, NPR had counted 100 instances of Trump threatening to prosecute or punish political enemies.

Bezos has ample reason to worry about the consequences of any retribution. Federal contracts are key to the success of Amazon Web Services, the cloud-computing division that has been delivering more than half of the company's profits. An arch-competitor is Oracle, whose founder and chairman is Larry Ellison, the GOP megadonor whom Trump hosted recently at the White House and extolled as "one of the most serious players anywhere in the world." Bezos's commercial space venture, Blue Origin, has received billions of dollars from his personal bank account. January's successful launch into orbit of its New Glenn rocket positions Blue Origin to finally compete with Space X, the pacesetter owned by Trump's seemingly omnipotent best buddy, Elon Musk. The government will be Blue Origin's essential customer.

You don't have to look far to see what might happen to businesses in Trump's crosshairs. Solely because the top-tier law firm of Covington & Burling represents the former special counsel Jack Smith, Trump stripped its attorneys of national-security clearances and ordered federal agencies to cancel the firm's federal contracts. Smith had received pro bono assistance in anticipation of retributive investigations and prosecution by Trump's Justice Department. The president, who had sworn only a month earlier to "preserve, protect and defend" the Constitution, aimed to damage a law firm for work that is guaranteed under the Sixth Amendment's promise of access to counsel.

Newspaper owners have every right to set their paper's overall direction, and opinions expressed in editorials—or whether to publish any at all—have always been their prerogative. In a note to readers this past October, Bezos argued that calling for a halt to presidential endorsements would help avoid a "perception of bias" and a "perception of nonindependence." He framed it as an effort to restore reader trust, which has sharply declined for the media. "We must work harder to control what we can control to increase our credibility," he wrote.

Setting aside whether a presidential endorsement every four years truly weighs more heavily in readers' perceptions of bias than the daily editorials on sharply polarizing subjects, Bezos's own behavior since that decision has undercut his stated goals. Appearing on the dais during Trump's inauguration did not look like working harder to increase the *Post's* credibility. Nor did it signal independence. Instead, it suggested dependence on Donald Trump. Bezos denies that fear of retaliation against his other commercial interests had anything to do with the endorsement decision. "That was

certainly not on my mind,” he told the *Times*’ Andrew Ross Sorkin at the DealBook conference. That strains belief.

“We saved *The Washington Post* once. This will be the second time,” Bezos said during the DealBook interview. “It took a couple of years. It made money for six or seven years after that. In the last few years, it’s lost money again. It needs to be put back on a good footing again ... We have a few other ideas.”

The opinion section’s Bezos-mandated pivot to “personal liberties and free markets” appears to be one of them. Bezos is right that his previous strategy for turning the *Post* into a national news organization was a grand success, and I was glad to execute it as my fellow journalists and I contributed good ideas of our own and scotched some really bad ones. This latest turn seems less promising, not to mention less inspiring. Will readers drawn to the *Post* outnumber those who lose confidence in it?

Read: The tech oligarchy arrives

What’s especially worrisome about Bezos’s instructions is the mandate that alternative views are unwelcome—“left to be published by others.” And neither Bezos nor the *Post*’s publisher, Will Lewis, has defined what precisely is meant by “personal liberties and free markets,” identified what sorts of opinions would be considered nonconforming, or addressed how this might affect the reputations of columnists who remain on staff. Who exactly in the opinion section has been against personal liberties? Will opinions in favor of regulation (of major tech platforms, for example) not be tolerated? Will it be allowable to speak of instances where markets have failed or gone awry? If columnists take a free-market view, won’t readers conclude that they’re doing so only because they’re required to as a condition of employment?

Lewis, in a note to staff, celebrated the “recalibrated content strategy” for offering “new clarity and transparency.” But *Post* columnists tell me they have no clue what it foretells and whether they’ll fit in. They’ve asked for explanations from the owner and the publisher, and been met with silence. Opacity, not transparency, appears to be the order of the day.

The White House and its allies, in contrast, didn’t seem confused at all about what was in the offing. Steven Cheung, the White House communications director, responded to the edict by posting a GIF of a typically grumpy Grinch cracking a smile. Elon Musk promptly blasted out, “Bravo, @JeffBezos!” The right-wing activist Charlie Kirk cheered, “Good! The culture is changing rapidly for the better.” None of them worried that Bezos’s directive constituted what they claim to abhor (and what it is): cancel culture.

The most fundamental American liberty is free expression. Newspapers such as the *Post* have long honored that constitutional right by welcoming a wide range of views in the opinion section, whether their leadership agrees with them or not, so as to

encourage civil public debate. Bezos was now decreeing that views out of alignment with his own ideology would not see the light of day in territory that he controls. The paper that proclaims itself to be on the side of democracy had taken a step that was distinctly undemocratic.

AS OF TODAY, the *Post*'s editorials continue to take Trump to task. After Friday's quarrelsome White House meeting between Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, the *Post* judged that Trump "sounded more like Don Corleone than an American president." In the months ahead, we'll see if a reconfigured opinion section censures the president for his abject failure to practice what Bezos preaches.

Trump and the modern Republican Party are anything but models of free-market principle. An affection for punitive tariffs is but one example. The incessant bullying of private enterprise to serve Trump's political interests is yet another, as Bezos knows from personal experience. "In today's Republican Party," the *Post* columnist Catherine Rampell has written, "the primary economic role of the state is not to get out of the way. It is, instead, to reward friends and crush political enemies."

From the March 2025 issue: Capitulation is contagious

As for personal liberties, it's difficult to imagine a greater hazard than Trump, a man who speaks admiringly of the world's dictators. He asserts unprecedented presidential powers and has demonstrated disdain for the rule of law. He is using the federal government as a weapon against his political adversaries, withdrawing security protection from former officials who have crossed him and threatening prosecution of those he deems to have persecuted him. High on the list of targets is the press, a regular object of harassment, intimidation, investigation, litigation, and condemnation, with the goal of further undermining public trust and sabotaging economic sustainability.

If the *Post* does its job correctly in both its opinion section and its news coverage, it will hold Trump fully accountable when he engages in deceit and as he continues to subvert this country's democratic institutions. It will report what Trump is seeking to conceal but what the public deserves to know. That, at some point, will make the *Post* a fresh target for malevolent and punishing attacks. Amazon and Blue Origin might well be in the line of fire too, and Bezos's postelection outreach to Trump is unlikely to count for much amid his fury.

As Bezos decides how to respond, I urge him to make one of his rare visits to the *Post*'s newsroom and stare at the wall where its nearly century-old principles are affixed, paying attention to two in particular. No. 1: "The first mission of a newspaper is to tell the truth as nearly as the truth may be ascertained." And then No. 5: "The newspaper's duty is to its readers and to the public at large, and not to the private interests of its owners."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Martin Baron

Martin Baron retired as the executive editor of *The Washington Post* in 2021. He was previously the editor of *The Boston Globe* and the *Miami Herald*, and is the author of *Collision of Power: Trump, Bezos, and The Washington Post*.

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