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with Mike Blinder

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[Marty Baron discusses his new book, his experiences at The Post and his views on news media today](#)

In this episode, we go one-on-one with industry veteran Marty Baron, where we discuss his recently released book, "Collision of Power," which offers an inside view of his time as executive editor of The Washington Post under Bezos' ownership and during Trump's presidency. We also hear his thoughts on managing a newsroom in today's challenging news media ecosystem.

[music]

0:00:04.0 Announcer: This is E&P Reports. A vodcast from Editor and Publisher magazine, the authoritative voice of news media since 1884, serving newspapers, broadcast, digital, and all forms of news publishing.

0:00:20.5 Mike Blinder: And greetings once again. Mike Blinder, publisher E&P Magazine. And as always, we kick off with housekeeping listening on a podcast platform of choice. Please follow us watching on YouTube. There is a subscribe button below us. There is a bell to the right, do one and then the other in whatever... I think you have to do, subscribe then bell. You'll get an update each and every time we upload our weekly vodcast series E&P Reports. I am in the presence of greatness. You're a well-known person. I think you were actually more well-known when the movie came out, right? I mean, let's be honest, when Liev Schreiber played you, he looked just like you. Do you agree? I mean, do people still...

0:00:58.7 Marty Baron: Yeah. Well, thank you for those nice comments. I appreciate it. It's great to be with you. Yeah, the power of popular culture is just incredible. I mean, of course at the Boston Globe, we had worked on that Catholic church investigation, the initial story came out in January of 2002. We published probably 900 plus stories over the next year and a half. But a movie reaches a lot of people and a lot of people were not aware of how that investigation was conducted. So, it made a big impact.

0:01:31.6 Mike Blinder: Well, the Hollywood Reporter actually put your picture next to Liev saying who is who. I don't know if you saw that on the internet.

0:01:36.9 Marty Baron: No. [chuckle] The funny thing is, is that people say he looks, at least in the movie, he looked just like me. But nobody has ever said that I look like him. So how does that work? I don't know.

0:01:48.6 Mike Blinder: Marty Baron is our guest today. But from there, after... In 2012, you went over to The Washington Post. Little did you know, correct me if I'm wrong, a few months later, you were purchased by Jeff Bezos and you stayed there till recently, 2021, and you had 10 Pulitzer Prizes under your watch there. A few in Boston. My God, sir, I'm honored to have you on the program, but the reason you're here is to discuss your latest book, "Collision of Power: Trump, Bezos and The Washington Post." Amazing read. I only got through half of it 'cause you granted me this interview like in 12 hours ago, so I only got through half of that.

[chuckle]

0:02:25.7 Mike Blinder: We're gonna chat about your life at the Globe, and of course, your feelings about the industry on the backside of this message.

0:02:31.6 Announcer: This episode of E&P Reports is exclusively sponsored by BLOX Digital, formerly TownNews. Even though the name has changed, their commitment to the media industry is as strong as ever. BLOX Digital is now even better positioned to deliver integrated solutions like

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0:03:36.2 Mike Blinder: Your book starts in a very interesting setting. And I know everybody asks you about this. You had dinner at the White House with Donald and Jared. And Melania was there too. Am I right?

0:03:47.4 Marty Baron: Yeah. Melania was there. And then from The Washington Post, it was Jeff Bezos, our publisher, Fred Ryan, the now late editorial page editor Fred Hiatt and myself.

0:04:00.6 Mike Blinder: This is fascinating because, correct me if I'm wrong, and when we were all watching you take over... I mean, Bezos take over, he gave you autonomy, correct? I mean, you were the editor in chief. He said he was gonna stay out of your wheelhouse. What was he doing at that dinner, if I may ask? Why did it upset you? Was it... I hope it's not [0:04:17.7] _____ I gotcha.

0:04:19.5 Marty Baron: Yeah. No. I mean, I was concerned about that because he did say at the beginning that he would give us our independence journalistically. And in fact, he did do that. He never reneged on that. But our publisher felt that it was a good idea for us to meet with the president. Obviously, you know, the preeminent news organization in Washington meeting with a new president. And the feeling was that Bezos should be there. At least that was the feeling on his part. But I was very wary of that meeting for a variety of reasons. One, that Bezos's presence would signal to Trump that he was involved in the news coverage or could be involved in the news coverage if he wished to be or should be involved. And secondly, that Trump is fundamentally a transactional individual.

0:05:05.1 Marty Baron: And if he granted us the favor of having dinner, that he would expect something in return. And that's pretty much how it turned out. I think that Trump did interpret that meeting as signaling that Bezos was involved or should be involved. And Trump leaned on him the very next morning. Called him at eight o'clock in the morning on his cell phone and said, "I don't know if you get involved in the news coverage, but I'm sure you do to some extent." That was contradictory on his part to say that. But... And then... And he asked Bezos to do something to make sure the coverage was, as Trump put it, "More fair to him." And Bezos responded that he did not get involved in the news coverage, and that if he did he would regret it for the rest of his life. And at the end of that conversation, Trump said... Essentially invited Bezos to ask for a favor. He said, "Well, if there's anything that I can ever do for you." And thankfully, Bezos never followed up, never did ask for a favor and did continue to give us our independence. But Trump interpreted that meeting in a way that I fully expected.

0:06:15.0 Mike Blinder: But was it true that during the meeting, a phone rang and Jared found out that you were publishing information about Mueller investigating his business dealing, at that very moment during the dinner? It turned in that direction?

0:06:29.7 Marty Baron: Yes. Well, one of his communications peoples was there. And her phone either rang or buzzed. And she showed the story to... He knew that we were working on this story, of course. But she then... It was one that didn't reflect favorably on him that... And so she showed it to Jared Kushner and whispered to him, very Shakespearean, "Having dinner with your enemy." And that's what she had to say. And Fred Hiatt, who was sitting right near there and overheard it said, "We're not your enemy." And that was that. But in any event, it was an awkward dinner. Trump did virtually all of the talking.

0:07:16.6 Mike Blinder: I bet. [chuckle]

0:07:17.7 Marty Baron: He was talking directly to Jeff Bezos, who was on the other side of the dinner table. And he would periodically criticize The Post, which he, at that time, was naming the worst media outlet. And every time he did criticize The Post, he would... I was to his left, and he would poke me with his elbow. And I have to tell you, I was very tempted to poke him back. But of course, I restrained myself.

0:07:43.1 Mike Blinder: Hopefully the food was good. I mean, from that it...

[overlapping conversation]

0:07:46.4 Marty Baron: It was good. The White House chefs are pretty good.

0:07:48.7 Mike Blinder: [chuckle] There you go. All right. So when I took over E&P, and I come from the business side, like Mr. Bezos... And I'm nowhere near his, whatever, but how did you feel about the fact that he started thinking more of The Post as a brand? You see where I'm... 'Cause that's the first thing I said, it's E&P's a brand. It's 140 years old. What am I gonna do with this brand? I think in that business term. You come from the editorial side where maybe that... Did that register quickly with you? Were you conflicted at the time or are you okay with all those discussions?

0:08:22.2 Marty Baron: I wasn't conflicted on that at all. I mean, obviously the brand is why I was honored to work. That's why so many people work at The Post is because of its history and its heritage. And it's the work that it does, and that is the brand. And what was impressive about Bezos when he arrived was that he put so much emphasis on that and how you could accentuate that. There were a lot of younger people on the staff, particularly the digital types, who almost were kind of running away from that, feeling you needed to start something new. Of course, that was the time when HuffPost was ascendant, and when BuzzFeed News was ascendant and a bunch of other digital upstarts were ascendant. And there was a feeling by many in the industry, in fact, some of the old guard that we needed to break away from these sort of old brands.

0:09:12.6 Marty Baron: But Bezos felt very strongly that no, we actually needed to... We needed that brand. That is what he acquired [0:09:18.3] _____ it and that we needed to... But we needed to adapt that brand to the digital era. And so really, that was his focus. That's why he worked on the motto, which became, "Democracy Dies in Darkness." Early on, when we were developing, he very much wanted to create a new tablet app. And some of the younger people, he encouraged people to think openly about the possibilities. And some of the younger people were proposing something

that didn't even mention The Washington Post. And he outright rejected that saying, "No. That's what I just bought."

0:09:48.2 Mike Blinder: When you put up that slogan, or whatever you wanna call it, that slug line, your branding, "Democracy Dies in Darkness." This was around the same time where Trump was calling you the enemy of the people, right? I mean, so there must have been some...

[overlapping conversation]

0:10:01.4 Marty Baron: Yeah. We introduced it right about then, right after he took office. We had actually been working on it for over two years. We had about a thousand different options, most of them...

0:10:11.4 Mike Blinder: Wow.

0:10:11.5 Marty Baron: I mean, almost all of them really bad. Hard. I mean, it was hard. I mean, he felt that we should say something and something that offered sort of an art... Was really an articulation of our distinct contribution to the United States and to democracy. He urged us not to shy away from the democracy word, although he didn't mandate that we use it. He said he wanted something that would fit on a T-shirt which was interesting. But the most important thing that he said is that, he said he wanted it to be not a newspaper... To convey that it was not a newspaper that people should subscribe to, but an idea that they wish to belong to.

0:10:51.7 Marty Baron: And so that was his articulation of it. And I think that, and very importantly, that emphasizes that newspapers are a product that's different from a lot of other products, almost all other products. We actually have... It articulated that we have a relationship with our consumers, with our readers and that we want them to sort of buy into that. We want them to buy into our mission. We want them... They're going to subscribe to us because they want to proceed on that course, on that mission, along with us and they support it. And they saw The Post as an institution that was holding government to account, that historically had done that, and was doing that again during the Trump era.

0:11:34.0 Mike Blinder: Okay. We have a new advertiser here at E&P who has developed, through AI, an amazing tool that you can go to any online article and it will dissect it and change the lead, change the headline so it gets better optimization, better clicks based on current metrics that it's analyzing. We spotlighted an amazing newspaper operation in Connecticut, Hearst owns... And just picked up some more where the editor in chief starts the editorial meetings in the morning with the metrics. Does that make sense? Let's look at what happened the day before. Let's see what got clicked, what didn't, what the audience wanted. That's not the way it was in the old days. Are you comfortable with those things in today's world, Martin?

0:12:22.3 Marty Baron: I am comfortable. We did that at The Post as well. We started our morning news meeting looking at how we performed. And we also talked about what people were... We had a schedule for publishing certain kinds of stories. We had looked very closely at the rhythms of readership when readership was highest and we were published during those peak periods, and we scheduled stories for that. We had a number of metrics to look at the level of readership, of course,

the level of conversions to subscriptions, which was an incredibly important metric for us, is which stories actually led people to move from being readers to being actual subscribers. And so we looked at engagement metrics as well. We had a ton of metrics some of which made a lot of sense, and some that I don't think made a huge amount of sense.

0:13:09.6 Marty Baron: But... And some were quite punishing which I was not comfortable with. For example, the speed of our alerts, I was perfectly fine with measuring the speed of our alerts, but the way that we did it is that we ranked us against our competitors one, two, three, four, five. So if we were one second behind our competitor, we would be number two. Not number one. And it was... You're only talking about one second difference between us and the leading competitor. So that's a very punishing metric. And I think can lead to a lot of problems. So, there were many metrics that I was fine with. And in fact, we did review metrics with department heads and sometimes with reporters. We did make them available. They were on screens throughout our newsroom so that people could see them. And we wanted people to develop an appreciation for what was required to make our business sustainable, and also to understand whether their stories resonated with readers or didn't. Because if our stories aren't resonating with readers, then what's the point of writing them?

0:14:16.0 Mike Blinder: We're in a struggle now to maintain journalism on a local level. You know that the disruption has been massive. We're losing... I'm sure you know about the... We had Penny Abernathy just on the show last week, who was talking about the latest, greatest, news desert report out of Medill. Any advice you could offer those local publishers now that are striving to maintain their mission, that Madisonian mission, of being that final check on power, that spotlight that shines in the corners and still maintaining a sustainable business model? I mean, do you get asked that question sometimes?

0:14:54.7 Marty Baron: Yeah. I get asked it all the time. I wish I had a ready answer. I could make a mint selling the answer to all of that. It's a tough one. I recognize the challenges and I wanna be careful not to suggest that I have the answers or offer something that's entirely glib. So, because I know that people are working really hard at it, and it is the greatest challenge we have in journalism in this country and also in other countries that are facing the same things. Look, I mean, I think every institution has to really evaluate how can they engage most effectively with their community. What... People have to work on a strategy. I mean, at The Post we changed our strategy once Bezos acquired us. And it was really to move away from an emphasis on local journalism and more toward reaching a national and international audience. But obviously, that's not an option for most news organizations in the country. And so I think one has to focus very determinedly on what do our readers want from us? What is engaging them? How do they want us to engage with them? And stop doing a lot of the other things, the things that really don't have any resonance with the public and focus on those things that do. And make yourself very much a part of that community. I mean, people do trust their local news organizations a lot more than they trust the national news organizations.

0:16:18.1 Mike Blinder: True.

0:16:18.3 Marty Baron: And that is 'cause they are members of the community. And so that is an asset that I would accentuate, is make sure people know your reporters. Make sure your reporters

are out in the community. Make sure that you have events where people can see your reporters. They recognize that they are good human beings who care a lot about their communities. They are the ones who will provide coverage of your events. All of that. Make the editors routinely available to people, have events that actually celebrate the community and highlight its great assets. All of that. Let the news organization participate in strengthening the bonds. The community bonds. And so those are things that I think are really important. I see that... I live in Western Massachusetts and I see that with our local paper, which I support, The Berkshire Eagle. And there are some other local news outlets here as well, fortunately, and they do a good job of covering the community, of having events.

0:17:27.5 Marty Baron: Their reporters are out in the community. People support the organization even through... They have a fund, a nonprofit fund, that can provide additional resources to those news organizations and I contribute to that. And I think they're doing a really nice job. So I mean, whatever you can do to strengthen your bonds with the community is what you ought to be focusing on. And then decide that there's some things that you can't continue to do, so that you can devote more resources to those things that actually resonate more effectively with the community as a whole.

0:18:04.8 Mike Blinder: The book is called, "Collision of Power: Trump, Bezos, and The Washington Post." The author is Marty Baron. We will have a link on the landing page that goes directly to getting that book, whether you want it in the good old fashioned cut-a-tree-down print version or do it the way I did it, put it on my phone and just start reading it. Either way, it's a great read and it's something I think everybody in our industry should take a hard look at because you are really discussing not only the great news stories that you did in your career there, you're discussing the industry as a whole and giving almost sage wisdom. I know I'm stroking you a lot, but I have to. It's a great book. So, Marty, thanks for your time. Can you please stay in touch with us? Let us know what you're up to next. I'm sure your journey hasn't stopped in our industry, right? Are you gonna do something or are you just gonna sit on the sidelines, on the porch and play what? Horseshoes or something? What's your plan?

0:19:01.2 Marty Baron: Well, horseshoes doesn't sound very appealing, but sitting on the porch might be nice. In any event, I don't know exactly what I'm gonna do next. I'm gonna spend the next months basically through the summer talking about the book and getting around the country, which I'm doing a lot of. I'm totally booked. And then I might do that overseas. Books are gonna be translated into Spanish. And I might go to Spain to promote it. We'll see. After that, I don't really know. I'll try to figure it out. For the first time in my life, I don't know what I'm going to do next. And I think I'm okay with that for now.

0:19:36.8 Mike Blinder: Thanks so much for your time, sir.

0:19:38.7 Marty Baron: Well, thank you for your interest.

[music]