

Lynden Calling

## Amazon Anarchist

Jeff Bezos is reshaping the *Washington Post*.

By Jeremy Lott – 2.7.14

### **LYNDEN, Washington**

After it was announced last August that Amazon founder Jeff Bezos would buy the *Washington Post*, ideological tea leaf readers started sifting.

Politicos wanted to know where the tech billionaire would be taking DC's biggest newspaper. Would he give us more of the Graham family's eclectic but liberal line or something different? Would he be a conservative, a liberal, a "great beyondist"?

At the time, I thought all the ideological speculation absurd. Bezos tends to play his cards close to the vest on everything, including politics. It seemed to me the *Post* purchase was much more about advancing Amazon's interests than about pushing a wider political agenda.

My working theory was, Amazon wanted to buy the United States Post Office. Ownership of the most important paper in DC would help grease the skids for that unprecedented, hard-to-swallow, highly political purchase.

While I still wouldn't bet against Amazon bidding for the Post Office, Bezos is proving a far more hands-on boss than expected. He recently flew the top brass to Washington state to go over new plans for the *Post*.

As promised, the Amazon exec is putting more resources into the paper, to hire reporters, overhaul the *Post* website, and, surprisingly, to expand the Sunday magazine. All of this is the stuff of recent press releases.

What's less noted is the way Bezos is changing the *Post*'s opinion section. Here the tea leaf readers had a point. Multiple observers noted that he was probably something of a libertarian, though not a particularly strident one.

Bezos had given money to the Reason Foundation, which publishes the libertarian flagship magazine *Reason* but does a lot of boutique policy research as well; donated to a group opposing an income tax in Washington state; and wrote a large check to help pass gay marriage here.

According to the liberal, gay Facebook billionaire-owned *New Republic*, Bezos's politics were not "visibly objectionable."

That assessment may change as Bezos's changes to the *Post* opinion mix sinks in:

- Ezra Klein is a popular young progressive who ran the *Post*'s Wonkblog. He wanted to do something larger at the *Post*. The *Post*, and therefore Bezos, said no. Off he went.
- Eugene Volokh is a libertarian law professor from UCLA. He has published the lawblog the *Volokh Conspiracy* with a cast of friends and relatives since 2002. The *Post* added the blog to its website in January.
- Catherine Rampell started the Economix blog for the *New York Times*. She's been hired as a new opinion columnist and blogger for the *Post*, starting February. Judging from her writing on a wide range of economic issues, she looks to be a moderate liberal with a data-driven libertarian streak.
- Radley Balko is a popular writer on criminal justice issues. He worked for both Reason and the Cato Institute (full disclosure: we were colleagues, though he refused to talk with me for this article, the bastard). The *Post* hired him away from the *Huffington Post* in December.

These additions have not made great waves because the *Washington Post* already had a more diverse opinion portfolio than the homogenous *Times*. The *Post* has been home to several conservative columnists and bloggers for some time: George Will, Charles Krauthammer, Jennifer Rubin, et al.

What the *Post* did not have was a lot of time for libertarians. With Bezos's ownership, this has changed. Because the *Post* doesn't expect its opinion writers to hold to the same girly Marquis of Queensberry rules that *Times* columnists observe, the new opinion mix is a recipe for delicious conflict.

Observe the difference:

- In the *Times*, David Brooks published a dumb column about how he had smoked pot and turned out OK, but still thought the reefer ought to be illegal for the kids, dagnabbit! And his fellow columnists said... nothing. Because they couldn't. They couldn't name him, nor could they quote his argument to refute it, because their newspaper does not allow that sort of thing.
- On the *Post* op-ed page, former George W. Bush speechwriter Michael Gerson also published a column against legalization. On his new *Post* blog, Balko [called out](#) Gerson by name and produced reams of evidence to undermine every single substantive claim in the column.

Bezos appears happy to change by adding, not subtracting. That means it will take a while for the editorial board members who write the paper's editorials to move along.

But the general direction of where he's taking steering the paper's opinion pages is clear enough. The *Post*'s new owner wants more real, lively debate. He's decided to send in the libertarians to make that happen.

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