



Editor's ouster sparks protest in Atlanta: powerful interests and personal styles clash at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

Creative Loafing

Publisher Jay Smith received word that Kovach was making behind-the-scenes criticisms about Glass and the Washington bureau, and he called the editor into his office for a reprimand. Kovach offered his resignation—and Smith accepted it.

This was not the first time such a scene had been played, Smith told *In These Times*. "At each point it seemed to be that unless Bill got 100 percent of what he wanted, then I was confronted with a threat to resign," he says. "There had been several occasions where a threat was made or implied, and at each point, I would tell him that wasn't what I wanted."

Eventually, Smith says, he became fed up with Kovach's temper and told him to quit threatening to quit. In Smith's view, the split was caused by Kovach's outsized ego and by his refusal to compromise on even the smallest issue. Kovach did not answer several requests from *In These Times* for an interview, but a senior *Journal-Constitution* staffer with inside knowledge of the situation says that Kovach had in fact compromised on many issues, but that he felt Smith and higher-ups in Cox management were looking for a way to force him out of his job.

Business as usual? If Cox Enterprises did push Kovach from his post, the company has some explaining to do. During his two years at the *Journal-Constitution*, Kovach vastly improved the paper's performance and reputation. The paper was nominated for four 1987 Pulitzers; in 1988 there were nationwide plaudits for the paper's coverage of the Democratic National Convention in Atlanta. And circulation was on the rise.

This sounds like the track record of an editor who deserves a raise, not a reprimand—even if he does have a hot temper. After Kovach quit, many people quickly assumed that he was forced from his job because of pressure from the Atlanta business community, which preferred the soft-touch reporting of an earlier era. Kovach's resignation was covered by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*—and all three stories mentioned the fact that Atlanta's leading corporate citizens were unhappy with how they were being treated by the "new" *Journal-Constitution*.

Indeed, the Kovach resignation echoes an unpleasant incident from the newspaper's past: in 1969 editorial writer Eugene Patterson was forced out of his job after he ran some critical pieces about Georgia Power. When Kovach quit, many *Journal-Constitution* staffers felt that history was repeating itself.

Immediately after Kovach resigned, newsroom staffers wrote an ad praising Kovach and asking the paper's management to reconsider his resignation. By the end of the day reporters had raised \$3,000; the ad ran the next day with 124 names

Playing editorial roulette in Atlanta

By Roger Kerson

WHEN MAJOR NEWS HAPPENS—an election, an assassination, an unexpected disaster—big-city newsrooms usually hum with activity. Something major happened in Atlanta on Friday, November 4, 1988, but the newsroom of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* did not hum. It stopped.

Word spread instantly around the newsroom about the resignation of Bill Kovach, the paper's popular editor in chief. Kovach, a former Washington bureau chief for the *New York Times*, ran the *Journal-Constitution* from December of 1986 until his resignation last November 4. He was credited with vastly improving the editorial content of the paper, which is owned by Cox Enterprises, a media conglomerate with holdings that include 18 daily papers, eight television stations, 12 radio stations and 23 cable systems.

Journalism heaven: Cox Enterprises is a privately held corporation owned by Anne Cox Chambers, 68, and Susan Cox Anthony, 65, daughters of James Middleton "Governor" Cox, the founder of the chain. James Cox Kennedy, son of the Governor, is the company's chairman and chief executive. The publisher of the *Journal-Constitution*, Cox's most prestigious property, is Jay Smith, who has previously served in similar posts for Cox newspapers in Austin, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio.

Kovach, a North Carolina native,

came to Atlanta in 1986, shortly after he was passed over for the managing editor's post at the *New York Times*. He was determined, he said, to make the *Journal-Constitution* the South's best paper. He added 50 editorial staffers and championed a "take no prisoners" approach to the news, with a heavy emphasis on investigative reporting.

JOURNALISM

"People I talked to had the feeling that they'd died and gone to journalism heaven," says urban sociologist Calvin Bradford. He spent several days in the *Journal-Constitution* newsroom in the fall of 1987, when the paper hired him as a consultant for an investigative series on racially discriminatory banking practices.

Under now-departed editor Bill Kovach, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* vastly improved its performance and reputation.

Aggressive reporting was a departure for the *Journal-Constitution*, according to an article about Kovach's resignation by Anne Corwin, news editor of the Atlanta weekly *Creative*

Loafing. In previous years, she wrote, the paper had been "heavily invested in sports and fuzzy front-page color photos.... Critical stories were frequently killed, and others left simply untouched."

Under Kovach, says one *Journal-Constitution* reporter who prefers to remain unidentified, "there was a feeling that there were no more topics that were off-limits, no more stories that we knew better than to write." The reporter says that under former editor Bill Minter—a close friend of James Cox Kennedy—"it was never the case that anyone came out and said 'Don't do that story. But...it was well known that he had a relative in public relations at Georgia Power [the area's largest utility company]. Stuff like that influenced the news."

Wild and woolly: There were no protected relatives under Kovach. The paper gave heavy coverage to allegations—later proven false—that Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young had been seen using cocaine. Other more solid exposés included articles about illegal political solicitations by Georgia Power and bribes offered in the Soviet Union by Coca-Cola (one of Atlanta's largest and most influential corporations).

An in-depth series on racially discriminatory lending practices, which forcefully indicted the entire Atlanta banking industry, had a dramatic impact. Community organizations had been trying to get banks to lend more money in low-income black neighborhoods for nearly two years

without success. A few weeks after the *Journal-Constitution* series appeared in May 1988, the city's financial institutions had committed more than \$60 million to low-income lending programs.

Community organizers loved the new look of the *Journal-Constitution*. While Kovach was running the paper, says Craig Taylor, director of the South Atlanta Land Trust, a neighborhood improvement group, reporters would frequently call him looking for news stories on community issues.

"It was as if the news staff was given their marching orders to go out there and find news," says Taylor. "I found it refreshing. I didn't have to call the newspaper to try to find out from the city desk who was supposed to be doing what."

Kovach, however, ruffled feathers in the top management of Cox Enterprises. Kovach battled constantly with the front office over issues such as the news budget, control of the Cox Enterprises Washington news bureau and pressure to reshape the paper into what he saw as a trivialized *USA Today* format.

Those conflicts came to a head on November 4, apparently over the issue of the Cox Washington bureau, which serves all of the papers in the Cox chain as well as the *Journal-Constitution*. Kovach wanted the bureau to do fewer soft features and focus more on breaking national news, but he had been unable to budge bureau chief Andrew Glass, a longtime Cox veteran.

on it. Staff members began wearing black armbands around the building, and on Monday, November 7, 13 reporters and editors and a staff photographer had a stormy meeting with Smith.

"You can say we were assertive," says reporter Tracy Thompson. "He was sort of missing hunks of skin when he left. It was a very confrontational meeting."

Smith says that the meeting took place at his initiative. "I asked that we assemble the toughest questioners...who had been involved in getting the ad in. We really hashed it out."

"They came in wearing black armbands," Smith recalls. The on-the-record session, he feels, helped answer uncomfortable questions about Kovach's resignation. "The tape recorder was on," he says, "notepads were out. The transcript that emerged went a long way to showing folks that there was a lot more to the story."

A *Journal-Constitution* staffer provided *In These Times* with a copy of the transcript. It reveals an angry group of reporters and editors who feel they have been betrayed by short-sighted corporate managers—a rare inside look at how journalists view the conflicting demands of their profession.

Some of the toughest comments during the session came from Bill Dedman, a 27-year-old reporter who wrote the paper's series on racially discriminatory banking practices. "What confidence do we have," Dedman asked Smith, "that we won't step back into what we all know was the case before, which was not so much where stories get written and spiked, but people know which stories not to write. The bank stories—I didn't think of those first; Hal [Straus, currently science and medicine editor] thought of them three or four years ago, but he was told not to do them.... It's an atmosphere, a tone, a direction, and we fear much of that has been pissed away."

"It hasn't," responded Smith. "I promise you, it hasn't.... My hope and expectation is that we're going to continue to encourage strong, aggressive reporting."

Wheelchair journalism: Smith tried to explain to the assembled staff members the issues that had led to a breakdown of "mutual trust" between himself and Kovach. He talked about budget fights, the Washington bureau and his commitment to what he described as "marginal readers."

"One of the issues that concerns me," he said, "not just about our paper, but about our industry...you

look at the national measures of readership, and newspapers are losing ground in terms of their ability to match up with household growth and with people growth.... There's someday out there when folks will say, 'Hey, newspapers are not necessary.'"

Smith hotly denied that he was trying to imitate *USA Today*. As he describes it, the effort to reach non-readers sounds sort of like a literacy crusade. But when staff members

Will aggressive reporting be replaced by McPaper-clone happy news?

pushed him for specifics about the kind of stories he wanted to see that he wasn't seeing under Kovach, he came up with an example that sounds perfectly fit for the Nation's McPaper.

"I thought this morning, the story of the fellow in the wheelchair who made it to the top of the IBM Tower," he said, referring to a front-page human interest story, "that was a hell of a good story. But we were not

consistently enough alert to that story that touches all of us, at least intrigues us sufficiently to talk about."

"What you're saying," replied Tracy Thompson, "sounds like a conflict between those who believe it's our job to tell people what they need to know and those who think it's our job to tell people what they want to read."

"I don't see the conflict," said Smith. "There's a great...Louis Armstrong quote: 'I play four for the audience and one for myself.'"

Smith did not succeed in winning over his own skeptical audience. "I'm sorry this happened," he said as the hour-long session came to a close. "Not half as sorry as we are," shot back features writer Jim Auchmutey. Dedman offered Smith a black armband, but Smith declined to wear it.

Principles and paychecks: When he spoke with *In These Times* some six weeks after Kovach had resigned, Smith was convinced that the morale crisis caused by the incident had passed. He remains optimistic about the future of the *Journal-Constitution*, but some reporters are not so sure. "Newspapers can decline actively or passively," said Dedman in December. "Nobody expects anything active. We expect

to be on hold for about six months." Shortly afterward Dedman left to take a job with the *Washington Post*.

One indication of the future direction of the paper will be how many staffers follow Dedman out the door. So far, Jay Smith points out proudly, only a few people out of a news staff of 400 have left.

The situation is not as rosy as it looks, says the anonymous senior staffer quoted above, who would like to hold on to his job for at least the immediate future.

"We've been defeated and we know it," he says. "Jay said, 'Anybody who doesn't like this policy or doesn't like what happened can start to look for work elsewhere.' There are a lot of people who just sort of decided to circulate their resumes."

Once people find other jobs, he says, there will be more resignations. More people would have left already, he says, but they are stuck to their present paychecks.

"Most of us aren't independently wealthy," he says. "The people who hold our mortgages don't necessarily understand our principles." ■ **Roger Kerson** is a Chicago-based freelance writer. He is also a research and organizing consultant for the National Training and Information Center, which serves low-income community groups.

IN THE ARTS

High Fidelity and the wild Cuban mix

The Uncompromising Revolution
Directed by Saul Landau

By David Pedersen

THE UNCOMPROMISING REVOLUTION uses low-key drama, created by its editing style, to treat large and small themes, intermittently, to show the people, the landscape, the rhythms and texture of Cuba after three decades of revolution. Just as Castro's revolution ended the chance for Americans to escape to Cuba for gambling, abortion, sex, rum and cigars, Saul Landau's new film dispels the notion of a similar mindless escape to the movies. Rather than quick-fix Hollywood entertainment or stone-cold network-style documentary, Landau creates a tapestry of words and thought-provoking images.

Landau, a senior fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies, has for 30 years been a studious watcher of Cuba and U.S. foreign policy. Weaving together archival footage, occasional flashbacks from his 1968 film, *Fidel*, recent interviews with Castro and a conglomeration of on-the-street and on-location interviews with a variety of Cubans, Landau at-

tempts to capture filmically what political scientists have tried in vain to do empirically: to understand Cuba's revolution.

From colony to nation: In contrast to Landau's *Fidel*, *Uncompromising Revolution* shatters the romantic illusions of revolution with a cinematic bath of cold reality. The film indicates that the revolution has been about the challenge of developing from a colony to a nation, of using reason to overcome supersti-

FILM

tion, a battle led by Castro. Cuban culture is almost 500 years old. In the film a woman who is 102 recalls the days of the Spaniards and the arrival of the Americans after the bombing of the *Maine* in 1898.

From the wrinkled face of the woman, remembering details of a war 91 years ago, the film dissolves into black-and-white images of Marines charging up San Juan Hill, occupying the island, gambling, having fun at Cuban expense. The footage shows why the revolution took the form it did, why Cubans remember and Americans have no memory.

The film dissolves from the past to the present, building montages of

a cross section of the island, touching on diverse aspects of Cuban life, from cowboys and engineers to doctors and nuclear-power workers. *Uncompromising Revolution* moves beyond TV documentary styles through the unexpected, as when Landau interjects his narration with ironic humor.

In a lens factory near Havana, Castro chats with the workers and puts his arm on the shoulders of a technician. As Castro's entourage, including Landau and his film crew, moves through the factory, the camera swings around to show the man with the shoulder that Castro touched. He is grinning in rapture. Landau narrates, in his typically soft and mirthful way, that this man has just had a "mild ecstatic experience." Then the camera is back on Castro, leading the way out of the factory—with his arm around Landau.

Almost every sequence that is established as "truth" finds itself challenged by subsequent sequences. This style leaves the feeling that the film provides few "hard facts." Yet the conflicting images fight their way to a synthesis.

The film contains layers, one of

Landau has for 30 years been a studious watcher of Cuba and U.S. foreign policy.

which is a dialogue conducted by Landau, as narrator, with the rest of the characters in the film. Some may find *The Uncompromising Revolution* frustrating, since the film offers no easy answers. Indeed, the film form implicitly challenges traditional methods of examining Cuba and revolution. The Cuban revolution, like all political life, is not seen by Landau as a series of questions or a collection of facts.

Landau demands and expects some mental work from his audience. The film covers much ground in a short time. We are given a history lesson on Cuba's involvement in Angola. We are introduced to "Santeria," the popular religion of Cuba, steeped with voodoo-like healing rituals. We see idle construction workers dozing on their brooms, explaining how "rectification" is needed, how people must work harder. "He is sweeping," one worker indicates as his partner lazily pushes dirt from one pile to another.

Who's directing? Castro, true to his role in Cuba, becomes the film's dominating voice. We see him in his jeep leading the film crew all over Cuba. Landau interjects, "There is no doubt about who is directing the revolution—or this film." A flashback shows Castro in 1968 listening to a woman complain and then telling an assistant to write down what she said. This wryly dovetails to 1988 and an almost identical situation.

The Uncompromising Revolution presents Cuba as a mélange of sights, sounds and colors that does not eas-

ily fit into Castro's disciplined model. We see a glorious amorphous mass striving for noble goals yet oozing sensuality. Castro exhorts the crowd at a rally to "be like Che" and then enumerates the virtues of the communist saint of Cuba. The film compares the faces of just plain folk to the words of their leader, who almost pleads with his people to shape up, to make a reality of his dream, to construct an egalitarian communist society.

Landau's penchant for political imagery comes from decades of activism and controversial filmmaking. From his earliest movies Landau has been a maverick. In a public television film, *Losing Just the Same* (with Richard Moore) in 1966 he inserted dream sequences into a film on life in the Oakland, Calif., ghetto, when such "manufactured" sequences were taboo for documentaries. In a 1971 feature film, *Que Hacer*, he alternated between documentary and fiction to develop a dialogue not only over the meaning of Salvador Allende's election in Chile, but also about how movies shape politics in the current age. In *Brazil: Report on Torture* (made with Haskell Wexler) camera beeps distract the viewers from otherwise excruciatingly painful recreations of torture scenes, forcing the viewers into the consciousness that they are watching a film about torture, not experiencing vicariously real torture. ■

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