

Arts & Humanities

The Fixer

Can editor Franklin Foer '96CC rescue the *New Republic*?

By

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Franklin Foer didn't just grow up reading the *New Republic*. He worshipped it.

As a child, he savored each issue that his father, an antitrust lawyer in Washington, D. C., would hand to him after he was done. The *New Republic* was smart and savvy, and Foer '96CC always dreamed about writing for the magazine. He just never thought he'd be asked to save it.

But that is exactly what Foer, 32, has been called upon to do. Circulation at the magazine had dropped precipitously since 2000, and the once-proud icon of liberalism has been pummeled by the Left for, among other Republican-pleasing positions, backing the war in Iraq. In addition, the Internet and the rise of blogging have made opinion magazines seem dated and slow-moving. And then there are the financial pressures: The Canadian media group CanWest, which completed its purchase of the magazine in February 2007, expects the *New Republic* to turn a profit in three years, which is unheard of for an opinion magazine. Add the bizarre controversy of serial fabricator Stephen Glass, whose misdeeds at the *New Republic* were depicted in the 2003 movie *Shattered Glass*, and the picture of an institution in crisis is complete.

That Franklin Foer was chosen to reverse the magazine's fortunes was a shock to nearly everyone in Washington, and not least to Foer himself, who was perfectly happy as a staff writer at the magazine and the recent author of a best-selling book on soccer. He had never edited and wondered why anyone would want to take on an editor's headaches.

Nor did he fit the profile. In recent years, the New Republic had featured editors with strong, out-there personalities — Michael Kinsley, Andrew Sullivan, Michael Kelly, and Peter Beinart. Foer is as low-key as they come, deferential almost to the point of shyness.

Yet, there he was in early 2006, announced as the replacement to Beinart, who said he wanted to return to writing. Martin H. Peretz, the magazine's longtime owner and editor in chief, says he never worried about Foer's being a neophyte. "He seemed to have the right take on what we needed," Peretz says. "And everybody respected Frank's writing. Besides, I took Mike Kinsley out of law school to edit, and he wasn't a mistake."

After Foer's initial surprise at being chosen as editor, "it didn't take me a whole lot of time to decide what I wanted to do," he says. "This was an institution I cared very deeply about, and I had a lot of ideas about how to fix it."

Foer, who has been considered a journalistic wunderkind ever since he graduated from Columbia College in 1996 with a degree in history, has presided over a complete remake of the magazine. In March, publication was changed from weekly to biweekly to allow for longer, more substantive pieces, and the magazine is nearly twice as long as before. It now emphasizes profiles — Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton were featured in the first two issues — and pieces examining what Foer calls “the culture of Washington.” He has also moved the magazine leftward, in both editorials and articles.

Circulation has risen from about 60,000 to 66,000 since the relaunch, Foer says, and readers’ reactions have been positive. So far, so good. But this could be a paradox for Foer: He can come up with a bold and inviting magazine, but in the crowded field of political opinion journals and Internet bloggers, does it even matter?

For one thing, there’s the demand to quickly generate a profit. Greg McNeil, who was an interim publisher for CanWest and who remains a consultant, believes it can be done. “I’ve turned around magazines in Canada that were in worse shape than this one,” he says. Foer declines to talk in detail about the financial expectations, but says he is “comfortable” with them.

Others are concerned, though. “I hope they don’t expect it to make money,” says Hendrik Hertzberg, one of the editors of the magazine during its glory years of the late 1980s and early 1990s, who is now a senior editor at the *New Yorker*. “In that respect, the *New Republic* has been an almost constant failure since 1914,” when it was founded.

Disenchantment on the Left

Circulation at the *New Republic* dropped from 101,000 in 2000 to 60,000 last year. Much of that decline reflected disenchantment among liberals, who felt that the magazine had lost its way. The magazine’s stance on Iraq and its support of Connecticut senator Joseph I. Lieberman for president in 2004 brought vehement criticism and open disdain from liberal critics, especially those in the blogosphere, who have treated the *New Republic* as their personal piñata.

“The fact is that the *New Republic* was not the voice of a clear political tendency as it had been for most of its existence,” Hertzberg says. “But the Bush administration

called for full-throated opposition, and even though the *New Republic* did a lot of work in that area, for various reasons, including the Iraq War, it was unable to play that role. It missed many of its opportunities in the past several years while the *Nation* was cleaning its clock.”

Foer says returning the magazine to its liberal roots is part of his effort to “help the *New Republic* get its mojo back.” The magazine had already renounced its support for the war by the time he became editor, and he notes that it also has repudiated a highly critical story about Hillary Rodham Clinton’s health care agenda that was written by Betsy McCaughey Ross in 1994. “It was a very famous piece that actually won the *New Republic* some national magazine awards,” Foer says. “We recanted that story in the first issue and apologized for it, and we’ve been stridently opposed to Bush pretty much on a whole array of views. So that makes us look more to the left, too.”

Peretz, known for his hawkish foreign policy views, especially regarding Israel, is often blamed by liberals for taking the magazine too far to the right. Still the editor in chief, Peretz says he doesn’t agree that Foer needed to move the *New Republic* leftward, “but he’s the working editor. I supply ideas, I don’t run the magazine. Frank’s respectful of my ideas but doesn’t take them as marching orders. And that’s OK with me.”

Past Is Prologue

When Foer started thinking about revamping the *New Republic*, he looked for inspiration to other magazines he admired, such as the *New Yorker* and *Spy* — the former for its “sensibility of being ironic, cosmopolitan” and the latter for “the visual things and sense of humor.” In the end, though, he also reached back into the past, to the *New Republic* of the 1940s and 1950s, when, as Foer puts it, the magazine’s mission was to “influence the influentials.”

“There were a lot of elements that I wanted to borrow,” Foer says in his office, where he takes down from a cluttered bookcase a volume of bound editions from the 1940s. “I wanted to have kind of a riff on this ’40s logo. I wanted the magazine to start with the lead editorial straight off, like it did then. One of the great strengths of the magazine is that it has this history. You realize that a magazine that did not pay

homage to this history would be a bad relaunch.”

Since one mission of the relaunched magazine is to recapture its relevance in Washington, Foer is encouraging his reporters to “write about the culture of Washington. We try to look at the aspects that aren’t so obvious. Tom Frank did a great piece on the building at 101 Constitution Avenue, which is where a lot of lobbyists have their offices. It was a peek behind the curtain. We also had a piece on McLean, Virginia. What Georgetown was to the old political establishment, McLean is to the new Republican establishment. It gave a picture of what life is like for the Republican elite and the rise of K Street lobbying.”

As for the decision to move to biweekly publication, he says, “We were caught up in the rat race of the news cycle. We tried to comment on Topic A every week and that’s obviously just not possible now in the world of the Internet. Your magazine goes to bed on a Thursday and when people get the magazine on, say, Monday, Topic A has shifted to something entirely different and it’s been chewed over by a gazillion blogs by the time it gets to your readers. So it’s liberating to say, ‘The hell with Topic A’ and instead focus on culture in a way that has shelf life. It forces us to think deeper, report harder, and write in a way that is more literary. The Internet may have been a gift to us at the magazine.”

Foer acknowledges some difficulty in moving into a managerial role. “As a writer, you’re always hanging back, observing but not doing,” he says. But Peretz and others say that his demeanor has helped bring much-needed tranquility to the *New Republic*. “You don’t need to be a loudmouth desk-thumping type,” says Beinart. “Frank is genuine and friendly, and he gets along with people.”

Dana Milbank, a former *New Republic* writer who now is a political columnist for the *Washington Post*, says that Foer “has been a real breath of fresh air. He has taken a publication famous for griping and infighting and turned it in a genuinely happy place.”

Professor by Other Means

Foer considered becoming a historian when he was at Columbia. “I studied with Eric Foner, Barbara Fields, and Alan Brinkley,” he says. “I loved American history, and that’s what I wanted to do. But then over the course of three and a half years, I

talked to enough graduate students who were miserable, and enough professors who weren't following that career path because there are so few prized positions and so many people chasing after them. At some point, I realized that journalism was the professorate by other means. You get to study things you're curious about. You get to write. You get to engage in discourse, but you don't have to attend faculty meetings or worry about getting tenure."

Brinkley, who taught Foer in a graduate seminar on American history between the world wars, calls Foer "a quite brilliant guy — very talented. Seldom have I been as impressed with a student as I was with him."

After leaving Columbia, Foer took a job with *Slate*, then a new online magazine. His editor was Kinsley, who had just had a spectacular stint at the *New Republic*, where its contrarian bent made it essential reading in Washington. From Kinsley, Foer learned to see things analytically and counterintuitively. "He has the most finely tuned bullshit meter of any American," Foer says admiringly. "He can pick apart any argument." At the free-wheeling *Slate*, Foer was expected to think unconventionally, and in his two years there he turned out pieces on such subjects as the difference between a nerd and a nebbish.

Foer's off-center approach suffuses his 2004 book, *How Soccer Explains the World: An (Unlikely) Theory of Globalization*. He took off eight months from the *New Republic* to travel through Europe and South America, watch countless soccer matches, and try to understand the varying cultural contexts of the game (chapter titles include "How Soccer Explains the Jewish Question" and "How Soccer Explains the Discreet Charm of Bourgeois Nationalism"). The book was a best-seller, translated into 25 languages, and Foer became a journalistic star.

Then, in early 2006, came the call from Marty Peretz about the editorship. "I did have some trouble giving up my writing because Peter Beinart warned me that editing would be all-consuming," Foer says. "I'm only able to write in dribs and drabs. Certainly, I'll want to get back to writing at some point."

Until that time, though, he says with a grin, "I hope that the *New Republic* will have a devil-may-care attitude when it comes to pissing people off."

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