



THE TNR DUST-UP

Horrible Bosses

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What the New Republic and the Washington Redskins have in common.

Because of recent clashes between its new, Silicon Valley-based executive team (led by Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes) and its senior editorial staff (many of whom resigned this week), the Washington-based opinion journal the *New Republic* has cancelled its December issue, raising fears that this distinguished, century-old bastion of liberal thought will never be revived.

To anyone who follows the changing media landscape, the *New Republic* story has a familiar ring: young, creative entrepreneurs trying to drag an outmoded, dead-tree publication into the 21st century, while a bunch of tech-challenged, ink-stained geezers freak out at the prospect. But this clichéd view is unfortunate, because the real conflict is not about old media vs. new. Nor is it about profitable “disruption” vs. unprofitable stodginess. It’s about good ownership vs. bad.

Readers who know Washington will note a striking parallel between Chris Hughes’s two-year stint as owner of the *New Republic* and Dan Snyder’s 16-year track record as owner of the Washington Redskins football team.

Both Hughes and Snyder are accomplished businessmen. But they are also overconfident billionaires who bought a treasured institution without understanding its real worth as a repository of social and cultural values. So instead of doing what good owners do—know their strengths, admit their limitations, hire the right people, and delegate—they have played at master of the universe, trusting their own ill-informed hunches over the expertise, savvy, and wisdom of others.

The outcomes of such plutocratic overreach are nearly always predictable: disruption that is more destructive than creative. Yet unfortunately, such

incidents are part of our Zeitgeist. Bill Gates once spent \$2 billion trying to improve the quality of American public education by breaking large high schools into smaller units. By the iconic billionaire's own admission, his business model was insufficiently vetted, and the experiment failed.

No such admission of failure has been forthcoming from the Redskins' Dan Snyder. Widely seem as the most meddlesome owner in the National Football League, his hyperactive involvement in personnel and operations has yielded few dividends. A decade and half of this meddling has produced a losing record (105 wins to 140 losses), eight changes of head coach in 16 years, four ill-fated wild card trips to the playoffs, and not a single Super Bowl appearance.

Granted, Dan Snyder knows how to make money. For the past decade, Forbes magazine has ranked the Redskins as the NFL's most profitable team. But along with commercial success has come neglect of the less tangible qualities—the standards of excellence and sense of tradition—that once made the Redskins a beloved and admired institution. The contrast could hardly be greater with the Redskins' previous owner, Canadian entrepreneur Jack Kent Cooke.

Cooke was no saint. Well endowed with business acumen, he also had a sizable ego and could be arrogant and vindictive. But as an owner, he had two saving graces: he knew what he didn't know, and he knew how to spot and grow talent. He hired the gifted Bobby Beathard as general manager and the tireless Joe Gibbs as his head coach – and stayed out of their way. “Before Cooke hired him,” wrote Washington Post sports columnist Michael Wilbon in 1997, “Gibbs was a nobody in the larger scheme of things.” But Cooke did not insist on “finished and polished products. He hired [his people] raw and gave them the encouragement to become the best at what they did.”

The proof was in the pudding: four Super Bowl contests, three of them ending in wins; and an overall record of 154 wins to 94 losses. Compared to that record, the outcomes under Snyder have been dispiriting: deflated fans, and scorn and derision on all fronts, from taxi drivers to think tank scholars. In 2006, an [economic study from the American Enterprise Institute](#) described the Redskins as “seriously mismanaged,” and called Snyder's management a “leading exemplar” in the trend of spending money irrationally.

Opinion journalism is not football. The scoreboard is hard to read, and the playoffs never seem to end. But like the Redskins, the *New Republic* is not a shapeless, malleable start-up. Neither is it a franchise to be squeezed for greater profit. It, too, is a beloved and admired institution, with plenty of fans in high places. The saddest comment to come from Guy Vidra, Chris Hughes's new CEO, was when he reportedly told the staff that he found the magazine boring and had stopped reading long-form articles. As clumsy as Snyder is, he has never walked into the Redskins locker room and announced to the players that his real love was badminton.

To be fair, it is too early to forecast with certainty what outcomes Chris Hughes will produce. Given his commercial instincts, he will likely find ways to squeeze a profit from what is left of the *New Republic*. But the destructive potential of his management style is evident in Vidra's puerile boast that he is a “wartime CEO” here “to break shit.”

Dan Snyder once stripped coach Jim Zorn of the responsibility to call plays on the field. Hughes has not yet shown signs of thinking he can assign or edit pieces, but he has no journalistic experience and no visible sense of how to choose or utilize talent. He and Vidra have succeeded in breaking a treasured and venerable institution, but do they have the vision and patience to build something better from the debris?

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