

In These Times

A long, long time ago, when I was only 44, I spent a week in New York hawking around a dummy for a new daily newspaper to take on the *New York Times*. It's a

good thing you are only young once.

I had the support of one or two hopeless romantics, perhaps none more hopelessly romantic than my friend Andrei Navrozov, a Russian who had recently arrived in London as a "cultural refugee" from the United States, where his family had fled in 1972 as political refugees.

Andrei, who now lives in Palermo as a "gastronomic refugee," had a fastidious dislike of the *NYT*, inherited, like much of his baggage, from his father Lev. Those of you who were as crazy as I was 20 years ago will have fond memories of Lev, who wrote a column for the now defunct Moonie paper the *New York City Tribune*. His message was that the West was being undermined by the congenital stupidity of her liberal elites (i.e., the *New York Times*) and in consequence was losing the arms race and would inevitably lose the Cold War.

Maybe Lev was right, but he never quite got the hang of America. He used to wear an especially absurd hat in winter and insist that it was the envy of ordinary Americans. How so? According to Lev, a truck driver had once called out to him: "Hey, buddy: *nice hat*."

Andrei was much more hip to the ways of Gotham and warned me that the title I had chosen for the new paper—the *New York American*—might be misunderstood. "I mean," he said, "Why not just call it the *New York Anti-Semite*?"

I decided to stick with the title, but as history records, I did not make it in New York. Peter Brimelow listened to

me politely, and so did Wick Allison, then publisher of *National Review*, now a "Conservative for Obama." I had approached John O'Sullivan, too, but did not see him on that trip. Did I write to Midge Decter? Do you know, I think I did.

Many years later, Conrad Black had roughly the same idea, plus some spare change, and started the short-lived *New York Sun*. Much as I like Lord Black, I have never greatly cared for his politics, and the *Sun* was a bit shrill for my tastes. Besides—and sometimes I can scarcely believe this—I now actually like the *New York Times*. The headlines that once made me sneer—"In Swiss elections, little excitement"—now make me cheer. Any newspaper that ignores the imperatives of journalism and instead tells the truth deserves our thanks.

Perhaps I have matured. At any rate, I can now see that if you want to become a press baron in a big city, starting a newspaper is not the best way to go about it. The best way is to be born in the USSR, get a job with the KGB, become an oligarch, and then buy the London *Evening Standard* for less than a pittance.

Alexander Lebedev, 358th richest man in the world and a former spook at the Russian embassy in London, acquired 75.1 percent of the loss-making *Standard* for £1 in January. The deal went through without anyone in authority raising an eyebrow or even, it seems, taking a bribe.

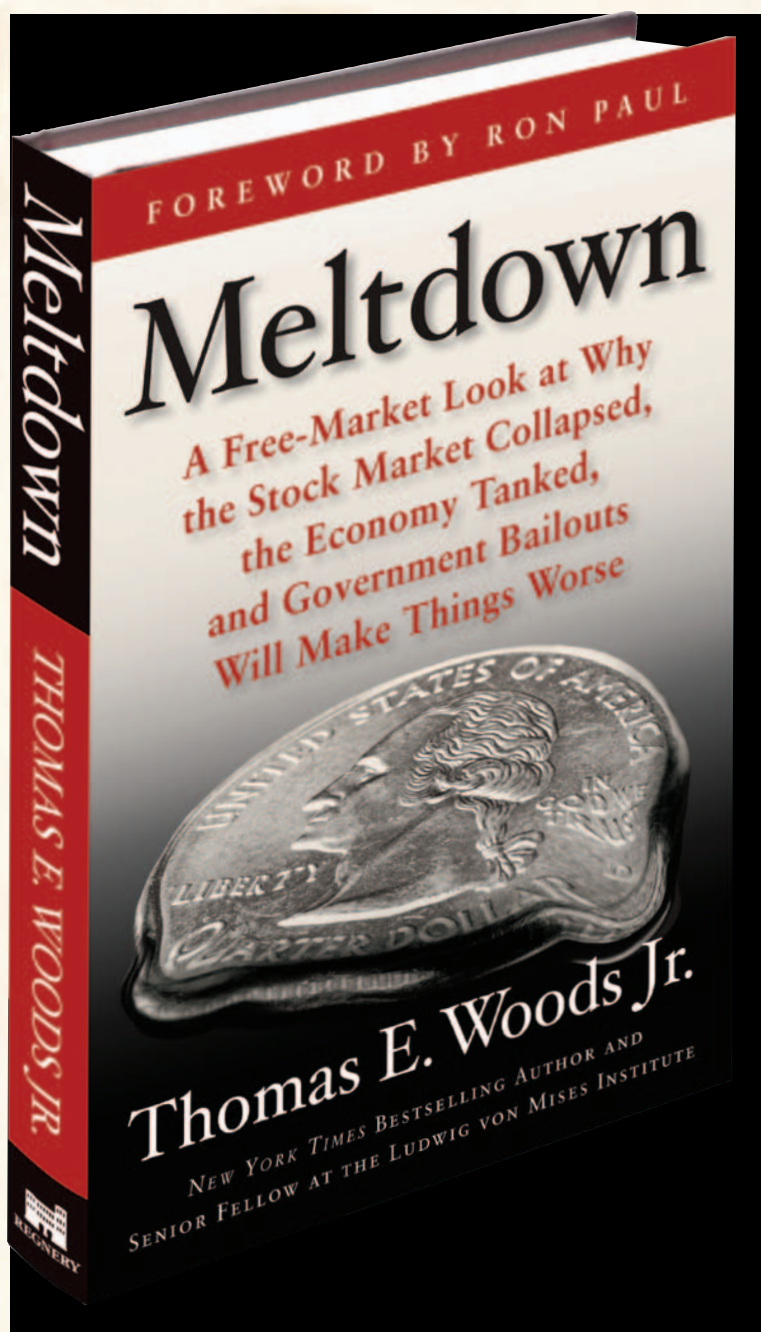
A smart new editor—old Etonian Geordie Greig, formerly of *Tatler*—was appointed, and Mikhail Gorbachev, Tony Blair, and Jacques Chirac were almost immediately spoken of as possible members of a future editorial advisory board. Loonies everywhere recoiled in horror. The *Standard* was on its way to becoming the voice of international reason.

As it happens, Lebedev has been sniffing around for some time. Almost three years ago, not very long after the *Spectator* had been sold to a pair of property developers, I was asked whether I, then deputy editor, would support a bid by Lebedev to buy the magazine. I said that I'd think about it, which is the easiest way of saying no. The idea of a billionaire spook owning the *Spectator* struck me as outrageous.

But was it? What difference would it have made? The British press as a whole is in poor shape, whipped by Darwinian competition into frenzies of moral outrage and suburban pornography. The *Spectator*, once the natural home of skeptical conservatism and hopeless cases and causes, has, under the new management, become a thrusting neoliberal magazine devoted to social mobility and celebrity. Even the stately, elegant, tendentiously liberal *Guardian*—Britain's best newspaper—has yielded to trash culture.

So, of course, has the *New York Times*, but at least as viewed from this side of the Atlantic, the Good Gray is an institution worth cherishing. The newspaper of the liberal elites is better than anything we have here and more conservative, too. So if the limeys, the Canucks, or the ex-KGB officers come a-knocking, do not answer. Buy American. ■

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