

GOING LONG, GOING DEEP

BY SCOTT SHERMAN

The *Atlantic*, one of the few American magazines that still dares to publish high-quality, complex narratives, sits in Boston's Little Italy, a slightly raffish neighborhood with narrow, twisting streets and filled with comfortable little restaurants, espresso bars, and cheese shops. The office has a charm of its own: there are hardwood floors, exposed brick walls and ceilings, and cozy sitting areas with easy chairs and coffee tables. Framed minutiae from the *Atlantic's* long history line the walls. The immaculate corner office belongs to the dapper, red-haired managing editor, Cullen Murphy, who, a few weeks ago, replaced Michael Kelly at the top of the masthead. He is not the editor, however: the magazine's owner, David Bradley, is trying him out for the top job.

Murphy is responsible for one of the greatest coups in the history of the *Atlantic*. A few days after the collapse of the World Trade Center towers, Murphy dispatched a letter to Kenneth Holden, the commissioner of the New York City Department of Design and Construction, the agency responsible for cleaning up Ground Zero. Murphy asked if he could send one of his most distinguished correspondents, William Langewiesche, to the site. To Murphy's astonishment, Holden said yes. The commissioner had subscribed to the *Atlantic* for twenty years, during which time he had devoured most of Langewiesche's articles, along with several of his books. Holden knew instantly that Langewiesche was the ideal journalist to chronicle the story of the cleanup. "He is very interested in how things work, and how people relate to processes," commissioner Holden said recently. "Obviously I'm not an editor; I run a construction agency. But it seemed like it would be a very good fit."

Holden went to bat for Langewiesche with Mayor Giuliani's office, which, for a variety of reasons, was eager to restrict media access to Ground Zero. "Let's just say I had to use up quite a number of chits in order to secure the kind of access that William was looking for," Holden says. In the end, Holden got his way, and Langewiesche got the journalistic opportunity of a lifetime.

He made the most of it. For five months, Langewiesche (pronounced long-gah-vee-shuh) showed up at Ground Zero virtually every day, and often stayed there for sixteen hours at a time. "When I went down to see him on a few occasions," Cullen Murphy recalls, "he was indistinguishable from the people there. He was wearing overalls and hardhat, respirator slung around his neck, and had an easy relationship with everybody on the pile that I saw. Engineers and construction people would come up and talk to him. He knew everybody there."

The fruit of Langewiesche's labor was an extraordinary 70,000-word series entitled "American Ground," which ran in three consecutive issues of the *Atlantic*, and which has just been published as a book by North Point Press, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux. The series, which flew off the newsstands, focused attention on the *Atlantic*—a magazine that, under the leadership of the unusual new owner, Bradley, is experiencing something of a renaissance. *The Boston Globe* recently called it "the magazine of the moment." *The Washington Post* referred to the July/August issue, which contained the first installment of "American Ground," as "probably the best issue of any magazine published in America this year" for "people who actually like to read." "It's the hot book right now," says Hendrik Hertzberg of *The New Yorker*.

The magazine's current success owes much to the deep pockets of Bradley, who has invested a great deal of money in a publication that, since its founding in 1857, has drained a fortune from its owners. When Bradley purchased the magazine in 1999, he promised to guide and protect it, and to honor its history. If he reneges on that promise, the *Atlantic* will probably return to the kind of economic instability that has burdened it for much of its history. If Bradley keeps it, years from now it can be said that he safeguarded and revitalized one of the great American magazines.

William Langewiesche came to the *Atlantic* through the slush pile. "Enclosed are two pieces on Algeria," he wrote in a blind query to the magazine. The year was 1990. The Algeria pieces didn't quite work, the editors felt, but the writing was graceful and evocative, and something about Langewiesche's sensibility impressed them. Eventually they let him write about North Africa, and the result was a 1991 cover story on the Sahara. In the 1990s, Langewiesche—a professional airplane pilot whose only writing experience had been for aviation magazines—would turn out a series of remarkable pieces for the *Atlantic*, including "The Shipbreakers," a stunning report from Alang, India, a place where massive ships are torn apart by hand and turned into scrap metal; "The Crash of EgyptAir 990," which showed how a pilot's intentional act led to the deaths of 217 people; and "The Profits of Doom," a parable about pollution and urban renewal in Butte, Montana. In an eerie way, much of Langewiesche's work for the magazine—on the unmaking of colossal ships, on suicide pilots, on massive pits in old mining towns—foreshadowed his report from Ground Zero.

WILLIAM LANGEWIESCHE

Grace under pressure, an unsentimental approach to tragedy, a certain cockiness served him well at Ground Zero.

Langewiesche's has been a most unusual career. His father, a distinguished pilot, wrote a classic text on aviation, *Stick and Rudder*. The son decided to become a writer in high school, after devouring the books of John McPhee. Following his graduation in 1977 from Stanford, where he majored in anthropology, Langewiesche spent a few years in Manhattan working for *Flying* magazine. But he recoiled from the New York magazine world, and for the next fifteen years earned his living as a pilot—flying cargo planes, air ambulances, air taxis, and corporate jets—while writing on the side, with "great determination" and "many rejections." In those years, he also worked as a flight instructor. "He teaches students how to fly into storms," explains Cullen Murphy. "He'll wait for a storm front to come across the country, and then when he sees it getting close to

where he is, he'll call up his students and say, 'OK, we've got an ice storm coming over Denver, and class is ready.'"

Langewiesche's technical expertise, and his unruffled manner, enable him to move with unusual ease in hostile environments. In 1996, when ValuJet 592 plunged into a Florida swamp, killing 110 people, the *Atlantic* dispatched Langewiesche to the Everglades. The press was confined to an area seven miles from the accident site, but Langewiesche persuaded investigators to give him access. (In a fraternal gesture, the pilot even let him fly the helicopter to the crash site.) Langewiesche moved effortlessly among the rescue workers, who sat in the shade, chatting and sipping cold drinks. He would later write:

They were policemen and firemen, not heroes but straightforward guys accustomed to confronting death. Not knowing who I was, they spoke to me frankly about the gruesome details of their work, and made delicate jokes, but they seemed more worried about dehydration than about "taking the job home" or losing sleep. I relaxed in their company, relieved to have escaped for a while the expectation of grief.

The same reporting qualities—grace under pressure, an unsentimental approach to tragedy, a certain cockiness—would serve Langewiesche well in his assignment at Ground Zero.

Some print reporters, despite only intermittent access, wrote well about the structural and technical aspects of Ground Zero—Eric Lipton and James Glanz of *The New York Times* are in this category—but only Langewiesche got the whole story from the inside, and told it in a single, expertly constructed narrative. The piece consists largely of mini-profiles of the men who toiled on the site, and it's a superb cast of characters—bureaucrats, collapsed-building experts, barge operators, construction executives, and Port Authority engineers, many of whom are brought to life with quick, powerful strokes. In Langewiesche's hands, the pieces of heavy equipment, too, become characters: "The stars of the show were the machines themselves, and particularly the big diesel excavators, marvels of hydraulics and steel, which roamed through the smoke and debris on caterpillar tracks and in the hands of their operators became living things, the insatiable king dinosaurs in a world of ruin."

Some of the best (and most controversial) pages of "American Ground" concern the "tribal" conflicts on the pile between construction workers, cops, and firemen, about whom Langewiesche writes with a cold eye. We read about a "muscular and charismatic" field superintendent for one of the major construction companies who grew weary of the "moralistic airs" of the firemen—who, in their determination to find their own dead, kept shutting down his cleanup efforts. One day, reports Langewiesche, a fire truck was found underneath the ruins—its crew cab "filled with dozens of new pairs of jeans from The Gap, a Trade Center store." Construction workers began to jeer; a fire chief tried to calm them down, arguing that the jeans had been blown into the truck by the force of the collapse. Writes Langewiesche: "The field superintendent, seeming not to hear, asked the fire chief to repeat what he had said. When he did, the construction workers only jeered louder." It's those kinds of de-

tails that give the piece its unique tone and texture, its insider's perspective.

Langewiesche composed the entire piece in a frenetic five-month burst, from various locations in Massachusetts, California, and France. In writing about Ground Zero, Langewiesche says, he wanted to chronicle a "grand experiment in American-ness that was growing up" on the pile, a unique mixture of cooperation and contestation. He also wanted to "break through the maudlin emotionalism that was surrounding this subject."

Despite a brief flirtation with *The New Yorker* in 2000, Langewiesche has decided to remain at the *Atlantic*, where he recently became a national correspondent, a title he shares with James Fallows. "I'm very happy there," Langewiesche says. "The *Atlantic* right now is the place to be for this kind of writing."

The *Atlantic* was born at two successive dinner parties in May of 1857, in the luxurious confines of Boston's Parker House Hotel. The guests—who included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr.—dined on steak and oysters. "By the time the wine had run out and the brandy supply was dwindling," the former *Atlantic* editor Robert Manning wrote in his 1992 memoir, "the guests... reached a judgment: America needed a new magazine devoted to literature, art and politics."

What America got was emphatically not a magazine for the masses. Edward Weeks, who edited the *Atlantic* from 1938 to 1966, once wrote that "our aim from the first has been to reach thinking people and to entertain them or make them think harder." Wrote Manning, "from its beginning the *Atlantic* was an obviously if not avowedly elitist periodical" whose purpose was "to inoculate the few who influence the many."

From the start, the *Atlantic* endeavored to both enlighten and entertain. Its archives constitute a Who's Who of American literature—from Harriet Beecher Stowe to John Sayles—and the magazine also published the work of public figures like Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. Yet it wasn't all seriousness: the *Atlantic* takes leisure seriously, and its pages have always been filled with articles about travel, dogs, food, sports, and manners.

No one seems to know for sure, but it is doubtful the *Atlantic* ever made a great deal of money for its owners. Still, until the 1960s, it survived in a journalistic landscape congenial to general-interest magazines. That didn't last. Poetry editor Peter Davison, who arrived at the *Atlantic* in 1956, explains that during certain years in the 1950s, under the ownership of Marion Campbell, the magazine made "a profit—a small profit, sometimes a large profit—and it was undone in the early 1970s by sudden raises in postal rates and paper costs because of the petroleum crisis. And it knocked out all kinds of magazines, and it put us into the red considerably."

In 1980, the magazine was sold to the real-estate developer Mortimer Zuckerman, who, in many respects, turned out to be a model owner: he paid the bills and left his handpicked editor, William Whitworth (who had been a top deputy to William Shawn at *The New Yorker*) to his own devices. Still, after heavy

initial investment, Zuckerman kept the magazine on a tight financial leash for most of his tenure, so Whitworth had to make do with relatively scarce resources. Calm, mannerly, fond of bowties, Whitworth was a workaholic. One evening, a former *Atlantic* staff member, Nicholas Lemann, returned from dinner to find him in the office at a late hour; the editor would frequently stay until 11 P.M. "Tell me, Nick," Whitworth remarked. "What is Boston like?"

The hours paid off. Whitworth played a major role in discovering writers like Eric Schlosser, Nicholson Baker, Witold Rybczynski, and Holly Brubach; he published a torrent of fine humor writing and he oversaw major pieces like William Greider's "The Education of David Stockman," which blew the whistle on Reaganomics; James Q. Wilson's "Broken Windows," which influenced police departments all over the country, and Robert Kaplan's "History's Cauldron," which helped to lay the groundwork for the preventive deployment of UN peacekeepers in the Balkans. Whitworth's *Atlantic* was in no sense a trendy or "hot" magazine, but it was a consistently good one for twenty years.

And then, in 1999, Zuckerman sold the *Atlantic* to David Bradley, and Whitworth was dismissed. He was immediately replaced by a very different kind of man—the pugnacious Michael Kelly.

The career paths of David Bradley, a wealthy businessman, and Michael Kelly, a journalist, converged in 1997. What propelled Bradley there was a sense of malaise, a kind of midlife crisis. He was born in 1953 to parents who were devout Christian Scientists; he didn't discover Tylenol until he was twenty-four. Politics interested him from an early age. He became an intern in the Nixon White House, and later enrolled in Harvard Business School. Starting in 1979, he created a pair of corporate consulting firms, which eventually brought him more than \$300 million. But Bradley's first love was ideas and politics, and for years he aspired to be a United States Senator. Instead, in 1997, he purchased the National Journal Group, and in 1999 bought *The Atlantic Monthly*. "For twenty years, I worked a pretty quiet, pretty earnest terrain of research for banks, corporations and hospitals," Bradley says. "My best friend threatened, if he outlives me, to have 'a man of fine research' chiseled onto my tombstone. By comparison, even a magazine as serious as the *Atlantic* is a popular, public, glamorous affair. By my late forties, I was ready for a change."

MICHAEL KELLY

Kelly's open-minded attitude toward unknown talent has proved beneficial to the magazine.

In the rough-and-tumble world of Washington, Bradley has a reputation for kindness and decency, and his new colleagues

at the *Atlantic* seem to agree. "The week the magazine was sold we were all numb and in shock," says senior editor Jack Beatty. "David Bradley came to the office and the second or third thing he said to us was, 'I just want to assure everybody here that their health insurance is not going to change, that there will be complete continuity.' That told me volumes about this man."

At the time he met Bradley, Michael Kelly was enjoying an extraordinary career. He had started at *Good Morning America* as a researcher, then associate producer, and later worked for the *Baltimore Sun*. Kelly covered the 1991 gulf war for *The Boston Globe*, *The New Republic*, and *GQ*, and then produced a much-admired book about the conflict, *Martyrs' Day: Chronicle of a Small War*. After a stint at *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* (where he wrote the "Letter from Washington") he became editor of *The New Republic* (see "The New New Republic," *CJR*, March/April 1997). When Bradley met Kelly, the latter had just been fired from *The New Republic*, largely as a result of his angry, emotional columns lashing Al Gore and Bill Clinton, which infuriated *TNR*'s owner, Martin Peretz.

Right from the start, there was a special chemistry between Kelly and Bradley; when they met they talked for a dozen hours over two days. Bradley wanted to build a magazine empire, and Kelly soon became his chief editorial adviser in that expansive venture. Bradley—who claims to be centrist and nonpartisan in his politics—admired what Kelly had done at *The New Republic*: "I did sense a ramping of velocity when Michael moved into the editorship," says Bradley. There was "huge narrative drive in Michael's own writing but a nice edge and speed in the magazine as a whole."

When Bradley installed Kelly as Whitworth's replacement, after a period in which Kelly ran *National Journal*, some media watchers expressed concern that the *Atlantic* was being handed over to an ideologue. Writing in *The Nation*, Eric Alterman worried that "this cultural treasure" was now entrusted to "the alarming Michael Kelly, a reporter and editor with no literary background, a volcanic temperament and history of colossal bad judgment." There were indeed reasons for concern. When Kelly became editor of *The New Republic*, he took over the weekly "TRB" column, which also appeared in *The Washington Post*, thereby launching his career as a syndicated columnist. As a reporter and book writer, Kelly's voice varied widely in tone, but it remained generally civil. As a columnist, however, he showed a preference for venom and invective: His columns, by and large, are swashbuckling compendiums of abuse directed at liberals, radicals, and left-leaning intellectuals of all stripes and colors. In 1997, Kelly spent a weekend in Vermont and wrote about it for *The New Republic*:

The place is stuffed with verdant vistas, mountain views, bosky dells, bubbling brooks and limpid lakes. But then there is man, and he is vile. You cannot swat a black fly in Vermont without disturbing the vacant-eyed rest of a pallid, hairy, and purposefully ugly white person. Hippies are everywhere, in every variety and of every age: ancient bedspring-scarred veterans of the summer of love, dreadlocked ingénues still

plowing through the mire of their first Chomsky, pre-schoolers with names like Cypress and Che.

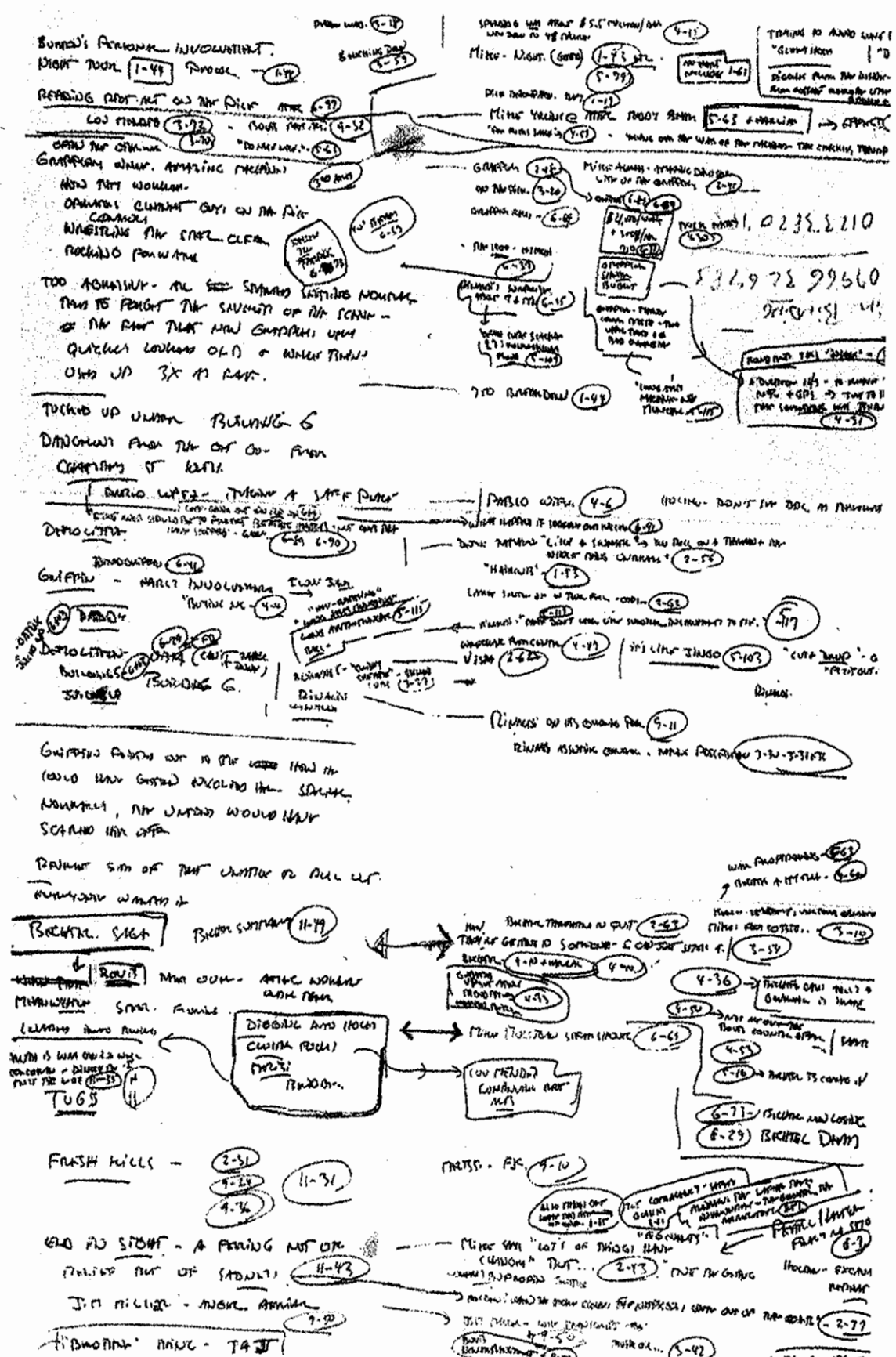
Yet, in his first months at the *Atlantic*, it became clear to his new colleagues that there were two Michael Kellys: There was the fire-breathing columnist, who called to mind some brutally contemptuous Irish-Catholic synthesis of Tom Wolfe and Taki Theodoracopulos. But another side soon emerged. Colleagues saw a man who could be generous and open-minded, who said "please" and "thank you" to fact-checkers, and who listened carefully to young free-lancers and human rights lawyers and left-leaning professors of economics. Fears that Kelly would change the tone of the *Atlantic*—as he changed the tone of *The New Republic* with his anti-Clinton screeds—were soon dispelled. As Kelly remarked recently, "There are certain writers I love—I won't name names—who, because of their ferocity, I would not put in the *Atlantic*, because we're not that ferocious."

What makes a serious magazine take off and fly? Money and editorial talent are the crucial factors, but money always matters more. William Whitworth, for most of his editorship, had fewer financial resources than Kelly had. Thanks to David Bradley's largess, the editorial budget doubled, which meant that Kelly was able to offer contracts to twenty-five new writers (at what he calls "competitive rates") and the magazine itself grew, with ten or so extra pages each issue for editorial copy. Kelly ordered a complete redesign, and the magazine's paper stock was upgraded. But most of the spending went toward editorial quality. The Langewiesche series, for example, cost nearly \$200,000 when all expenses were tallied.

Kelly's first hire was James Fallows, who had served as the *Atlantic*'s Washington editor from 1979 to 1996, and then left to work at *U.S. News & World Report* and Microsoft. It was Whitworth who said to Kelly, "Fallows is the best reporter we ever had and we should get him back," and Kelly agreed.

Another key hire was Robert Vare to the position of senior editor. Vare, a gifted editor who specializes in narrative journalism, had worked at *Rolling Stone*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and *The New Yorker*, where he had clashed frequently with Tina Brown, but was admired by his writers. When Ron Rosenbaum sent *The New Yorker* a fifteen-thousand-word article that later formed part of his book *Explaining Hitler*, he recalls being bowled over by Vare's first edit: "Covered with tiny inscribed comments and questions," says Rosenbaum, "it looked like a manuscript illuminated by a mad monk, but his queries were all on target."

One of Kelly's major achievements was the revitalization of the *Atlantic*'s books section. He immediately hired a thirty-eight-year-old polymath, Benjamin Schwarz, to do the intellectual heavy lifting. Schwarz, in turn, hired writers like Christopher Hitchens—who now writes every month for the *Atlantic*, mostly on literary matters—and Caitlin Flanagan, who, with virtually no journalism experience, has produced a series of lively, much-noticed essays on manners, mores, and domestic life. Schwarz himself had worked for nine years at the Rand



NOW, JUST WRITE IT: A 70,000-word narrative requires a plan. For his "AmericanGround: Unbuilding the World Trade Center," William Langewiesche mined his notes for weeks, then created an outline on several feet of butcher paper. This is a piece of the outline for Part III. © 2002 William Langewiesche.

Corporation and joined the *Atlantic* in 1997 as a correspondent. With his encyclopedic knowledge of U.S. foreign policy, military history, and English literature—he reads two books a day—he serves as the magazine's in-house intellectual, though he claims his only true political passion is animal rights.

Much of the credit goes to Kelly himself. Before his arrival at the magazine, Kelly's editing experience was fairly limited. But friends say his mind has always worked like an editor's. Robert Vare, when he was working at *The New Yorker*, would get frequent calls from Kelly. "He would say, 'You should have Susan Orlean do this, or Peter Boyer do that, or Larry Wright do this,'" Vare says. "He was always thinking like an editor, even when he was a writer."

The *Atlantic's* feature well has always contained a mixture of policy pieces and narrative journalism. Under Whitworth, the magazine leaned in the direction of policy. Whitworth, who wrote many profiles at William Shawn's *New Yorker* in the 1960s, wanted to inspire his readers to rethink the major issues of the day; he felt there was something indulgent about pure narrative. Kelly leaned in the other direction, toward storytelling, and some *Atlantic* writers rejoice in that emphasis. William Langewiesche is blunt about what he sees as the shortcomings of Whitworth's regime. "A lot of times," Langewiesche says, "they were writing stuff that amounted to predicting the future. It sometimes lacked a connection to the world."

Kelly has certainly run his share of policy pieces—David Bradley is fond of them—but he seems to prefer the narrative efforts, many of which have shined: Mark Bowden on the private life of Saddam Hussein, Mary Gordon on nuns, David Brooks on Ivy League yuppies, Byron York on the demise of *The American Spectator*, David Grann on the Haitian thug Toto Constant, and Christopher Hitchens on Winston Churchill, to cite just a few examples from the last two years. Kelly's open-minded attitude toward unknown talent has proved beneficial to the magazine. When Trevor Corson, a young writer (and former lobsterman) cornered Kelly at the magazine's Christmas party and told him he wanted to write a long narrative on Maine's lobster industry, Kelly gave him the green light. When Samantha Power, a Harvard-based human rights lawyer, sent Kelly a thick stack of material about Rwanda and U.S. indifference to mass slaughter, he was quick to see the possibilities. The resulting piece, "Bystanders to Genocide," which ran at eighteen thousand words, won a National Magazine Award and helped to lay the groundwork for Power's important book, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*.

Has the *Atlantic* become more conservative under Kelly? Under Whitworth, the magazine leaned left on poverty, foreign policy, and defense spending; it tilted right on multiculturalism, immigration, and crime. A truly conservative editor would probably not have signed off on David Grann's piece on Toto Constant, which illuminated CIA chicanery in Haiti, or on Byron York's article on the death of Emmett Tyrrell's *American Spectator*, a piece that made the Right look rather foolish. On the other hand, the magazine's new "Agenda" section—short essays on current political subjects—seems stacked in favor of conservatives like David Brooks, P.J. O'Rourke, and

Kelly himself. *Atlantic* watchers differ about the political shift under Kelly. "He is extremely conservative," says Robert Manning. "I disagree with a lot of what he writes in his syndicated column. But I don't think that he has injected his politics harmfully in any way into the *Atlantic* so far." Others have a different view. Nicholas Lemann insists that Whitworth and Kelly are both conservative, but in different ways. "In both cases, though, the liberal articles can have a perfunctory, ticket-balancing feeling—the conservative articles are more passionate and heartfelt." Still, it was never Kelly's job to produce a magazine that reflected a perfect political balance. It was his job to put out a good magazine, and he did it.

But Kelly grew restless in the editor's chair. Beginning with the November issue, he appears on the *Atlantic* masthead as "Editor at Large," a position that he says will enable him to work on his columns, on a book about the American steel industry for Random House, and on various editorial projects for the company. Kelly insists that he will remain deeply involved in editorial decision-making, but some *Atlantic* staff people see a diminishing role for him in the future.

CULLEN MURPHY

His colleagues admire his Zen-like editing skills, calm demeanor, and efficient administration.

Murphy, sometimes described as the magazine's "heart and soul," was the obvious choice to take over from Kelly. Colleagues admire his Zen-like editing skills, his calm demeanor, and his efficient administration. *Atlantic* readers know Murphy primarily as a writer. Over the years, he has produced a large number of witty, quirky essays, each of which imparts a nineteenth-century feel; they are wry, whimsical ruminations on the small movements of life, and they reflect his personality: self-effacing, calm, inquisitive. In the introduction to a collection of those essays, *Just Curious*, Murphy wrote:

We are all doomed to inhabit a tiny wormhole of familiar space amid an unimaginably vast and growing unknown. At the same time, the situation offers opportunities: one's chances of bumping into interesting and unfamiliar things by accident have never been better. In recent days, for example, I have learned through utter happenstance that the number of birds killed by domestic cats in the United States in a typical year exceeds the population of China; that modern cooking practices are reducing human tooth size at an estimated rate of one percent every thousand years; that Richard Nixon left instructions for 'California, Here I Come' to be the last piece of music played at his funeral ('softly and slowly') were he to die in office....

Along with his short essays, Murphy has written widely on religion for the *Atlantic*. He is the author of a well-reviewed book, *The Word According to Eve: Women and the Bible in Ancient Times and Our Own*, a personal journey through the world of feminist biblical scholarship, and he is currently writing a book about the Catholic Inquisition. On top of his duties at the *Atlantic*, Murphy has managed to find the time to write the syndicated *Prince Valiant* comic strip. *Prince Valiant*, which is set in medieval England, is a family affair: His father, John Cullen Murphy, has drawn it since 1970; Cullen has written it since the late 1970s. The strip, which appears weekly, goes to 350 newspapers around the world.

While Murphy's name now sits at the top of the masthead, he still has the title of managing editor. David Bradley is clearly taking his measure. Bradley explains, "With Michael stepping back from day-to-day management, I decided to slow us down, see how the magazine develops and then seek the right editor for the assignment. Please know this does not reflect unfavorably on Cullen in the least. Cullen carries the enterprise and has for twenty years." Concludes Bradley, "He may well succeed to the editorship, if he wants that outcome."

Two years ago, Lawrence Weschler, a longtime staff writer at *The New Yorker*, published a little-noticed essay in *ARTicles*, the annual publication of the National Arts Journalism Program at Columbia University, entitled "The Long Goodbye: Trying to See Past the Increasingly Harrowing Plight of Longform Non-fiction in General Interest Magazines." "Over the past decade," Weschler began, "a certain kind of writing—and with it, a certain tenor of attentiveness—has been disappearing from the world." He was referring to prose in the tradition of A.J. Liebling and Joseph Mitchell, Jane Kramer and John McPhee, Tom Wolfe and Norman Mailer. In Weschler's view, "the magazine universe today is increasingly niche-slotted, peg-driven and attention-squeezed," a situation he likened to "the death of the soul—or, at any rate, the successive parching of the staging ground of any sort of idiosyncratic readerly-writerly communion of souls."

Bradley clearly understands that tradition. But he also understands that revitalizing the *Atlantic* will not be easy. The magazine lost \$3 million a year in the Zuckerman era, and last year, under Bradley, it lost more than \$5 million. Indeed, Bradley insists that finding a viable business model for the *Atlantic* is the most arduous challenge of his entire career—"as taxing of intellect as any I've faced."

To meet that challenge, Bradley has installed top members of his corporate consulting firm, the Advisory Board, to the *Atlantic*'s business side. For instance, the magazine's new publisher, Elizabeth Baker-Keffer, has no experience in the magazine business; she spent eighteen years working alongside Bradley on the corporate research and consulting beat. Bradley thinks his people can bring fresh eyes to old, vexing questions pertaining to magazine advertising and business strategy. Says John Fox Sullivan, who is the *Atlantic*'s president, "From an advertising standpoint, and to some extent from an editorial stand-

point, the *Atlantic* has been kind of out of the game, off people's radar. We have brought it back editorially, and we are in the process of doing the same in terms of reaching advertisers." So far, that strategy has yielded results. With regard to the magazine's long pieces, Bradley notes, "I was not, but now am, a complete convert. The 'American Ground' series is also the best-selling piece in a decade. It is transforming to the reputation of the magazine." Bradley's business team has so far convinced certain larger advertisers to attach themselves to specific editorial features. The Langewiesche series, for instance, was sponsored by UPS, Legacy, and the American Stock Exchange. (Sullivan insists that advertisers "do not have any involvement as to content of pieces or series.")

DAVID BRADLEY

He holds a delicate treasure in his hands, a magazine that has deliberately sidestepped odious trends and lived to tell about it.

Bradley and Co. are preparing a bold, risky move: to raise the subscription price, which for years was in the \$10-\$15 range. "Our goal, quite literally," says Sullivan, "is to double our prices over the next year." His logic is simple: "Most consumer magazines are, in my view, way underpriced." Bradley and Sullivan are betting that readers will pay more money for a better product—much in the same way that readers of *The New York Review of Books*, *Granta*, *The Economist*, and *The New Republic* pay high subscription prices for those publications. But it's not a sure bet. Admits Bradley: "There is not much precedent for so dramatic a price shift."

One person who shares Bradley's concern is Mortimer Zuckerman, the former owner, who is enamored of what Bradley and Kelly have done. "I think they have done an excellent job editorially in maintaining and enhancing the magazine," Zuckerman says. But he is not sanguine about the magazine's future. Can the *Atlantic* break even? "I don't know," Zuckerman replies. "I can only tell you that I tried for twenty years and didn't succeed. If Bradley can do it, good luck to him. It's not going to be easy." Is raising the subscription price a wise decision? "I don't think that's the solution. The vast bulk of the revenues in print still come from advertising. Without advertising, you can't make it work." Zuckerman knows this firsthand. Asked how much he lost during his twenty-year ownership, he groaned loudly and then replied, "tens and tens of millions of dollars."

Those who directly compete with the *Atlantic* see a fundamental flaw in the magazine's business strategy—its reliance on an expensively inflated circulation, which is now about 500,000. When John R. MacArthur took over *Harper's* magazine in 1980, he deliberately reduced spending on circulation-building, and allowed the numbers of subscribers to fall to a more "natural" level. The result, says MacArthur, is a smaller, healthier magazine with a circulation of roughly 220,000. By

spending to remain above its "natural" circulation level, the *Atlantic*, MacArthur insists, is fighting a losing battle—since, in his words, "advertising agencies are not impressed by 450,000; they want millions." Says MacArthur: "If they are serious about making it a going business proposition, they're going to have to bring the circulation down." Raising the *Atlantic*'s subscription price may bring about that result.

These days, Bradley's ambitions are larger than the *Atlantic*. He dreams of creating a new weekly magazine, something as authoritative as *The Economist*, which would appeal to elite readers. "There is almost nothing I would rather do in journalism than start a weekly magazine from scratch," says Bradley. "Michael and I have talked about this for the whole of our relationship. I think the prudent position for the moment, however, is to turn the fortunes of the *Atlantic* first before taking on so large a next endeavor."

In a recent obituary for *Lingua Franca* in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, the critic Russell Jacoby wrote, "After 11 years, a backer of *Lingua Franca* decided enough was enough and pulled out. Nearly 280 million Americans did not notice." If the *Atlantic* perished tomorrow, it seems likely that 270 million Americans wouldn't notice. Of course, those who would notice are its readers, who tend to be movers and shakers, people like Kenneth Holden of the New York City Department of Design and Construction—people for whom, as Edward Weeks, a former *Atlantic* editor, wrote in 1957, "the printed word is still the most powerful medium for imparting the truth and for penetrating to the heart."

To his credit, Bradley understands that he holds a delicate treasure in his hands, a magazine that has deliberately sidestepped

odious trends in the magazine industry and lived to tell about it; a magazine that remains, in Lawrence Weschler's words, a staging ground for an "idiosyncratic readerly-writerly communion of souls." Bradley cares about the *Atlantic*, and he frets that he is not doing enough on its behalf. "I've not done any of this work before—circulation, direct mail, newsstand promotion, magazine positioning—and worry I'm performing still to B-standard," he says. "I'm glad I own it outright, or surely I would be terminated." It's vintage Bradley—self-effacing, modest, understated.

But for how long will a money-losing magazine hold his interest? "I am on the *Atlantic* watch for the long haul," Bradley says. "This is, of course, what every corporate CEO says right up to the moment he bails out. I simply don't see that here. The *Atlantic* is very much the thing I do every day when I get up. It is the largest share of my thinking. It is the largest share of my professional purpose. Deeply, deeply I do not want this to remain a vanity possession for a succession of wealthy men. My purpose, though evidently not my gift to date, is to reset the *Atlantic* as a successful, profitable magazine. This will require a good deal of time."

It may indeed. There are two hard questions facing the *Atlantic*. If David Bradley, a man who earned \$300 million as a corporate consultant, insists that bringing the *Atlantic* to profitability is the most taxing challenge of his entire career, one wonders if it can be done. And if the *Atlantic* continues to bleed money, will Bradley—a man of fine research and fine character, but also a man who played by corporate rules for a long time—still feel so charitable down the road?

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