


From Atlantic editor to concerned author When the magazine left, Murphy stayed and wrote 'Are We Rome?'



By David Mehegan, Globe Staff | May 19, 2007

MEDFIELD -- We're not surprised when people aspire to the top job, and even admire them for getting there. But giving up that job, willingly -- that's a little unusual.

Yet that is what Cullen Murphy did. After 17 years as managing editor of the venerable Atlantic Monthly, he took over the duties of editor in chief in 2002. But last year, when owner David Bradley decided to move the magazine to Washington, D.C., Murphy declined to go with it. Since then, he has taken a lesser editing job at Vanity Fair and written a book. "Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America," published last week, deals in part with hubris and the peril of needing to be number one. "There's a simple fact of life: the status quo never stays that way," Murphy writes near the end of the book.

For Murphy, 54, the status quo was great while it lasted. He was born and raised in Connecticut, the oldest of eight kids. His father, John Cullen Murphy, was the illustrator of Prince Valiant, the syndicated comic strip of medieval derring-do (from 1979 until his father's death in 2004, the younger Murphy wrote the stories). The adventurous family traveled in Europe, and in the mid-1960s "my parents moved us all to Ireland for two years. It was a wonderful period and informs my life, even now." He attended Catholic schools in Dublin and back home in Greenwich, then went to Amherst College, where he studied medieval history and wrote for the college newspaper.

Murphy has a decidedly professorial manner, but he never considered academe as a career. "I wanted to be in the world of editing, publishing, and writing," he said. Writing books full time would take too long, and newspaper writing wouldn't allow the kind of longer pieces he favored. "I liked working with people, and in a magazine you get more of an experience of collaboration than you often do in a newspaper." After college he worked for Change, the magazine of higher education, then switched to the Wilson Quarterly, where he met his wife, Anna Marie.

In 1983, he began writing freelance pieces for the Atlantic, and when longtime managing editor Louise Desaulniers left the magazine in 1985, editor William Whitworth asked Murphy to succeed her. He took the job but never stopped writing, eventually starting a long-running monthly column, "Innocent Bystander."

"He wrote everything from little essays to travel pieces to long reported pieces," Whitworth said from Arkansas. More important for the magazine, said Whitworth, he "could keep writers happy. Keeping a writer on board, feeling that he is being protected and valued, rather than being interfered with, is an absolute necessity."

One of those writers was William Langewiesche, a longtime Atlantic staff writer, now at Vanity Fair, where Murphy again serves as his editor. "He's done the editing on my pieces, from conception to execution," Langewiesche said. "He was always thinking of the writing problem. There was always give and take. He was never dictatorial, never made gratuitous changes. He puts his glasses on, takes up a pencil, and goes to work. He's fast and right on target."

The writer-editor relationship got a test in 2003, when Langewiesche's 2002 series on the cleanup of New York's World Trade Center site was published in book form as "American Ground: Unbuilding the World Trade Center." Reporting on tensions between firefighters and other workers, Langewiesche described a scene where a fire engine had been found crushed, filled with neat piles of jeans apparently looted from a store. Outraged New York firefighters denied it had happened, picketed and heckled Langewiesche's book appearances, and demanded that publisher Farrar, Straus and Giroux withdraw the book.

Farrar did not back down, nor did Murphy. Without counterattacking critics, he quietly insisted in public that Langewiesche's facts had been doubly and triply checked, and verified. Even so, he ordered another audit of the reporting. "If we had made a mistake," Langewiesche said, "we would have been out in front on it, for reasons of integrity. Not for spin -- Cullen's not the spin type."

In 1999, David Bradley, publisher of the National Journal, bought the Atlantic from Mortimer B. Zuckerman and soon

brought in Michael Kelly to succeed Whitworth. Murphy stayed on as managing editor and took over Kelly's job (but not his title) in 2002, as Kelly went back mostly to writing. Kelly was killed a year later while embedded with US forces in Iraq. In 2005, resolved to reduce costs, Bradley decided to move the Atlantic to Washington, effective last fall, after 139 years in Boston.

Cullen and Anna Marie Murphy could have moved, too -- their three kids were grown, and editing the Atlantic would be no less prestigious in Washington than in Boston. Some would view the nation's capital as a headier environment than Boston. Asked whether he had wanted Murphy to stay on, Bradley replied by e-mail: "I had talked with Cullen several times about the prospect of his moving to Washington. I knew that he was not disposed to that uprooting. I have not met, and likely will not meet, anyone with a greater gift for bringing the great narrative out of a great writer. Had Cullen wanted the editorship here, it surely would have been his."

Murphy said he has no regrets about stepping down. "The very process of moving it to Washington implied that there would be some sort of fresh start, and I had no wish to go there. I had been at the magazine for 20 years and loved it. There does come a time when you wonder, 'Well, that's 20 years. What about the next 20?' " Besides, his wife is deputy editor of Boston College Magazine.

As it happened, his hiatus was short-lived. Graydon Carter, editor of Vanity Fair, offered him the job of editor at large. He goes to New York one or two days a week but works mostly from home. He has time to write the books he's been thinking about for years. His next book, due out next year, is about the Roman Catholic Inquisition.

"Are We Rome?" does not conclude that the United States is doomed to fall. It takes a synoptic look at the two superpowers. It worries about American hubris and ignorance of the world. It calls for rethinking our assumptions about frontiers and foreigners. And it says the recent trend toward privatization of public services, including some aspects of the military, is a disquieting replay of what happened in the late Roman Empire.

In voice and tone, "Are We Rome?" is much like Cullen Murphy in person: reflective, curious, mild and measured, without personal attacks. "The comparison of modern America and ancient Rome is there implicitly in the zeitgeist," Murphy said, "so I began to wonder what you see if you start looking at it explicitly." He says the book is not a veiled screed against Bush administration foreign policy.

"I hate the tone of public conversation these days," he said. "I am put off by too much partisanship, people shouting at one another. My thought was, it must be possible to explore a handful of issues, bringing history and current affairs and personal experience into the conversation, the kind of discussion where people find themselves stopping and thinking and, perhaps, changing their minds."

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