

Constant Comment

How Kathleen Parker became America's most-read woman columnist

BY KERRY HOWLEY

S*ave the Males*, Kathleen Parker's 2008 polemic on sexual permissiveness and libertinism, contains the following euphemisms for vagina: "inner sanctum," "familiar," "you know what," "very private parlor," "sacred vessel," "vestal vestibule," and "hirsute abyss of God's little oven." We will be, laments Parker in her obligatory chapter on Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*, so "awash in vaginaism," that we are nothing beyond "vaginas on the plain seeking out other vaginas with which to hold hands and gaze unlongingly into the silky night of a manless moon." We have abandoned a better, gentler America, a place where women were "above this sort of thing," a nation where men did not "talk about vaginas in public."

For a woman who clearly loves to talk about sex but feels compelled to deride the vulgarization of public discourse, there is perhaps nothing to do but write a book about the hot, wet, carnal sins of Ensler and Lindsay Lohan. And *Save the Males'* contribution to the culture it professes to despise is only the most obvious of its internal contradictions. It adheres to no known ideology, which is to say it resembles the thinking of the vast majority of Americans. Its only organizing principle is that most enigmatic of moral guideposts, "common sense."

Parker is a phenomenally successful defender of "common sense" in all its culture-bound oddity. Love her, hate her, or lack the foggiest idea of who she might be, she is the most widely syndicated female columnist in the nation. Data on the reach of particular columnists is hard to come by, but a 2007 Media Matters report ranked her third among all columnists in terms of the number of newspapers that carry the column, just behind George Will and Cal Thomas. In September of 2009, according to the Washington Post Writers Group, the syndicate that distributes both Parker and Will, she was running in a few more papers than her colleague. These numbers don't measure online reach, but they do suggest a massive geographic spread.

Parker's popularity may come as a surprise to denizens of D.C. and New York or anyone who prefers major papers to smaller ones. News organizations like *The New York Times* tend to maintain their own stable of columnists; it's the readers of the *Biloxi Sun Herald* and *The Kansas City Star* who are likely to unfurl their rolled anachronisms to gaze upon Parker's twice-weekly syndicated opinions. "When I came to Washington," she says, "I was already in 350 papers. Washington people had never heard of me. But you'd have to stand in line to get

a ticket to see me in Oklahoma City. I give a speech out there, and it's standing room only, 1,300 people."

Twenty-two years after she started writing columns and 14 years after the Tribune Company started selling her as a conservative voice befitting a well-rounded op-ed page, Washington is finally getting to know Parker. Oddly, a good bit of that newfound notoriety among East Coast elites might be attributed to Sarah Palin, the anti-establishment vice-presidential candidate about whom Parker wrote a much-discussed column last September. Parker has since ascended to the hallowed space of *The Washington Post* op-ed page and has become somewhat of a regular on Sunday cable-news programs such as *The Chris Matthews Show*, where she sits to the right on a select panel of opinion providers.

Where Parker is known, she is known as an acerbic, 50-something, right-leaning commentator—disparaging of political correctness, supportive of military engagement, derisive of what she takes to be an overly sensitive populace. "If a 5-foot-6-inch, 115-pound middle-aged woman of Northern European extraction with shoulder-length, tastefully highlighted hair and dark-brown eyes who speaks English with a slight Southern accent recently had hijacked an airplane and killed thousands of people," she told readers in a Sept. 26, 2001, column, "I'd gladly subject myself to extra scrutiny." She has lived in the South for most of her life and considers herself in touch with normal people (who are known, in Parker-speak, as "Bubba," as in: "I've always been kind of an advocate for Bubba").

As a *Post* columnist Parker covers all the issues national opinion writers are expected to cover, from health care to environmental regulation, but her most passionate material has always been a good deal less policy-oriented, less hostage to "the story" as framed by the powers that be. In her early years as a pundit, she set herself up as a critic of contemporary feminism and what she characterized as an attack on the natural boundaries of gender. "It is little wonder that men and women don't know how to act anymore," sighs a Jan. 25, 1989, piece. "Women carry briefcases and condoms. Men wear aprons and plant petunias." In a Nov. 14, 1989, column, Parker reminds us that "there was a time not long ago when 'men's jewelry' were words not commonly used together." We are apprised on Feb. 19, 1989: "Like it or not, women do have more in common with each other than with men."

Such faith in unschooled intuition is best delivered infor-



mally, and Parker is not one to dress up her down-home Southern vocabulary. Words I learned during the writing of this article include “oogedy-boogedy” and “skedaddle.” “I don’t want to say she is *folksy*,” Michael Murphy, a former employee of the *Orlando Sentinel* and longtime editor of Parker’s work, told me, though he could think of no alternative adjective with which to describe her style. In conversation, Parker’s tendency toward sarcasm and unwillingness to curse drive her heavy use of the word “dadgum.”

Parker began renting a Georgetown studio apartment five years ago, and ever since she has split her time between D.C. and South Carolina, where her husband practices law. But it wasn’t until Sept. 26, 2008, a few weeks after Sen. John McCain announced a certain Alaska governor as his running mate, that Washington began to take notice. As Palin panning goes, the column was relatively sympathetic, tagging the vice-presidential candidate as the “antithesis of the hirsute, Birkenstock-wearing sisterhood.” It was with disappointment, Parker wrote, that she had come to realize how unready Palin was, how woefully underprepared for interviews and thus for the role of second in command. “Only Palin can save McCain, her party, and the country she loves. She can bow out for personal reasons, perhaps because she wants to spend more time with her newborn. No one would criticize a mother who puts her family first.” She ended the column: “Do it for your country.”

It was one of Parker’s best columns to date, empathetic and intelligent, and never had she received such a response: 20,000 e-mails in three weeks, many from enraged Palin supporters. Parker had built a career slamming the liberal media elite; now, her critics alleged, she had become one of them. “Allow me to introduce myself,” she memorably began her next column. “I am a traitor and an idiot. Also, my mother should have aborted me and left me in a dumpster, but since she didn’t, I should ‘off’ myself.”

In alienating thousands of readers Parker also became one of cable television’s favorite conservative dissenters. She showed up on *Reliable Sources*, *Larry King Live*, and *Hardball* to talk about Palin’s unreadiness, the right’s reaction to her thoughts on Palin’s unreadiness, and her reaction to the right’s reaction to her thoughts on Palin’s unreadiness. This was, in short, a Southern columnist’s coming-out party. And she wasn’t done. “[Republicans] do not ... deserve to win this time,” she declared in October and followed up with an incen-



diary December column referring to the “oogedy-boogedy” wing of the Republican Party, by which she seemed to mean religious social conservatives. “The GOP,” she wrote, “has surrendered its high ground to its lowest brows” and “Southern Republicans, it seems, have seceded from sanity.” She mocked Palin on *The Colbert Report*. *National Review* dumped her column. *The Washington Post* began running it.

“Ms. Parker is certainly not a conservative anymore, having apparently realized it’s a lot easier to be popular among your journalistic peers when your keyboard tilts to the left,” Focus on the Family’s James Dobson told the readers of his magazine. Rick Moran, a blogger, declared Parker “an intellectual harlot who sells her conservative soul in order to be thought of as ‘courageous’ by both her smart set liberal and conservative friends.” This senti-

ment seemed to be widely shared among the right-wing blogosphere. “I guess I can see Kathleen Parker at one of those cool cocktail parties,” wrote the Cranky Conservative, an anonymous blogger. “She’s the one pretending to keep up with the conversation because she wants to be with the ‘in’ crowd.”

The once-loyal columnist, it appeared, had trampled Bubba on her way to some tony D.C. get-together.

“IT’S COMPLICATED,” SAYS PARKER of her disciplinarian upbringing. We’re in a Georgetown coffee shop, and she periodically glances into her purse, containing as it does a recently adopted, 5-pound blind poodle named Ollie. “My mother died when I was 3. Second mother, married when I was 5, divorced when I was 12. Third mother was just my 10th grade. I knew that one wasn’t going to work. The other two came after I left home. I was gone at 17. I skedaddled.” She calls herself the daughter of a Yankee pilot and a Southern belle, by which she means that her father was stationed at a U.S. Air Force Base in South Carolina when he met her mother, a local girl. “These guys fly in, they’re gorgeous, they’re the crème de la crème, and they’re *Yankees*, so they know stuff that these girls have *never* seen before. And they just swept those girls off their feet.”

In Parker’s telling, her mothers were interchangeable, passing through her family’s Florida home much like the camera-toting excursionists in nearby Orlando. She speaks of them often in the plural—mothers—a nebulous mass of female adults somehow attached to her father, whom she describes with reverence and in sharp particulars. Every night during her high

TOM KOCHTEL

school years, she and her father convened in the kitchen, he cooking and she stationed before a mound of potatoes. Her father lectured. She listened and peeled. “I was not encouraged to express myself,” she recalls. “I didn’t start expressing opinions around the house until—well, I never did. I tried it once; I think it was when McGovern was running for president. My father stopped speaking to me for a year and a half.”

Parker earned her reporting stripes at Charleston’s *Evening Post* and *The Florida Times-Union*, where she reported from Palatka, “the bass capital of the world.” She profiled the local anti-porn activist and a guitar-playing preacher. (“That’s where I became Bubba-tolerant,” she says.) Eventually she worked her way up to the features section of the *Orlando Sentinel*, where editor Sandra Keyes gave Parker her first column.

In understanding the trajectory of Parker’s career, it is perhaps helpful to remember that even in 2009, the ratio of men to women on opinion pages heavily favors the former. According to the 2007 Media Matters report, only 29 of the 100 most-widely syndicated newspaper columnists are women. When Parker was offered her column in 1987, the editors told her it would be called “Women.” They wanted, they said, an “Anna Quindlen-type” column.

Parker’s column was not, in fact, Anna Quindlen-like. It was much weirder than that. There was the Oct. 9, 1988, col-

umn in which she went for a walk, was accosted by a beggar, gave the beggar \$5, and concluded that \$5 was not much to pay for a nice walk. There was the March 29, 1991, column completely devoted to women’s relationship to their hair. (“I also ran into the back of a man’s car while stopped at a traffic light. This happened because I hated my hair.”) There was the June 25, 1989, piece, prompted by a six-page pictorial history of the bra appearing in *Life* magazine, in which she set forth a parallel history of the jock strap. There was a June 12, 1992, column on sexist readings of scientific processes, which began, “Once upon a time, there was a sweet, helpless little egg named Ovie who lived in a dark dungeon waiting patiently to be saved by a fearless prince.”

Nor was Parker, for all her worrying over gender confusion, going to be a downer; she is that rare cultural declinist with a sense of humor. “How does the ultimate ’80s wife become a credible ’90s woman?” she asked in a 1992 column. “If the ’80s were characterized by shameless acquisition and self-indulgence—‘Watch Me Eat Caviar’—the ’90s are characterized by voyeuristic consumption of others’ shame and self-indulgence. ‘Let Me Watch You Dribble Caviar All Over Your New Plastic Breasts.’ Ewwwww, that’s disgusting. Do it again. Yum-Yum.” This analysis doesn’t make much more sense in context, but it was almost certainly the most interesting thing in the *Orlando Sentinel* that day, and it is

Kathleen Parker’s Palin-panning article was the kick-off for the Southern columnist’s coming-out party.

Twilight of the Op-Ed Columnist

What is the fate of the syndicated newspaper columnist in a world where online punditry is plentiful?

BY PAUL WALDMAN

The influential French sociologist Gabriel Tarde wrote in 1898 that newspapers “both enriched and leveled ... the conversations of individuals, even those who do not read papers but who, talking to those who do, are forced to follow the groove of their borrowed thoughts. One pen suffices to set off a thousand tongues.”

This is what the most influential op-ed columnists are able to do. Yet in the age of the Internet, we don’t need to

turn to the back of our paper’s A-section to get some perspective on the news of the day (if we’re still getting the paper, that is). With the proliferation of news sites and blogs, anyone can access the opinions of millions of commentators, some of whom are as good or better at explaining, edifying, entertaining, and persuading than the lions of the op-ed page.

So does the op-ed columnist have a future?

Not if the newspaper

doesn’t, and the industry is in what could charitably be called a period of transition. According to the Newspaper Association of America, print revenues at papers have plummeted, falling 17.7 percent in 2008 from the year before (classified-ad revenue declined 29.7 percent, thanks in part to Craigslist). Total paid daily circulation has declined every year since 1987, and last year it fell below 50 million for the first time since 1945, when the population was less than half of what it is today. And the remaining print audience is graying: A survey last year from the Pew Research Center found that while 52 percent of respondents over the age of 62 said

they had read the paper the day before, only 16 percent of those under 31 said the same.

No one knows what the newspaper industry will look like in 10 or 20 years, but a few things seem clear. The days of 20 percent or 30 percent profit margins are over. More papers will end their print editions and become online-only, as the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* did this year, and every newspaper will shift attention and resources to the Web. “If I had to bet money, says Rick Newcombe, the president of Creators Syndicate, home to such prominent columnists as Pat Buchanan and Mark Shields, “I’d say the Internet will play out the way television is today” with *(continued next page)*

not the work of a self-serious or particularly moralizing mind.

Parker's earliest columns were knocked out in a converted garage adjacent to her South Carolina home, where she could keep an eye on her young son. As he grew older, her column topics sprawled from the confines of the household into the world at large—politics, personalities, world events. And despite her current reputation as a conservative, it has always been pretty hard to predict where she will go. "I personally do not pass judgment on a woman who has made the painful decision to have an abortion. I figure that's her business," Parker wrote in a Sept. 6, 1991, column blasting the parents of young children involved in a graphic Operation Rescue protest. "While some people arguably should not have abortions," she concluded "it is abundantly clear that some people should not have children."

During the 1991 confirmation hearings for Clarence Thomas, she wrote several columns highlighting what she considered to be the very real problem of sexual harassment. A Jan. 8, 1993, column defended Hillary Clinton against the criticism of men who feel threatened by female intelligence. An Aug. 3, 1997, column was devoted to making fun of Concerned Women for America, a right-wing women's organization then engaged in a moral crusade against Disney cartoons, in particular *The Little Mermaid*, under attack for inappropriate dress on an animated sea creature. She likes Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, the Republican opposition to whom she paraphrased as: "Are you the bitch everyone says you are?"

One would be hard-pressed under these circumstances to label Parker a loyal Republican. Indeed, she maintains that she

is not and has never registered as such. It was in 1995, when Parker's column was picked up for syndication, that she became a designated voice of the right. "The way the market is set up," Parker says, "there has to be a left, there has to be a right, there has to be a conservative, there has to be a liberal, there has to be a man, a woman, a black, an Asian. Blah blah blah blah."

This political packaging came as a surprise to some. About six years ago, Keyes, Parker's former editor, was managing editor of a paper in Hawaii and searching for a right-leaning columnist to round off the op-ed page. "I called a friend of mine who's an editorial-page editor and said, 'I'm looking for a good conservative columnist,'" Keyes says. "And this person said, 'Oh, Kathleen Parker!' I said, 'What?' I thought, 'Oh, that must be another Kathleen Parker.'"

But Parker's focus on traditional gender roles and impatience with political correctness were enough to sell her as a conservative in a market where a right-leaning woman was an appropriately diversifying oddity. (Which is not to say being

a woman was an advantage. "When my syndicate tried to sell me," Parker recalls, "they often heard: 'We don't need Parker, we have [Ellen] Goodman.' Meaning, we already have a woman.")

And it was as a nominal conservative, not as a Palin-bashing would-be liberal, that *The Washington Post*



(continued from previous page)

three tiers of news content: some free and supported by ads, some available by subscription, and some available on a pay-per-view basis. This presents a problem for both the syndicates and the columnists whose words they sell to papers, because it's hard to get a paper to pay much for a column that runs only on its Web site. And as *The New York Times* found out when it made its columnists available online to subscribers only, there are only so many people willing to pay a monthly fee to read Maureen Dowd's *bon mots*.

Not that newspapers pay all that much for syndicated columns as it is. The syndicates use a sliding scale based on

circulation, so a small newspaper may pay as little as \$5 a week to run a column; a large paper might pay as much as \$100, with the rest in between. The typical syndication contract stipulates that all fees will be split 50-50 between the columnist and the syndicate. The result is that a columnist could see his or her columns run in dozens of papers around the country and only net a few thousand dollars a year. "I would be shocked if there were more than 10 or 20" columnists who could make a living just from their column, says Dave Astor, a columnist for *The Montclair Times* in New Jersey who covered the syndicate industry for many years at *Editor & Publisher*, the trade publication

of the newspaper industry.

In 2007, when I was at the progressive media watchdog organization Media Matters for America, we surveyed every daily newspaper in America and asked which syndicated columnists they ran (96 percent responded, so our survey was as close to complete as it could be). While the study identified 201 columnists who appeared in three or more papers and in more than one state, the overall market was extremely concentrated at the top. Using the combined circulation reached by each columnist, the 10 most widely read accounted for more than

35 percent of the total market, and the top 18 columnists reached as many readers as the other 183.

While there may be lots of people who can call themselves "syndicated columnists," in other words, the top two dozen or so are the ones who dominate. Their competition could be reduced further by the cuts happening within individual newspapers. When I asked David Sirota, whose syndicated column runs in a few large papers like the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Denver Post*, and *Seattle Times*, and a few dozen smaller papers scattered around the country, to predict the future of the op-ed column, he said, "The first thing you'll see is

hired her—just weeks before she wrote the column advising the vice-presidential nominee to step down.

THIS IS KATHLEEN PARKER'S MOMENT. According to *The Washington Post's* Alan Shearer, an average columnist might break into 15 new papers a year. In September alone, while the business of news gathering was supposedly imploding, 58 papers added Parker's column to their pages. At the *Post*, the op-ed page's most recent addition also generates "as much or more" reader mail as anyone there. "I got one this morning that said, 'You bloody c---. You bitch,'" Parker says blithely, drawing a strip of chicken from her salad and feeding it into her purse. "He's an appraiser in Texas. He signed his name. I don't know what column he was upset about."

The list of media professionals who have profited by replacing one ideology with another is well known in Washington. In Parker's case, however, it's not clear that she ever adhered to the ideology she is charged with abandoning. Nor is her hatred of oogedy-boogedyism sign of a new, Bubba-bashing, cocktail party-attending Kathleen Parker. She did not grow up in a religious household ("occasionally, when we drank too much, we would become religious"), and she has long evinced a distaste for the excesses of would-be moralists. "It's interesting that the GOP," she wrote in 1995, "once champion of the founding principle separating church and state, now should be inch-

ing toward an implicit governmental religion that suggests not only intolerance but also an un-American exclusivity."

Parker has placed herself, in other words, in the role of anti-ideologue, a rhetorical platform that manifests itself not in the deferential moderation of fellow columnist David Broder but in a sarcastic, somewhat incoherent iconoclasm. There are the ideologues who think you should get upset when the Transportation Security Administration singles you out

for a strip search and the ideologues who think you should be jailed for terminating a pregnancy. There are the smut-peddling Hollywood directors, and there are the moralizing popes. This kind of dogmatic anti-dogmatism fans out into distrust of any and all "experts," a word Parker has trouble saying without a sneer, as in "alleged parenting experts" or "the usual array of crisis experts." Parker is also fond of the locution, "I'm not an expert, but,"

the implication being that university-obtained erudition is no substitute for rock-ribbed American judgment.

This concern with the influence of social reformers manifests itself most deeply in *Save the Males*, wherein we enter a dark world of experts (and girls) gone wild. "Sex equity experts," as it were, are trying to make boys more like girls. Experts from the American Association of University Women are coaxing schools into ignoring boys. Meanwhile, it seems, we've all lost our sense of common decency, which is why "pole-dancing

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the death of the local national column," by which he meant a column about national issues, written by a local columnist employed by the paper in your hand. In a struggling industry, the economics of keeping that person on staff are just too difficult, when readers can be offered the same thing from a syndicated column that may cost the newspaper just a few hundred dollars a year.

These columnists are already starting to be laid off, but that doesn't mean that those who focus on local issues are safe from the brutal cuts happening in newsrooms all over the country. As Astor notes, "In some cases, even those who are doing everything their papers say they want

them to do," like focusing on local issues and contributing to the papers' Web sites, are still getting the ax.

IT'S POSSIBLE THAT the decline of newspapers will mean the decline of the superstar columnist, but it may be more likely that the opposite will happen. Despite the near-infinite amount of opinion available on the Internet, newspaper columnists belong to an exclusive club that could become even more exclusive.

That's because what makes a columnist important is authority, the perception among readers that the person who penned this missive is someone whose opinions are worth listening to. That

authority can be created in a number of ways—a history of erudition and wisdom, say, or winning a Nobel Prize in economics. It can also be a matter of style—Fred Barnes famously said on television, when asked if he could speak "with authority" on an obscure topic, "I can speak to almost anything with a lot of authority."

For the newspaper columnist, the largest part of that authority comes from the simple fact that your words are printed on the pages of an important publication. "There is something unique about the power of print" in creating prestige, says Rick Newcombe of *Creators*, who admits this even as he tries desperately to help newspapers "monetize"

the Internet. Tiny dots of ink on paper still seem more important and weighty than tiny pixels on a screen. As newspapers dwindle and the Web expands, space on the printed page becomes even more precious and rare—imbuing the people whose words occupy it with all the more prestige.

That doesn't mean that op-ed columnists in the future will ignore the Internet the way the older generation of columnists does today. (You haven't read David Broder's blog, because he doesn't have one. Not that you'd want to read it if he did.) As Sirota argues (and Newcombe seconds), when Broder's generation of columnists retires, editors will begin asking *(continued next page)*

moms” are everywhere, “faking intimacy with an inanimate pillar that never goes limp,” their “prostitots decked in baby hookerwear” not far behind. This is a world in which “being a slut isn’t just fashionable ... it’s practically mandatory,” and the “sexual aggressiveness of young women,” terrifying as it is, may be responsible for a “rising incidence of impotence among young males.” Such is our gender confusion that “metrosexuals [are] everywhere,” “babies now can be custom-ordered without the muss and fuss of human intimacy,” and “in France, men already are fantasizing about the day they can give birth.”

To those of us who wake up every day in an America that is not some cross between a Ron Jeremy film, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and a freshman women’s studies seminar, this characterization of American culture will seem terrifically odd. It is partly because of such characterizations that Parker has been labeled a reactionary. The world Parker actually wants is not a world in which women make babies and men chop wood. It is merely a world in which one can walk down an average city street and not be confronted by a 4-year-old in a “Future Porn Star” T-shirt, a world in which most women do not own stripper poles, a world in which most people do not know that sex-equity experts even exist. It’s a world in which most people don’t say “vagina” in polite conversation, vice presidents are expected to know something about the country that elected them, abortion is stigmatized but not

illegal, and racial profiling is permitted but not celebrated.

It is, in other words, precisely the world in which we actually live. For all her railing against our decadent times, Parker is a stalwart defender of the status quo, committed to the arbitrary prejudices of our age—recall her problem with men in jewelry—and skeptical of anyone whose ideology might challenge our present state of affairs. She is literally a conservative, which means she is nothing of a Republican. And it is only by pretending that we are much, much further along the road to perdition than we actually are that Parker can look longingly back to some lost age of decency.

“The great thing about having five mothers,” she told me, “was that with each one you get a new religion and new décor. Women take everything. When you get a divorce? They take the switch plates. So we lived in an empty house the last three years in high school. We literally had no furniture.”

Parker writes for those who want to keep the furniture in place, the house unstripped. Week after week, she bolts the living-room set to the floor. And at a time when the low rumble of a moving truck suggests not hope of change but fear of loss, she is more popular than ever. **TAP**

Parker is a true conservative, skeptical of anyone whose ideology might challenge our present state of affairs.

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(continued from previous page) a different set of questions about the columnists with whom they choose to replace them. Does this writer have a large online following? Will she drive traffic to my Web site? “The newspaper industry can no longer rely on the newspaper alone to get readers,” Sirota says.

Nonetheless, it is still true that maximal authority—and influence—is created by a combination of print and television. Consider this: Do you know who Leonard Pitts Jr. is? If you live in D.C. or New York, you probably don’t. Yet Pitts, a Pulitzer Prize winner for commentary, is the second most widely syndicated progressive columnist in America

(after Ellen Goodman). If you don’t know him, it’s because his column, which originates with *The Miami Herald*, doesn’t run in the major D.C. or New York papers, and he almost never appears on television. And while bloggers are now showing up on cable chat shows, the most important seats on the primetime and Sunday shows (along with other high-profile venues like National Public Radio’s *All Things Considered*) are largely reserved for the top-tier newspaper columnists, particularly those published in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. The prestige of the papers that publish their columns gets them those gigs, which further

enhance their prestige.

So it wasn’t surprising that when *National Journal* published a survey in September of 375 “political insiders,” asking which commentators “most help to shape their own opinions or worldview,” the first seven places were taken by columnists for the *Times* and the *Post*. The top spot was held by Thomas Friedman, perhaps a testament to the D.C. establishment’s fascination with all-encompassing yet oversimplified metaphors (or the wisdom of Bangalore cab drivers). Just as interesting were those who didn’t make the cut: Goodman, the most widely read progressive columnist in the country, was not mentioned by a single “insider,” nor

was Pitts. Cal Thomas, despite his presence in hundreds of papers, was mentioned by only one of the 375.

But as long as there exists a thing called a “newspaper”—even if many of the 1,400 daily papers currently operating in the United States go out of business—people will continue to believe that the opinions of those whose words rub off on our fingers are somehow a little more valid and important than opinions we find only on the Web. **TAP**

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