

Text of James O'Shea's Remarks

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Prepared remarks delivered by editor James O'Shea Monday morning in the newsroom of the Los Angeles Times to explain to the staff why he is leaving the paper. Wall St. Journal online)

By now I am sure you have all heard I am leaving the Los Angeles Times after 14 months as editor of the paper. I will never forget the day that I walked into this newsroom, which was furious about the firing of my predecessor, Dean Baquet. As I entered the Globe Lobby, the security guard handed me a pass. It was good for one day. I remember thinking this was going to be one of the toughest days of my life. Actually, today is probably a little tougher. I am leaving here after making many great friends and before I got a chance to do everything that I wanted. But that's life and I accept it.

I know there's a lot of talk about why I am leaving so let me set the record straight. In discussions about the current and future budgets, it became clear that Publisher David Hiller and I didn't share a common vision for the future of the Los Angeles Times. In fact, we were far apart. So David decided he wanted a new editor. As I've said on numerous occasions over the past 14 months, I intended to stay here and lead this newspaper to the greatness it deserves. But David decided he wanted to terminate my employment and get another editor. I wish the new editor the best.

Although I didn't really accomplish all of the goals that I set when I arrived, I know that this newsroom today is better off than when I walked into the door, and I am proud of all that we did together. We've accomplished a lot in just 14 months. When I came to this newsroom, I pledged to maintain the quality of the LA Times, and I did, even though I had to cut budgets and shrink the staff.

Despite those cutbacks, we successfully transformed this place into a true interactive newsroom with a web site that is far more successful than when I came. In fact, traffic on LA Times.com was up by a staggering 187 million page views over December 2006, an extraordinary achievement and one that should generate pride in our ranks. Our coverage of the fires that's truly worthy of a Pulitzer Prize is just one example of why record numbers of print and online readers depend on this newsroom. During my tenure, we also turned around a Sunday magazine that was drowning in red ink when I arrived; it's now rebounding and is in the black. With a modest investment in new resources, we created a new fashion section that generates millions in new print and online ad revenues and a successful new Calendar weekend section. The formula for success? A small investment in new resources more than pays for itself with added revenues. We also created a new multi-media Guide section and web site; we redesigned Travel; we stopped the bleeding in circulation by being one of four papers in the country whose daily circulation was up in the last reporting period; and we broke news, the heartbeat of a newsroom, lots of it. The Sheriff Corona story; the diversion of U.S. anti-terrorism aid in Pakistan; I could go on and on. The quality of the paper under my time as editor didn't decline. I am proud of

that given the financial pressures we faced. And most important, there's a talented stable management team in place that cares about the news that flows out to the public under the name of the Los Angeles Times.

This is an incredibly talented newsroom and I've really enjoyed getting to know many of you. I think Steve Lopez is the best daily newspaper columnist in the nation, one of a few that I would compare favorably to Mike Royko. And that's saying a lot for someone from Chicago. There are lots of others who I could name but I don't have the time. I didn't get the time or opportunity to get to know some of you better and I regret that. One criticism I accept is that I spent too much time in my office and not enough time in the trenches, where I belong. So I apologize if I seemed a bit remote. As anyone who knows me well will tell you, that is not like me. I didn't make enough time to do what I'm really good at: rolling up my sleeves and editing a story.

This is a tough time in the company and the industry. I understand that. I spent much of my career covering business and economics. I understand the realities of the bottom line. I am not some naïve, starry-eyed journalist who can't accept economic reality. I know you have to cut back in hard times. I've done that more often than I care to mention. I also know this is a time of transition with change sweeping throughout the industry. But when you don't agree with the future course of the newspaper it's best to simply move on. There are plenty of other challenges out there for me and I don't intend to sit around idle. There are bike rides to be had, books to write and hopefully another opportunity or two to make a difference. I am not a quitter.

One thing I want put on the record, though, is that I disagree completely with the way that this company allocates resources to its newsrooms, not just here but at Tribune newspapers all around the country. That system is at the core of my disagreements with David. I think the current system relies too heavily on voodoo economics and not enough on the creativity and resourcefulness of journalists. We journalists have our faults, but we also have a lot to offer. Too often we've been dismissed as budgetary adolescents who can't be trusted to conserve our resources. That is wrong. Journalists and not accountants should seize responsibility for the financial health of our newspapers so journalists can make decisions about the size of our staffs and how much news remains in our papers and web sites.

The biggest challenge we face -- journalists and dedicated newspaper folks alike -- is to overcome this pervasive culture of defeat, the psychology of surrender that accepts decline as inevitable. This mindset plagues our business and threatens our newspapers and livelihoods. I believe that when Sam Zell understands how asinine the current budgetary system is, he will change it for the better, because he is a smart businessman and he understands the value of wise investment. A dollar's worth of smart investment is worth far more than a barrel of budget cuts.

This company, indeed, this industry, must invest more in solid, relevant journalism. We must integrate the speed and agility of the Internet with the news judgment and editorial values of the newsroom, values that are more important than ever as the hunger for news

continues to surge and gossip pollutes the information atmosphere. Even in hard times, wise investment -- not retraction -- is the long-term answer to the industry's troubles. We must build on our core strength, which is good, accurate reporting, the backbone of solid journalism, the public service that helps people make the right decisions about their increasingly complex lives. We must tell people what they want to know and -- even more important -- what they might not want to know, about war, politics, economics, schools, corruption and the thoughts and deeds of those who lead us. We need to tell readers more about Barack Obama and less about Britney Spears. We must give a voice to those who can't afford a megaphone. And we must become more than a marketing slogan. I know I can rely on this newsroom to do this.

Lastly I want to make it clear that I didn't quit. Anyone in a top newsroom management job during tough times always wrestles with a crucial question: Where is the line? At what point do you go from "I can deal with this" to "this is simply wrong."

So when I got here, I wondered: Where's my line? Would it be a newsroom of 800 people? 700? But then I realized the folly of that kind of thinking. I'd been around the accountants and their "metrics" too long. The line you draw is this: Do I believe in the course we've set for the future? If the answer is Yes, if I thought the LA Times could resolve its problems by getting smaller and smaller, by being gradually diminished, then I would stay. If not, (and I don't) then I told myself to take a stand and say enough is enough. If you have to consider closing foreign bureaus and cutting back in other parts of the paper to free up the money needed to cover the Olympics and the most historic political campaign in modern times, well to me that's no plan for the future, that is not serving the interest of readers. It is simply stupid. Even though we face tough and demanding times and I sympathize with those who face daunting revenue challenges, I don't believe that we will succeed long term by giving up; by taking steps that I think will gradually diminish newspapers. I decided to take my stand and say: Change the way we do things. I made that decision and I will live with the consequences. And when I walk through the Globe Lobby for the last time, I can guarantee you that I won't regret taking that stand. I believe history will prove me right. When this industry stops relying so much on cuts and starts investing in Journalism, it will prosper because it will be serving the best interests of our readers. That's when we will prosper. I wish you all the best and with that its time to say of my tenure here:

Dash 30 Dash.