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## At Dick Morris' Random House, Time Is Up for the Old Times

At *The New York Times Book Review's* 100th-anniversary party on Oct. 3, Harold Evans, president and publisher of Random House, made only a fleeting appearance. But the literary throng gathered in the marbled Astor Hall of the New York Public Library barely noticed. They were far

more focused on party attendees Peter Osnos and Steve Wasserman, former and soon to be former employees of Random.

Mr. Osnos had been the publisher of Times Books, Random's imprint specializing in politics, business, health—and extremely lucrative games books. But on Sept. 18, he offered his resignation to Mr. Evans, a fellow former journalist and the man who got the job Mr. Osnos had once coveted. Mr. Osnos announced that he would start a publishing venture based out of the progressive 20th Century Fund. Then, on Oct. 2, Mr. Wasserman, the bearded editorial director of Times Books, resigned, too. He will become book editor of the *Los Angeles Times*.

The departures had the book community frenetically speculating about the future of Times Books. "Is it all over?" one observer asked. One person wondered, had the Times editors "jumped or been pushed?" Random chief executive Alberto Vitale and Mr. Evans are expected to pare Times down mainly to its puzzles-and-games, business and health lines. So Times, long devoted to esteemed, often liberal historical, political and economic thought, may soon be largely devoted to the

pursuit of crossword puzzles. Editors at Random say that they will continue to publish the kinds of books Times has pursued under Mr. Osnos, but it is clear that they don't feel they need the intellectual legitimizing force of the imprint. "All I think of when I see Harry Evans now," said one guest at the *Book Review* festivities, "is Dick Morris."

Certainly, Times as Messrs. Osnos and Wasserman nurtured it will be no more. As they've known for a while, American book culture is increasingly gaga for sex and scandal, dutifully buying into the cult of celebrity as well as the crippling advances and unrealistically large print runs that come with it. The same week that Mr. Wasserman started house-hunting in Los Angeles, Doubleday confirmed its purchase of a first novel about a rampaging prehistoric shark, for a reported \$2.1 million.

Meanwhile, Times' winter 1997 list has been folded into Random's catalogue, and resources are currently being diverted instead to Crown Publishing Group, a brasher division trying to vault into high visibility on the expensive backs of such properties as Spike Lee's basketball book, Gabrielle Reece's *Big Girl in the Middle* and a book about Tupac Shakur. Mr. Wasserman perfected the financial stopgap of releasing such instant titles as *The Contract With America* and *The Gotti Tapes*, but that wasn't enough. And whither Random leads, conglomerate-owned contemporary publishing follows.

Random's example, though, is a dangerous one, since owner S.I. (Si) Newhouse Jr. wants

both bang and profit for his buck from Mr. Vitale. After six and a half years on the job, Mr. Vitale is feeling Mr. Newhouse's pressure to firm up the shaky bottom line this balancing act has wrought. "Si is really yanking Alberto's chain," an insider said. Mr. Vitale, in turn, is yanking Mr. Evans'. "They were looking around for someone to blame, and they found them at Times Books," said a company source. "This diverts attention." Overpriced investments, overprinting, too many titles and returns of 60 percent to 70 percent from the bloated superstores have the corridors at 201 East 50th Street and elsewhere awash in red ink. Zealously publishing cerebral, semi-academic books while overspending with the best of them, Mr. Osnos let down his guard against the tide washing him right out of his publisher's office.

Although Mr. Osnos was offered a variety of senior slots at Random House, he preferred, he said, to go it alone in search of "the dedicated, if finite, audience for a certain kind of nonfiction." Mr. Evans, who has been interviewing candidates, including Viking Penguin senior vice president and executive director Cathy Hemming, told *The Observer* that a new publisher will be in place by Oct. 11. It stands to reason that the appointee will not resemble Mr. Osnos, the prickly son of European refugees whose intellectual gravitas won him membership in the left-wing, dog-good media elite currently overshadowed by Mr. Evans' mode of working-class-bloke-made-good showmanship.

Mr. Evans' publicity radar and the social connections that bolster it have meant that the often alleged tensions between him and Mr. Osnos, brought in with much fanfare from *The Washington Post* but definitively eliminated as Random's heir apparent by Mr. Evans' appointment in 1990, were rendered moot before they could even develop. Mr. Evans gave Mr. Osnos his full support to overacquire—and overpay for—his earnest titles: Mr. Evans has a personal respect for such books, but he could also watch a colleague dig his own grave. "Random House didn't need two great newspapermen," said Chris Calhoun, an agent with Sterling Lord Literistic Inc., "figuring that Mr. Evans' hiring of Ann God-

off as Random's editorial director one and a half years ago further served to embarrass Mr. Osnos. With only the occasional best seller, like Robert McNamara's *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* winning him brief reprieves from Mr. Vitale's attempts to rein Times in, Mr. Osnos' luck petered out at the same time that the publishing industry began to founder. "When push comes to shove, you only get so many tries," said Stanley Newman, the managing director who presides over Times' red-hot profit center, the puzzles and games book divisions, "and I assume Peter ran out of tries."

By leaving the reigning publishing scene behind, Mr. Osnos is not disregarding it. He said he merely believes in alternatives. "I want to focus on 20 books a year I can really put my arms around," he said, "not devote 75 percent of my time to answering the vast needs of a giant publishing house. The readership I'm interested in needs to be served directly by someone who is good at such things and can find new means of distribution, like particular stores, on line or direct mail."

Whether others will share his faith remains to be seen. The Sept. 30 *Publishers Weekly* was forced to print the correction: "Although the 20th Century Fund will supply Peter Osnos with a base for his new book line (News, Sept. 23), it will not underwrite it, and he will seek funds to support it." Harper Collins Publishers editor in chief Diane Reverand, a colleague of Mr. Osnos' at Random House when she headed Villard Books, said, "I spoke with Peter recently, and he seemed shakier than I expected. But he has a good heart and he's talented. I'd love to talk to him here."

Times staff members remain hopeful that some involvement with serious nonfiction publishing will be maintained, and cite such forthcoming titles as spymaster Markus Wolf's memoirs, Anthony Bianco's exposé of the Reichmann real estate family and Richard Holbrooke's book on Bosnia to support that hope. "A lot of people are walking around pretty shellshocked," said associate editor Geoff Shandler. "Harry said Times would be doing less nonfiction and more of what makes money. The operative word here is 'less'—does it mean some or none?"