



## **A Matter of Opinion: The *Oregonian* Editorial Board and Sam Adams**

Startling news broke in Portland, Oregon, on January 19, 2009. The recently-inaugurated mayor, Sam Adams, had just admitted to a past affair with a young man; moreover, it was possible the young man had been a minor at the time. Sixteen months earlier, however, Adams had vehemently denied charges of that affair leveled at him by a rival for the mayor's post. Among other things, Adams, an openly gay Portland politician, had declared the rumor an overt political smear, and a homophobic one to boot. In the process, Adams had destroyed the credibility of his political opponent, and went on to win the election by a wide margin.

The *Oregonian* was the predominant newspaper both in Oregon and in Portland, the state's most populous city. Its editorial board served as a guiding voice in Portland's civic life, making difficult judgment calls on numerous political and social issues, which were published on the *Oregonian's* editorial page. Editorial Page Editor Bob Caldwell knew his seven-member board would be expected to weigh in on Adams' confession. Specifically, the group would have to decide whether to call for Adams' resignation.

The board had enthusiastically backed Adams for mayor. He had been the most experienced candidate running, with charm and intelligence to spare. With his generous election margin, Adams had a mandate that gave him considerable leverage to tackle the pressing economic issues that faced the city in the midst of the most severe national recession since the 1930s. Moreover, the board was proud their city had embraced an openly gay mayor, another example of the tolerant liberalism on which Portland prided itself. But the confession was a major event.

Caldwell wanted to make sure that Adams had an opportunity to state his case. So he invited the mayor to visit the board the next morning. During their meeting, Adams changed his story several times. The board sensed he was still concealing some of the facts; some were unconvinced that the young man had been 18—Oregon's legal age of sexual consent—at the time of the affair.

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As the editorial board gathered after the meeting, they debated what to write. Some facts were clear. By his own admission, Adams had lied in 2007. Portland voters might not have elected him had he admitted to the affair before the election. Moreover, Adams had discredited another potential candidate, depriving voters of that choice. On the other hand, Adams was a charismatic public figure who had won high voter approval, and whose policy priorities reflected those of the board as well as the electorate.

The board had to decide what they could usefully say about the situation. What kind of editorial would best serve the interests of *Oregonian* readers? Did they have enough information? If, as Adams maintained, he had lied but done nothing illegal, did his behavior warrant a call for his resignation? Would they be considering such a move if the mayor had lied about a relationship with a woman, underage or not? Did the board risk undermining a capable leader unnecessarily? To whom, fundamentally, was the board responsible in presenting its perspective?

### **The *Oregonian* editorial board**

The *Oregonian* was among the largest newspapers in the northwestern United States, with a circulation near 300,000. The paper's audience centered in Portland, Oregon—where the *Oregonian* was headquartered—but extended into the surrounding counties and parts of Washington state. Like most major American newspapers, the *Oregonian* devoted the last two-page spread of its Metro section to opinion writing. The convention had arisen in the mid-19th century as US newspapers, until then often instruments of partisan politics, gradually moved toward presenting the news in an objective, neutral tone to appeal to wider audiences. The opinion pages represented an attempt to separate partisan analysis of current affairs from the facts presented in the news pages.

This history was reflected not just in the pages, but also the staff structure, of modern newspaper organizations. A news staff typically reported to a managing editor, in charge of day-to-day newsgathering. A separate opinion staff reported to an editorial page editor, in charge of the opinion pages. The staff separation was meant to ensure that a newspaper's "editorial slant"—the points of view expressed in its opinion pages—had no impact on the way its reporters gathered and wrote the news. In addition to individual columnists, the opinion staff also included an editorial board—a committee of writers charged with reporting and collaboratively writing a few daily, short arguments about issues facing their community.

Founded as a Republican newspaper in 1850, the *Oregonian* remained editorially conservative for much of its history, endorsing its first Democrat for President with Bill Clinton in 1992. The paper's editorial slant was determined in part by the priorities of its owners, the Newhouse family, who had purchased the *Oregonian* in 1950. In theory, the Newhouses could steer its papers' editorial positions as much or as little as they chose. In practice, the Newhouses, who owned over 30 newspapers nationwide, delegated editorial autonomy to local management at

individual newspapers. In the *Oregonian's* case, President and Publisher Fred Stickel appointed the editorial page editor. Himself a staunch conservative, Stickel in 1995 had sought out a political moderate to lead the seven-member board, and had chosen Caldwell. At the time, Caldwell was *Oregonian* Metro Editor; he was not a registered member of any political party, and he tended to hew to the center. Stickel only occasionally weighed in on editorial decisions, and did not expect Caldwell to defer to his judgment.

The ideological composition of the board was not constant over the years as writers came and went, but Caldwell, Stickel, and Sandra Rowe, the paper's editor, tended to hire experienced, politically moderate reporters for the board. In 2009, most of the board's members considered themselves in the center-left of the political spectrum. There were six in addition to Caldwell, and they functioned as beat reporters—focusing on law, education or state government, for example. Though each member suggested topics, wrote editorials, and participated in daily discussions about what the *Oregonian's* stance should be, Caldwell himself ultimately determined what positions the *Oregonian* took. He explains:

[The board is] not a democracy. I'm responsible for what appears on the editorial page... We don't vote or anything along those lines. We have discussions. In the end, the author of an editorial and I have to agree what the opinion is going to be and presumably... the opinion presented... is informed by the discussion and the views of other members. [But] we don't try to reach a consensus and we don't try to ask people to represent views that they don't actually own.<sup>1</sup>

The *Oregonian's* editorial slant was thus colored by Caldwell's own idiosyncrasies. For example, not all of Caldwell's staff agreed with his support for capital punishment, yet the *Oregonian's* official stance was pro-death penalty. Caldwell had also seen to it that the *Oregonian* endorsed George W. Bush over Vice President Al Gore for President in the hotly contested election of 2000.<sup>2</sup>

*Board members in 2009.* Rick Attig was the board's lead writer on state government, politics, and issues surrounding energy and the environment. Attig shared a 2006 Pulitzer for commentary with his colleague, Doug Bates, for a 15-part editorial series exposing ghastly conditions at a state-run mental hospital in Salem, Oregon's capital. Bates was the board's lead writer on health care, and he also wrote frequently about child-welfare issues, government ethics, and state politics. Mary Pitman Kitch covered primarily Portland city government, land-use planning, gay rights, and immigration. Mike Francis covered business and maintained a blog about the 2003 Iraq war's effect on Oregonians. Susan Nielsen, in addition to writing a Sunday column of her own, primarily

<sup>1</sup> Author's interview with Bob Caldwell on May 20, 2009, in Portland, Oregon. All further quotes from Caldwell, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

<sup>2</sup> The *Oregonian* endorsed a Democratic presidential candidate for the first time in its history with Bill Clinton in 1992, three years before Caldwell took over the editorial board.

covered education and the courts for the board. David Sarasohn, who also had his own column, covered mostly national and statewide political issues.

Like most American newspaper editorials, *Oregonian* editorials were “unsigned,” that is, their authors’ names were not attached. *New York Times* Editorial Page Editor Andrew Rosenthal explained the practice in an online discussion forum with readers:

Editorials are unsigned because they are the product of a group of people, who bring their experience and intellect to bear on a wide range of topics. They are meant to represent an institutional opinion, not a personal opinion. The editorial board is the voice of its board, its editor and the publisher of *The Times*. (By the way, it is most emphatically NOT the voice of the newsroom, which is... entirely separate from my department.)... We are not striving for unanimity and we do not take votes (except for political candidate endorsements, which is a bit more formal process). But we are looking for positions that make sense to this group of highly qualified, educated and deeply experienced professional journalists. They should be based on the principles for which the board stands and grounded in a solid understanding of the facts.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to overseeing staff editorials, which appeared on the first page of the opinion section, Caldwell also selected letters to the editor for print, and oversaw the contributions of opinion columnists and guest writers. Those columns appeared on the page opposite the editorials; their name, “op-eds,” referred to their position in the newspaper.

## Oregon politics

Much of the *Oregonian*’s readership resided in Portland, Oregon’s most populous city and the seat of the paper’s headquarters. Portland’s metro area was home to nearly half of Oregon’s residents.<sup>4</sup> City voters tended to lean left; one conservative commentator mocked typical political views in Portland as covering “the full range of opinion from left, to far-left, to ultra-left.”<sup>5</sup> The political dynamic in the rest of the state was somewhat more complicated. In 2009, four out of Oregon’s five congressional representatives were Democrats; two Democrats represented the state in the Senate. The state’s electoral votes had gone to the Democratic presidential candidate in every election since Republican Ronald Reagan had won the state twice in the 1980s. But Democrats Al Gore and John Kerry, who ran for President in 2000 and 2004 respectively, each won Oregon by thin margins of only a few thousand votes. The state’s Senate seats had been split—one Democrat

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<sup>3</sup> “Talk to the Times: Editorial Page Editor Andrew Rosenthal,” *New York Times*, April 12, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/13/business/media/13askthetimes.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>4</sup> Portland State University, Population Research Center, 2008 population report, <http://www.pdx.edu/prc/>.

<sup>5</sup> Linda Seebach, “Portland’s business-leery attitude has had an effect,” *Rocky Mountain News*, September 17, 2005.

and one Republican—for some 10 years until Gordon Smith (R-OR) lost his seat in the 2008 election. Democratic dominance in Oregon was by no means assured.

The *Oregonian* editorial board did not strive to reflect the views of its politically diverse readership, but rather to inform them. Reader interpretation of the board's editorial slant varied along with political preference. Caldwell says:

I think the general reader would see us as a little bit center left. I think that many Portland, especially Portland central city readers see us as center right, but I think that's partly because the politics of Portland tend to be [liberal].

*Political scandals.* Sex scandals were not unknown in Oregon politics. Caldwell himself had helped the *Oregonian* cover at least two others involving public figures, once in the news section and once at the helm of the editorial board. In 1992, when Caldwell was the *Oregonian's* Metro news editor, the *Washington Post* broke the story that 10 women had accused Senator Bob Packwood (R-OR) of sexual harassment. The *Oregonian* news section was widely criticized for failing to get the story first; the incident even inspired a briefly popular bumper sticker: "If it matters to Oregonians, it's in the *Washington Post*."<sup>6</sup> Caldwell had, in fact, assigned a reporter to look into rumors about Packwood's sexual impropriety before the story broke, but the *Post* published first. The *Oregonian* was further embarrassed when it later came out that Packwood had forced a kiss on one of its own political reporters, though Caldwell had not been informed.

In May 2004, Caldwell and the *Oregonian* again faced a sex scandal involving a state politician—and again another newspaper broke the story. This time, an investigative reporter at alternative weekly *Willamette Week* discovered that former Oregon Governor Neil Goldschmidt had had an affair with his children's then-14-year-old babysitter in 1975. At the time, Goldschmidt had been 35 and Portland's mayor.<sup>7</sup> While the news section scrambled to catch up with *Willamette Week's* scoop, the editorial board, now under Caldwell, wrote:

It is beyond sad to see former Gov. Neil Goldschmidt's remarkable service to Oregon end this way, with a brilliant public man brought down by a stunning personal failure nearly 30 years ago.<sup>8</sup>

In the week that followed, the *Oregonian* was deluged with reader letters on the Goldschmidt affair. Many condemned the *Oregonian's* editorial as far too supportive of Goldschmidt. Under Oregon law, sex with a minor under 16 was third-degree rape, punishable by

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Koberstein, "Dubious Achievements: The *Oregonian* 1974-1999," *Willamette Week*, November 10, 1999, <http://wweek.com/html/25-oh.html>.

<sup>7</sup> *Willamette Week* reporter Nigel Jaquiss won the 2005 Pulitzer Prize in investigative reporting for exposing Goldschmidt.

<sup>8</sup> "Goldschmidt's Tragic Choice," *Oregonian*, May 7, 2004.

up to five years in prison. But the three-year statute of limitations for prosecuting the perpetrator of such a crime had long since passed; Goldschmidt had gotten away with it. One reader wrote:

The *Oregonian* editorial board has gone too far... The board... tries to make excuses, tries to put a "human face" on Neil Goldschmidt... Goldschmidt raped a child. He is a sexual predator.<sup>9</sup>

Another reader theorized that the *Oregonian* would have been far harder on Goldschmidt had his victim been a boy.<sup>10</sup>

*Gay marriage.* Nor did Caldwell lack experience commenting on the politics of homosexuality. In 2004, a county commissioner with jurisdiction over Portland assigned a state attorney to review the Oregon constitution to determine whether it permitted gay marriage. The attorney found that denying marriage licenses to same-sex couples constituted unconstitutional discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The county commissioner ordered courthouse clerks to begin issuing marriage licenses to same sex couples immediately.

Caldwell and most of his editorial board colleagues found the move unwise. Board members had differing opinions as to whether gay marriage itself should be legal. The board officially embraced civil unions--same-sex partnerships that carried many of the legal benefits of marriage but stopped short of the title. In the editorial he wrote on the matter, Caldwell decided to sidestep the desirability of gay marriage itself, instead blasting what he saw as the county commissioner's undemocratic intervention in an issue that should have been left to Oregon's voters. Caldwell also warned that the commissioner's decision risked sparking an anti-gay backlash that would ultimately set back the cause of legalizing gay marriage. He did not ask the commissioner to resign, but suggested that voters recall her and several of her colleagues, concluding:

If they can't be trusted to make a momentous decision in an open, fair, respectful and transparent manner, they shouldn't be trusted to direct the daily operation of county government.<sup>11</sup>

That winter, as Caldwell had foreseen, Oregonians overwhelmingly passed an amendment to Oregon's constitution that banned same-sex marriage outright.

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<sup>9</sup> Ross Day, "Don't Make Excuses For Him," *Oregonian*, May 8, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Eric Crites, "Paper Uses Linguistic Spin Control," *Oregonian*, May 8, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> "Vote Linn and others from office," *Oregonian*, March 21, 2004.

## Sam Adams

Meanwhile Adams had risen to prominence as an openly gay Portland politician. His career in public life had included an 11-year stint as chief of staff to Vera Katz, a popular Portland mayor. In 2003, Adams had campaigned for Portland City Council and won as an openly gay man; his website featured a photo of himself and his then-partner.<sup>12</sup> It seemed that Adams' sexuality barely registered as an issue with Portland's voters. In a poll the campaign commissioned, 72 percent of respondents said that Adams' sexuality would not affect their vote.<sup>13</sup> Adams' opportunity to run for mayor came in September 2007, when then-Mayor Tom Potter announced that he would not seek reelection. Potter's term would expire in January 2009, and Adams, by now a well-respected public servant, was widely thought to be interested in replacing him.

One obstacle, however, was a rumor that had started that summer. Another potential candidate for mayor, a real estate developer named Robert Ball (who was also openly gay), learned that Adams might have carried on a sexual relationship with a minor. The affair had allegedly taken place in 2005 with a legislative intern named Beau Breedlove, then 17. If true, this meant that Adams had committed statutory rape under Oregon law.

In August 2007, Ball relayed the story to another City Council member, Randy Leonard. In private, Leonard asked Adams whether the rumor was true; Adams denied it forcefully, and Leonard warned Ball against repeating the story to anyone else. But weeks later, Ball sought out former Portland Mayor Vera Katz—Adams' former boss—and told her the same story. Katz and Leonard both suspected Ball was trying to sabotage Adams politically, and contacted the *Oregonian* City Hall reporter. The reporter found them, and Adams, persuasive. A news item ran on Tuesday, September 18, saying in part:

It was among the most potentially damaging accusations that could be leveled against a gay politician, particularly one as high profile and ambitious as Adams. And it was coming from another gay man who also was thinking about running for the city's top job.

The problem: The story Ball told about Adams and a 17-year-old legislative intern isn't true, according to both Adams and the young man. Adams acknowledges trying to be a mentor, including exchanging

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<sup>12</sup> Portland's city government was unusual among major American cities. Most cities had separate executive and legislative bodies—the mayor was the chief executive, and the City Council wrote the laws. In Portland, the mayor and the four-member City Council shared legislative and executive authority. City Council members, called city commissioners, not only wrote laws, but each oversaw their own portfolio of city bureaus and agencies. The mayor did not have substantially more authority than any city commissioner. The *Oregonian* had opined that the system should change—Portlanders voted overwhelmingly to preserve it in a 2007 referendum.

<sup>13</sup> The poll results reported the opinions of a sample of 400 Portlanders. 14 percent said they would not vote for Adams because he was gay, and another 14 percent said they would vote for him because he was gay. Source: Gabrielle Glaser, "Gays' Maps Lead to Portland," *Oregonian*, March 15, 2003.

numerous phone calls and text messages with the young man over several months in summer 2005.

But both men said that they have never been anything more than friends.

Ball said he was doing a public service in speaking with Leonard, implying that as a reserve police officer he felt a responsibility to report suspected child abuse. Oregon law requires people in positions of responsibility—public or private—to report child abuse to police or welfare workers.

Those he told, including Leonard and former Mayor Vera Katz, said they took it as an attempt at political assassination.<sup>14</sup>

Adams for his part launched an aggressive public-relations campaign the same day, starting with an open letter to Portlanders that he posted on his website at around 6 a.m. He called the rumor “ugly politicking” and said:

I will not dignify the substance of this smear by repeating it—if you read the accounts you will see there is no foundation to it. The reason is simple: it is untrue... I have in the past, and I will in the future, respond to people who reach out to me for help and advice. This is especially true when it comes to young people.

... I remember when I was a teenager and I had nobody who I felt I could talk to at a time I desperately needed someone to give me advice and perspective about coming to terms with being gay. I came through it. Not everyone does...

Gay youth suicide rates, homelessness and depression are still too high... I didn't get into public life to allow my instinct to help others to be snuffed out by fear of sleazy misrepresentations or political manipulation. I understand the need for good judgment, and I keep within the bounds of propriety—as I did in this case.<sup>15</sup>

Adams spent much of the rest of the day talking to Portland media outlets. He averred that he was particularly hurt that the source of the rumors was another gay man. “I’m hoping that this gives me an opportunity to talk about the bigger issues here,” he told one newspaper. “Like the fact that it’s apparently still not okay to be gay in certain situations. It’s as if, because I’m gay, I can’t have any meaningful interaction with males under the age of 18.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Anna Griffin, “Fallout from rumors stirs City Hall politics,” *The Oregonian*, September 18, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Sam Adams, “An Open Letter to Portlanders,” September 18, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Scott Moore, “The Scandal That Wasn’t There,” *Portland Mercury*, September 20, 2007.



An *Oregonian* editorial writer, David Sarasohn, went to City Hall that afternoon and interviewed Adams for nearly 40 minutes. Adams convinced Sarasohn there was no merit to Ball's story. Moreover, Ball's motives for spreading the rumor seemed to Sarasohn clearly political. Editorial Page Editor Caldwell likewise felt Ball had undermined the protested purity of his motives by telling public officials about Adams' alleged impropriety, rather than going to Adams himself or notifying law enforcement. Sarasohn wrote on behalf of the board for a September 20 editorial:

It's not for us, or for anybody else, to say that Portland developer Bob Ball's concerns about... Sam Adams' relationship with a young intern—three years ago when the intern was 17—were anything but sincere. But it does seem that the way Ball expressed his concerns about Adams—like Ball, a widely mentioned candidate for mayor next year—looks more like spreading politically lethal rumors than like child protective services. It's not clear what either of Ball's initiatives was likely to do for the (former) minor involved. What they were likely to do was tie one of the most toxic accusations in politics, sexual abuse of a minor by a gay adult, to Adams.<sup>17</sup>

In the space of a few days, Adams cleared himself of suspicion. Meanwhile, consequences were severe for Ball, whose credibility and reputation did not survive Adams' public relations campaign. Ball decided not to run for mayor. Neither the Breedlove rumor, nor Adams' sexuality more broadly, surfaced as an issue in the Portland mayoral race, which Adams formally entered on October 3, 2007 with a promise to focus on education.<sup>18</sup>

## The Election

The office of Portland mayor was non-partisan. Candidates from all political parties competed in one primary election in May, and if no one garnered more than 50 percent of the vote, the two candidates with the most votes competed in a runoff election in November. In a field of about 10 candidates, Adams was the clear frontrunner. His closest competitor, a local businessman named Sho Dozono, entered the race in January 2008. That year's mayoral primary was to take place on May 20.

On May 11, Caldwell published a letter to the editor from Adams in which the candidate embraced while playing down his sexuality:

One of the greatest mayors in American history, New York's Fiorello LaGuardia, once said, "There is no Democratic or Republican way of cleaning the streets." Let me add that there is no gay or straight way of

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<sup>17</sup> "Whisper campaign does no one justice," *Oregonian*, September 20, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> James Mayer, "Adams in Lonely Race for Mayor," *Oregonian*, October 4, 2007.

filling a pothole. I'm not running to be a gay mayor, just a good mayor. But the fact that I would be the first openly gay mayor of a major American city does make me proud—not proud of myself, proud of Portland.<sup>19</sup>

The campaign was not particularly hard-fought. Says Caldwell, “[Adams was] one of the best-prepared candidates in recent history,” based on his experience as an aide to the former mayor, as well as his years on the City Council. Caldwell says:

He was a local person, had lived in Portland for a long time. He was and is well-known as an innovative and incisive thinker about Portland municipal affairs and Portland politics and the like.

In Caldwell’s opinion, Adams was “in every respect” a better candidate than Dozono, who had never held elective office. Caldwell continues:

Sho Dozono basically presented his campaign as, well, we all know who’s going to win this, but I’m here to present an alternative from the business community. And that was truthful.

Most of Caldwell’s staff was also impressed with Adams, and he seemed the obvious choice for their endorsement. Editorial writer Nielsen held a slightly more nuanced view. She was concerned about the prospect of Adams winning over half the vote in the primary—which would end the race in May, lopping six months off the mayoral campaign. She explains: “I just think it’s good to have the longer conversation with voters [that] the full campaign provides.”<sup>20</sup> She wrote in her own column:

Another six months on the campaign trail would force Adams to explain himself, listen more closely to those who disagree and immerse himself in the world outside of City Hall. He had to do this four years ago, when he lost the primary to opponent Nick Fish and scrabbled his way to victory in the fall. That runoff made him a better leader. This runoff could, too.<sup>21</sup>

But within the board, this represented nearly the only argument against endorsing Adams. Adams’ sexuality, and specifically the previous year’s rumor about his relationship with Breedlove, barely came up. Nielsen summarizes the board’s attitude: “It turned out that he’s gay. That’s [fine]. You know, are you going to be a good city commissioner or mayor?” Noting that Portland’s school superintendent was gay, she continues: “It’s just not an issue in Portland at all.”

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<sup>19</sup> Sam Adams, “Yes, I’m gay, and tell me why that would matter?” *Oregonian*, May 11, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Author’s interview with Susan Nielsen on May 21, 2009, in Portland, Oregon. All further quotes from Nielsen, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

<sup>21</sup> Susan Nielsen, “A Mayor’s race in need of a runoff,” *Oregonian*, May 11, 2008.

On May 15, 2008, the board endorsed Adams for the primary. On May 20, Adams won with 58 percent of the vote, avoiding a runoff election. The sitting mayor, Tom Potter, faded from view as Adams increasingly assumed the responsibilities of the mayor's office from his post on the City Council, even though his term did not officially start until January 2009. The editorial board applauded his promising preparations for taking office—among them a possible mandate that grocery stores charge for environmentally hazardous plastic bags to discourage their use, and an attempt to secure financing for the construction of a convention center in Portland. Says Editorial writer Attig: "His priorities pretty much aligned with ours."<sup>22</sup> Adams was sworn in as Portland mayor on January 1, 2009. He was 44 years old.

### **Another Scoop for *Willamette Week***

In the meantime, *Willamette Week* reporter Nigel Jaquiss, who in 2004 had uncovered the sexual misdeeds of former Portland Mayor Goldschmidt, had continued to pursue the story of Adams' alleged affair with a legislative intern. He had been in frequent contact with Breedlove, Adams' alleged former lover, as well as acquaintances of each man who believed their relationship to have been sexual. By Saturday, January 10, 2009—with Adams' mayoral tenure barely a week old—Jaquiss was convinced he had enough solid evidence of an affair to submit the story for print. He requested a final comment from Breedlove, now 21, by email. Breedlove responded with a text message:

I can't say anything. I'm sorry. I'm scared. If the story goes to print without me saying anything, I'm worried I will look like a scumbag. If I do say anything, then Sam's fate is in my hands.<sup>23</sup>

Jaquiss thought that, in light of other evidence pointing to an affair, the text practically amounted to a confession. His investigation was slated for publication in the January 21 issue of *Willamette Week*. On January 15, Jaquiss gave Adams a chance to respond to the evidence; the mayor again denied the affair. But four days later, Adams called the reporter and came clean. He had had a sexual relationship with Breedlove, he admitted—but the relationship had not begun until Breedlove had turned 18. Adams maintained that he had done nothing illegal. Jaquiss' investigation would not come out in print for another two days, so on January 19 he posted a breaking news update about Adams' admission on the *Willamette Week* website. At the same time, Adams released a statement on his own website confessing to the affair.

On learning of Adams' confession that afternoon, Caldwell decided not to ask his colleagues to wait until the next day to write an editorial on the issue. He wanted to give each board member an opportunity to read and think about the news reports on the subject, and to do

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<sup>22</sup> Author's interview with Rick Attig on May 20, 2009, in Portland, Oregon. All further quotes from Attig, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

<sup>23</sup> Nigel Jaquiss, "Adams' Admission," *Willamette Week*, January 14, 2009.

their own reporting. He also called the mayor's office to invite Adams to visit the board to explain his side of the story. Adams agreed to meet with Caldwell and his colleagues the next morning.

*Meeting with the mayor.* Tuesday morning, January 20, the *Oregonian* editorial board met with Mayor Adams. Nielsen recalls that, contrasted with that day's inauguration of President Barack Obama, whom the editorial board viewed with optimism, Adams' behavior was all the more disappointing. She says: "That day you're celebrating a new start for the country and a new President that the majority of people feel pretty good about and leadership and a fresh start, and then... this."

Adams detailed his brief affair with Breedlove for the board, fielding questions from members as they came up. The relationship had begun in the summer of 2005 and lasted only a few months, Adams said. He again emphasized that he and Breedlove had not had sex until Breedlove reached the age of 18, Oregon's age of consent. Adams apologized for having lied to Portland's voters. He said he had done so out of the belief that voters would not believe that he had waited until Breedlove's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday to initiate the relationship—and thus would not elect him.

To Caldwell and several of his colleagues, that was an important point. Caldwell explains:

That had a material effect on the [mayoral] campaign, on the choice that people got to make, and... it would have been better for people to have had this issue to discuss when it counted. In fact... his willingness to lie about it took away from voters what well might have been the central choice of the campaign.

Caldwell asked Adams how voters could know that he wouldn't lie his way out of other high-pressure situations as mayor. Adams' answer—that he could not convince voters he would not lie again, and that they would have to decide for themselves whether to trust him—was not reassuring. Caldwell says: "That's an honest answer, I'll give him credit for that, but it's not an acceptable answer." After Adams left, the board sat silently for a few moments. Nielsen describes the mood, all of them wondering "what's the appropriate response?"

If we're going to offer some useful commentary, what should that be?... You want to be quick without being knee-jerk, and I think you have to make that distinction in your own head and try to... sort out your own emotions... from what's happening... My first thought was... we need more information, of course... Sam has said this happened, but there's always more to the story. Whether there's more to the story positive or negative, you don't know at that time, but you know there's more coming.

## Call to Resign?

The most dramatic step the board could take would be to ask for Adams' resignation. If they decided to do so, should they do it immediately, for the next day's newspaper, or wait? Alternatively, they could urge Portland voters to organize a recall election—but under Oregon law, a recall election could not take place until an official had held office for six months. The board could withhold judgment entirely until more facts about the situation trickled in. Or the board could acknowledge the revelations as embarrassing, but remind voters that Adams was still best-qualified to lead the city among the other candidates who had run against him for mayor. There was no obvious replacement should he leave office, and the board agreed that Portland was badly in need of strong leadership. Attig spoke first. He thought Adams should resign. He says:

He admitted that he'd lied to voters... and didn't feel that he could tell the truth prior to the election and still get elected... And if he felt that way, then I think I felt that way, and that he shouldn't be in office... This was such a fundamental deception.

But if they did ask for Adams' resignation, Sarasohn reflects, "you have to consider why it is that you're asking him to resign. Is it because he had sex with a teenager? That's tacky, but if his most recent story holds up, not illegal." Caldwell worried that even if the board cited the lie, rather than the affair itself, as the reason Adams should resign, readers might misinterpret their stance. Caldwell says:

I worried... that people would think that we based this recommendation on the fact that he had had this affair with such a young person, or... more broadly, that we had based this argument on the fact that he had had an affair with *anybody*, or anybody of the same sex.

Nielsen, meanwhile, leaned toward calling for Adams' resignation but was wary. She says that she reflected: "Are we overreacting, for whatever reason, either as a group or individually, and are [we] overreacting because it's a surprise?"

Are [we] overreacting because he's gay? Are [we] overreacting because he's a new mayor?... You don't want to overreact and... you want to think about [the] long-term credibility of the newspaper as an institution and of the editorial board, and you don't want to just call for people's resignations willy-nilly, because... over the course of 10 years, a lot of people screw up, and you can't just call for everybody's resignation.

Kitch, who as the *Oregonian's* lead writer on Portland politics had personally covered Adams for several years, was disgusted by Adams' lie. But she was also deeply disappointed that Portland might lose a much-needed leader. She remarks:

There was such a pent-up longing for an activist mayor, and we suddenly had one. Because he actually won in the primary, he'd had six months of lead time... when he was revving up to be mayor. So he had a lot of rehearsal time where we saw him on the stage, and we saw him getting ready and doing all the right sort of things. And, because of that, when this came out, I think the first response that many people had, quite understandably, was, this is crushing... There really isn't anyone saddled up and ready to go in these directions. And so there was a calculation about, well, do we just forget all of that and bet on a new horse, or do we say, heck, this guy's too good to lose?<sup>24</sup>

What kind of editorial would best serve their readers? How much weight should Caldwell afford anticipated reader reaction in choosing the *Oregonian's* editorial stance? Was their responsibility merely to state an opinion on the matter or should their work be guided by some other principle? What effect would demanding Adams' resignation have in the gay community, and should the board take a possible backlash into account? It was Caldwell's decision.

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<sup>24</sup> Author's interview with Mary Pitman Kitch, on May 21, 2009, in Portland, Oregon. All further quotes from Kitch, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.