

High-minded argument

By [David Heim](#)

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Several high-profile editors [resigned at the *New Republic* magazine last week](#) after owner Chris Hughes announced he was moving the magazine toward becoming a “vertically integrated digital media company.”

For many observers, the rebellion signaled not only the demise of *TNR* but the inevitable eclipse of thoughtful journalism at the hands of media gurus like Hughes, who purportedly value only the number of links clicked and webpages viewed. [Hughes insists that he is still committed](#) to the magazine’s journalistic mission. (He can hardly be blamed for pursuing a more financially viable model for his journal.)

However *TNR*’s future unfolds, the magazine provokes passionate comment because it has been such an admirable example of political and intellectual argument. More than a few people my age recall the mid-1980s to mid-1990s as the glory years, when each issue was like a fractious and entertaining seminar on the future of liberalism.

That was a time when New Deal liberalism seemed exhausted, inadequate to address intractable forms of poverty and discrimination or improve the state of public schools for low-income students. A group of neo-liberals (fast becoming neo-conservatives) at *TNR* argued that liberal ends were better served by conservative means. Opportunity, equality, and the public good could be enhanced by shrewdly using the power of the market, economic incentives, and individual choice.

The pages of *TNR* bristled in those days with arguments back and forth about school vouchers for inner-city parents, work incentives for welfare recipients, and market-based solutions to pollution. The policy future was up for grabs, and it mattered who came up with the better ideas and the better arguments. You read *TNR* to see which argument was gaining ground and to test your own ideas against lively arguments.

Perhaps such journalism was the serendipitous result of a diverse set of sharp thinkers chancing to land at one office at a particular moment of political upheaval. It’s hard to imagine it happening now, given how political positions have hardened,

especially on the right. One has little sense today that minds will be changed by a fresh argument or data, or that there is any single conversation that liberals (or conservatives) need to pay attention to. And it's clear that today's conservatives want to use conservative means to reach illiberal ends, hence argument is more of a predictable standoff. It is surely a loss for liberalism that it lacks its own lively internal arguments about how to reach its goals.

Perhaps the glory days of *TNR* cannot be recaptured, in any medium. But one can't help hoping.