

# HOT TYPE



Rob Warden

photo/Bruce Powell

## Report Bares Haste and Incompetence in Daily Administration!

This is a tale of life on Media Row—a tale of misspent passions, split-second decisions, and late-night cloak-and-dagger. Specifically, it's the tale of how one magazine editor forced Chicago's dailies into beating him out of his own story, and then competing to see who could blow it out of proportion the most.

Our tale even has a subtitle: *Business as Usual in Chicago Journalism. And Then Some.*

In case you were out of the country, the *Tribune* and *Sun-Times* erupted last weekend in a jangle of headlines concerning Mayor Byrne's long-suppressed transition report. But the story behind those headlines may be more absorbing than the story they introduced. On June 6, former alderman Dick Simpson—the report's principal author—met with *Sun-Times* officials to offer them exclusive coverage of the transition team's findings, which the city had tried to keep bottled up since they were completed in the spring of '79. Simpson's purpose was twofold. He wanted to get the report's suggestions for cutting city waste on the table; and he wanted some publicity focused on the forthcoming book *Chicago's Future*, which he edited and which contains his own lengthy essay drawn from the report.

The meeting concluded with the loose understand-

ing that the *Sun-Times* would not act too quickly, because Simpson wanted to save some of the glory for *Chicago Lawyer*, the respected investigative monthly edited by Rob Warden. That was fair: it was Warden's lawsuit that had finally pried the transition report loose from City Hall, and Warden was preparing an article on the legal battle for *Lawyer's* July issue. As Simpson told us, there was no hard agreement about when the *Sun-Times* would publish its account, "but it was presumed it would work out about the same time" (meaning the end of June).

But the *Sun-Times* was ready to go sooner than expected, and was about to kick off a three-part series on the report last Sunday. When Warden caught wind of this, last Friday (June 20), he phoned *Sun-Times* editor Ralph Otwell to request that he hold back a week. Otwell replied that the story was already in the paper, but that he'd try to postpone it—which, in fact, he was able to do. The first edition of Sunday's *Sun-Times* carried not a whit about Simpson, transitions, or waste.

But Warden didn't know this on Friday night, at 11 o'clock, at Riccardo's (the newsfolk's watering hole on Rush Street). That's where a friendly *Sun-Times* staffer—unaware of Otwell's high-level tinkering—sought out Warden to tell him the paper was running with the story that Sunday. Warden—a former *Daily Newsman* with no love lost for Field Enterprises—had no trouble believing that; he assumed Otwell had failed to pull the story, and felt the *Sun-Times* was shafting him by going back on the "deal" that had been made with Simpson.

So to retaliate, Warden decided to turn the *Sun-Times's* "exclusive" into no exclusive at all. By midnight, Warden was in the *Tribune* city room; by 1 AM Saturday, a couple of *Tribune* reporters had awaked William Bowe, who was analyzing the transition report for *Chicago Lawyer*, and who (at Warden's suggestion) led the reporters through its 700 available pages over the next three hours. By 5 AM, the *Tribune* was assembling an unexpected front page for Sunday's paper, and remaking its "Perspective" section to accommodate a lengthy scorecard of the report's findings.

Thus, imagine Warden's surprise when, on Saturday, he picked up the first editions of Sunday's papers—and discovered the *Sun-Times* had indeed

held the story. Imagine Otwell's surprise—among other, less benign emotions—when Warden called to apologize and explain. (The *Sun-Times* then slapped the story across its front page, so as not to be left behind.) Imagine our surprise that the *Tribune*—which gave the story 350 column inches to the *Sun-Times's* 98—had prepared in hours a clearer, more comprehensive report than its rival, which had had the story for weeks. (As it turns out, this had to do with the *Sun-Times* having suddenly to condense a three-part series into one article.)

Coupled with El Fast Byrne's celebrated nonouster of the *Tribune's* city hall reporter, all this derring-do has camouflaged the real impact of the transition report—which isn't so hard, since its impact is pretty minimal in the first place. For, despite the *Tribune's* claims, its coverage wasn't "exclusive": many of the same findings had run in the Lerner papers last November 18. And despite the yelping of both papers, the report wasn't even so "secret": Simpson's book, which discusses the findings, was originally published last spring, and had been in the possession of (among others) the *Sun-Times's* Lois Wille and WBBM's Walter Jacobson since then. Make no mistake: the transition report contains plenty of good stuff, such as revealing intercity statistics and creative urban designs, and we suspect it'll easily withstand the charges of naive impracticality aimed at it. It would make a good page-seven story.

But it was transmogrified into an overblown front-page screamer. And in the process, media watchers were treated to the ironic spectacle of two dailies showcasing a story that neither would have

even used that week—but that each felt compelled to run because the other was doing so.

Managing editor Bill Jones told us the *Tribune* used solid news judgment in allotting so much space to the transition report (which, you'll remember, is 14 months old and aimed at malfeasance in *previous* administrations). "We decided if we were going to run this report, we would try to make it as clear and comprehensive as possible." But at least as likely an explanation is this: afraid of where the *Sun-Times* might play the story, and how extensively, the *Tribune* ran it in the only way, and in the only place, they *couldn't* be beat—long and on the front page.

Otwell all but assured us that, under other circumstances, the transition report would certainly not have been a Sunday banner headline. "After all," he reflected, "it's a recycled story that wouldn't seem to justify the space and fanfare that *either* of us gave it, quite frankly." Even Warden—who apparently misunderstood the Simpson-*Sun-Times* arrangement, and then rather hastily set all this in motion last Friday night—thinks things got a little out of hand. Would he have run this somewhat dated story on the cover of *Chicago Lawyer*? "Hell no," he said.

At any rate, consider the real meaning of this whole ridiculous episode (which has probably set back any serious scrutiny of the transition report by months): a year-old story becomes a three-day, three-ring media circus, thanks to one overprotective magazine editor, two contentious dailies, and the city's dizzy first family. And for a few moments, all of Chicago was fooled into thinking something important had happened.