

Background about *Legal Affairs*

Legal Affairs was the first American general-interest magazine about the law. Its goal was to stir a challenging, vibrant conversation about the subject. It operated as an independent not-for-profit venture with an educational and social mission — editorially independent as “A Magazine of Yale Law School” from 2002 to ’04, and editorially and organizationally independent from ’04 to ’06. *Legal Affairs* published 24 issues in print, every other month from May 2002 until March 2006, with the content also posted on the web. From September 2004 until May 2006, *Legal Affairs* published in addition a web-only feature called Debate Club, with 74 debates.

The complete contents of the magazine’s 24 print issues are available, page by page, on the website of the Yale Law School Library.

The contents are available as they appeared on the web, also on the library website.

In addition, the 74 debates are available.

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Yale’s Sterling Professor Emeritus of Law Boris Bittker decided to start a new kind of publication when was 78 years old, in 1994, and more than a decade into retirement from teaching. He was a preeminent scholar of tax law, with wide-ranging interests: his 1973 book *The Case for Black Reparations* argued that reparations for Black Americans would follow a well-developed model of compensation for misconduct by the U.S. government. He had grown concerned about legal scholars’ lack of interest in what he called “the link between law and actual life,” and the undigestible writing in law reviews that often betrayed the writers’ indifference.

Prof. Bittker spent about a year developing and then published 400 copies of an issue of a journal titled *The Yale Survey of Current Legal Issues*, which aimed “to bring the fruits of academic legal scholarship” to the attention of lawyers outside the academy. Seven years later, in 2002, *Legal Affairs* launched, growing out of Prof. Bittker’s vision. An expression of Yale Law School’s support of journalism, especially about law, it had an expanded purpose: to get lawyers and judges, authors and journalists, scholars and other writers to reach and engage a general readership about what the magazine called “the intersection of law and life.”

The premise was that law and lawyers matter deeply in the United States and around the world and that literate, probing, and wonderful writing about the law is found too rarely in even the best general newspapers and magazines. The goal was to present this kind of writing regularly and stir a challenging, vibrant conversation about the law — broadly defined to include everything from the political nature of American state and federal courts, to the relationship between strong legal systems and national economic vitality around the globe; from how Israel had constitutional law without having a constitution, to the problems of prison rape in the U.S., of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, and of social friction in the web’s multi-player games, revealing the web’s dark side.

As a not-for-profit, *Legal Affairs* was an early adopter of that corporate form in journalism, which has since become common as an alternative means of seeking to become sustainable. The magazine was also distinguished by working to present ideas and perspectives from across the ideological

spectrum about law, creating an ideological DMZ where conservatives could feel safe reading liberal ideas and vice versa — a magazine high on reason and low on spin. Based on a survey of the magazine’s readers, they were generally affluent, largely professionals or professionals-in-the-making, and very interested in public affairs. In the previous year, 74% had donated money to a political or nonprofit organization, 65% had met with or written to a public official, and 48% had served on a board or a committee. And they were loyal: they spent an average of 1.2 hours reading each issue.

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In *Legal Affairs*’ four years of operation, its revenue grew large enough to support about half its annual operating expenses, from subscriptions, sponsorships, and other forms of revenue. As *The New York Times* [reported](#) when *Legal Affairs* became fully independent in 2004, the magazine projected becoming self-sustaining by 2007. Print circulation had grown to around 30,000, including a subscription at the U.S. Supreme Court library. Traffic on the website was also growing, on average with three million hits and nearly 120,000 unique visitors a month and occasional spikes to 200,000. But the magazine was not able to raise enough additional financial support to continue publishing until it became self-sustaining, as a [note](#) on the website explained in 2006 when the magazine shut down. It had enough funds left to maintain the website as an archive of the contents.

Legal Affairs published over 500 articles, plus the 74 multi-day debates online. Articles in the magazine were linked to, blogged about, and otherwise highlighted. They were reprinted in other magazines, newspapers, textbooks, and materials for high school, college, and graduate school courses and continuing legal education programs. They were the focus of television news features. The magazine was mentioned in Senate Judiciary Committee hearings about the nomination of a Supreme Court justice; cited in a front-page story of *The Washington Post*; and, in the *Harvard Law Review*, acknowledged by the scholar and Judge Richard Posner, because he first developed part of his law-review argument in an article he published in *Legal Affairs*. Former staff members of the magazine have since worked for *The Atlantic*, *The Boston Globe*, *Foreign Affairs*, *GQ*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Politico*, *Slate*, *Wired*, *The Yale Review*, and other outlets.

In 2020, 20 years after it was incorporated, Legal Affairs, Inc. dissolved as a legal entity. Fulfilling a provision in its incorporation papers, it had offered the Yale Law School Library its remaining funds and asked it to take on ongoing stewardship of the magazine’s contents and the library had accepted. The library used those funds to digitize the magazine’s contents and otherwise preserve what the magazine published.

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Here is some of the recognition the magazine got:

Finalist for Livingston Awards, honoring outstanding reporting by journalists under 35, for National and for International Reporting, in 2003, 2004, 2005, and 2006

2003

For National Reporting:
From Russia With LØpht

The Russian hacker Alexey Ivanov flew to Seattle for a job interview with a tech company. It turned out to be the FBI.

By Brendan I. Koerner
May | June 2002

For International Reporting:
Let There Be Law

Israel doesn't have a written constitution. Aharon Barak has transformed the country's
supreme court by acting as if it did. And his court has emerged mighty but wounded.

By Emily Bazelon
May | June 2002

2004

For National Reporting:
When God Goes to Prison

The Carol Vance Unit is the kind of faith-based program the Bush Administration would
like to see more of. Its mix of religion and rehabilitation may violate the First
Amendment, but may also make it the best prison in Texas.

By Daniel Brook
May | June 2003

For International Reporting:
After the Revolution

Albie Sachs lost an arm in the fight against apartheid. Now that he's a justice on South
Africa's high court, he's more cautious than rebellious.

By Emily Bazelon
January | February 2003

2005

For National Reporting:
The Big Kozinski

If the Ninth Circuit were a circus—and some say it is—Alex Kozinski would be its
ringmaster. Presenting the most controversial judge on our most controversial
court.

By Emily Bazelon
January | February 2004

For International Reporting:
Want Your Kid to Disappear?

For \$1,800, former Atlanta police officer Rick Strawn will make that problem child
someone else's problem. He even makes house calls.

By Nadya Labi
July | August 2004

2006

For National Reporting:
The Gentle People

Impressed by their piety, courts have permitted the Amish to live outside the law. But in
some places, the group's ethic of forgive and forget has produced a plague of
incest—and let many perpetrators go unpunished.

By Nadya Labi
January | February 2005

For International Reporting:
Common Denominator
Using sophisticated mathematical models, a group of four economists has proven that a country's legal history greatly affects its economy. At least they think they've proven it. How their sweeping theory has roiled the legal academy.
By Nicholas Thompson
January | February 2005

Winner of a National Headliner Award for Magazine Feature Writing in 2003

Last Words
Why are we so sure that death and honesty go together?
By Brendan I. Koerner
November | December 2002

Under the Microscope
For more than 90 years, forensic science has been a cornerstone of criminal law. Critics and judges now ask whether it can be trusted.
By Brendan I. Koerner
July | August 2002

From Russia With LØpht
The Russian hacker Alexey Ivanov flew to Seattle for a job interview with a tech company. It turned out to be the FBI.
By Brendan I. Koerner
May | June 2002

Winner of Silver Ozzie Award for Best Design of a New Magazine in 2003

Winner of Gold and Silver Ozzie Awards for Best Use of Illustration in 2004 and in 2005

Winner of a Casey Medal for Meritorious Journalism in 2005

Want Your Kid to Disappear?
For \$1,800, former Atlanta police officer Rick Strawn will make that problem child someone else's problem. He even makes house calls.
By Nadya Labi
July | August 2004

Winner of an Award for Excellence in Financial Journalism in 2006

Behind the Hedge
In the untamed world of hedge funds, rigged deals and manipulated markets help the wealthy thrive while ordinary investors wither.
By David Skeel

November | December 2005

Honorable Mention for a Casey Medal for Meritorious Journalism in 2006

The Gentle People

Impressed by their piety, courts have permitted the Amish to live outside the law. But in some places, the group's ethic of forgive and forget has produced a plague of incest—and let many perpetrators go unpunished.

By Nadya Labi

January | February 2005

Finalist for National Magazine Awards in the categories of General Excellence and Public Interest in 2006

General Excellence finalist for these issues in 2005:

January | February, March | April, and September | October

The contest's judges noted that “overreaching executive power and shocking sexual abuse among the Amish are only two of the ambitious subjects tackled with confidence and intelligence by *Legal Affairs*. Its timely mix of deep-dive reporting and lucid analysis is a great service to more than just lawyers and academics.”

Public Interest finalist for “The Gentle People” by Nadya Labi, January | February

The contest's judges noted that “a remarkable investigation by *Legal Affairs* senior editor Nadya Labi finds that the Amish tradition of confession and forgiveness in dealing with antisocial behavior has led to the widespread sexual abuse of Amish children.”

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Some comments about *Legal Affairs*:

“A year ago, the Law School helped launch a journalistic experiment of sorts – a magazine that tackles important legal issues facing society today in a way that is both comprehensive and comprehensible to a general audience. That publication, *Legal Affairs*, is nearing its first anniversary, having been judged a success in the court of public opinion.”

—*Yale Bulletin & Calendar*

“America's most interesting legal magazine.”

—*The Washington Post*

“By far the best legal magazine in the business because there's so much first-rate reporting as well as opinion in it.”

—Nat Hentoff, *The Village Voice*

“An insightful, creative, and unconventional publication.”

—Jami Floyd, CourtTV

“You’ve pulled off something remarkable—a truly general-interest magazine about law...of immense value to people in the profession while remaining accessible and entertaining to people outside it.”
—Cullen Murphy, managing editor, *The Atlantic Monthly*

“There’s never been a magazine about law minus the legalese written for non-lawyers and lawyers alike. Enter *Legal Affairs*.”
—“All Things Considered,” NPR

“Entertaining as well as informative.”
—“The Biz,” CNN-FN

“Casts an intelligent eye over a broad and spacious intellectual terrain.”
—*The Nation*

“Modern, general-interest journalism does a miserably poor job reporting on law and lawyers. So we are pleased to call our readers’ attention to a new magazine specifically designed to redress this defect ... *Legal Affairs*.”
—*The Weekly Standard*

The “writing is superior and the topical variety amazing,” going “deeper than the familiar legal discussions of the issues, and far beyond what we think of as a legal publication.”
—Legal Information Alert

“Makes reading about the law a pleasure.”
—*Columbia Journalism Review*

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“The January-February issue of *Legal Affairs* magazine is further proof that there’s no justice. A wonderfully accessible, educational, small circulation look at the law includes typically provocative efforts. There’s a story on why both law and technology may be critical in dealing with awful viruses that could actually bring the Internet to a crashing halt; an argument against an increasingly popular notion that the Net is somehow erasing national borders from two Ivy League law professors who believe that national laws may be having the opposite impact by exerting more control over the online world; and a melancholy account of the travails of a war crimes court in Sarajevo, a city whose victimization recedes in our collective memory. ... And, sadly, there will be not much more of *Legal Affairs*. An independent magazine that is scrupulously fair-minded, and surely boasts both liberal and conservative readers, it just couldn’t generate enough operating capital. Sometimes quality doesn’t win out.”
—*Chicago Tribune*

“*Legal Affairs* brought elegant analytical precision to critical issues of the day, from hedge fund regulation to the future of the Supreme Court. It also covered a host of utterly unexpected and fascinating topics. (When Huck Finn failed to report finding a dead man by the Mississippi, was it a felony? Amish mores dictate forgiveness and community absolution, so how do the Amish handle serious repeat criminals such as sexual abusers?) Other publications recognized *Legal Affairs* as something exceptional.”
—*Yale Alumni Magazine*