Mediacide: the Press's Role in the Abdication Crisis of Edward VIII

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On December 10, 1936, a group of men entered the ornate drawing room of Fort Belvedere, the private get-away of His Majesty, King Edward VIII. The mood of the room was informal as the King sat at his desk. Fifteen documents lay before him ready for his signature. Briefly scanning them, he quickly affixed, Edward, RI, to the documents. He then relinquished his chair to his brother, Albert, Duke of York, who did the same. The process was repeated twice more as Henry, Duke of Gloucester, and George, Duke of Kent, also signed the documents. The King stepped outside and inhaled the fresh morning air.[1] To the King it smelled of freedom. After months of battling with his Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, and the Prime Minister's allies in the establishment and the press, Edward was laying down the crown in order to marry the woman he loved, an American divorcee named Wallis Simpson. The next day the newspaper headlines across the world would broadcast the news of the King's unprecedented decision. With the signing of the Instrument of Abdication, Edward had signed away his throne.

The newspapers in both the United States and the United Kingdom that would report the abdication had played a major role in bringing about the fall of the King. While the British media had observed a blackout during most of the crisis, the media in the United States had reported the story of the King and Mrs. Simpson since early October. It was through the press that the battle for the throne was to be fought between the King and the Prime Minister. Both sides manipulated the press in order to win the allegiance of the citizens of the dominions. It was by Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin's connections to the media and Edward's failure to sway the powers that be in his favor that led to the Prime Minister's triumph in the Abdication Crisis. By winning the battle of whom the Monarch may or may not marry, Baldwin ensured that the reigning monarch would henceforth be fully and completely the dominance of the elected government.

The seeds of the crisis were planted in late 1931 when the then

[1]H.R.H. Edward, Duke of Windsor. *A King's Story* (New York City: Van Rees Press, 1951), 405.

Prince of Wales met Mrs. Simpson at a party.[2] Wallis Simpson, an American born socialite was married to shipping magnate, Ernst Simpson. At first, Mrs. Simpson was disappointed in meeting the Prince of Wales. Upon discovering she was an American the Prince, doing his part to keep the conservation going, politely inquired if Mrs. Simpson missed central heating. She answered in the affirmative and remarked, "I am sorry, Sir, but you disappoint me." The Prince was perplexed and inquired why. Mrs. Simpson coolly replied "Every American woman who comes to your country is always asked that same question. I had hoped for something more original from the Prince of Wales."[3]. By the time of King George V's death however, Mrs. Simpson and the new King were inseparable. When the King broke custom by attending his own Ascension Proclamation, it was none other than Mrs. Wallis Simpson who watched the announcement by his side.[4] The first whispers in the media of what would soon become the King's dilemma happened on October 15, 1936. As reported in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Wallis Simpson filed for divorce from her second husband. The story noted that Ernest Simpson and his wife had gone to Paris in July to reconcile their differences. Shortly afterward Mr. Simpson had gone back to England and awaited his wife who instead of returning to her husband, went straight to the King's Scottish retreat. The reason for the divorce was officially adultery; however, because of pressure exerted by the King, it was ensured that His Majesty's name would not see the light of day in the proceedings.[5]

Breaking custom and tradition was something Edward had done his entire public life. This had led to the elite establishment of the Empire to view Edward with suspicion. In their eyes Edward would never live up to the inflexible standard that George V had set.[6] It was this standard that made Wallis Simpson an unacceptable consort to the King, and it came from the fact that Wallis Simpson was divorced with a living ex-husband. While theoretically the King could marry anyone but a Roman Catholic, as head of the Church of England, the King was expected to and swore to live up to the teachings of the Church. The Church at the time did not recognize divorce; thus had the King married Wallis, the titular head of the Church and defender of the faith would be in a state of excommunication. Dr. Cosmo Lang, Archbishop of Canterbury, was clearly against the relationship between Edward and

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[2]Schulz, Erin. *The King and Mrs. Simpson: The True Story of the Commoner Who Captured the Heart of a King* (New Bedford: WS Beetle & Company, 2008), 13.
[3]H.R.H. Edward, Duke of Windsor. A King's Story (New York City: Van Rees Press, 1951), 256.
[4]Ibid, 267.
[5]"Mrs. Simpson, friend of King, seeks divorce" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 5, 1936, final edition.
[6]Ibid, 286.

Wallis.[7] Archbishop Lang was not the only person to have a less than smashing view of the new King. Edward would get a taste of this with the first encounter with Stanley Baldwin since his ascension. The Sovereign and his Prime Minister met shortly after the death of King George V, and from the very beginning of the new King's reign, things got off on the wrong foot. The Prime Minister had of course interacted when Edward was the Prince of Wales. Now in their first meeting since the ascension, the Prime Minister gave his condolences on the death of the late King, he remarked that a member of his family, a well-known poet, had passed away. Edward had not heard of the death and would later remember, "He seemed a little resentful of the injustice of a situation that allow the death of one of Britain's great writers to go unnoticed while the nation was absorbed in the passing of a Sovereign."[8] The strained relationship between Baldwin and Edward would only grow worse as the months continued.

Baldwin and Lang were not the only people uneasy with the new King. Many of the powers that be in Britain feared the prospect of marriage and were open in their wish for Edward to abdicate rather than have him marry Wallis Simpson. One peer unashamedly told the Associated Press that he would like to see an abdication and prefer to "get on with the Duke and Duchess of York…no secret of the fact they would like to have the Duke and Duchess of York occupy the throne."[9] The timing of the Simpsons' divorce was significant. If all went as scheduled, the final decree of divorce would be granted at the end of April, 1937. With the coronation set for May 12, 1937, the timing would allow Edward to marry Wallis Simpson before the coronation, thus she would sit beside him as Queen while he was crowned King-Emperor. When it became clear that the Government of the United Kingdom and the dominions would oppose the idea of Queen Wallis, the King proposed a morganatic marriage.[10] This would let Edward to enter into a legal marriage with Wallis but would prevent Wallis from becoming Queen or any of their children from succeeding to the throne. The United Kingdom had never recognized this type of arrangement, and special legislation would have to be passed in order for this proposal to become reality. At first the King was not a fan of the idea and found it distasteful and ungraceful.[11] But Edward was willing to at least attempt

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[7]Ibid, 276.

[8]Ibid, 264.

[9]"Many Peers Fear Marriage," *New York Times*, November 20, 1936, final edition.

[10]Morganatic marriage is a legal marriage between a male member of a Royal family or Princely house and a woman of a lesser rank. They would be married but issue would not have succession rights nor would the woman be equal in status. H.R.H. Edward, Duke of Windsor. *A King's Story* (New York City: Van Rees Press, 1951), 341.

[11]H.R.H. Edward, Duke of Windsor. *A King's Story* (New York City: Van Rees Press, 1951), 341.

to explore the option. Exercising his constitutional power, he summoned the Prime Minister to Buckingham Palace and demanded an answer as to whether Parliament would pass such a bill. Without hesitation the Prime Minister nixed the idea. The King pressed Baldwin again and again until he somewhat relented. The Prime Minister agreed to send the proposal to the cabinet and to the dominion governments. When the Prime Minister left, the King was hit with a sudden realization that he had sealed his own fate. By officially asking the Prime Minister to find out the thoughts on the subject, he was constitutionally bound to submit to their answer.[12]

The establishments of the Kingdom were not the only ones to notice the King's close relationship with the twice-divorced American woman. The American press jumped on the relationship between the bachelor King and Mrs. Simpson. *The New York Times* and the *Chicago Daily Tribune* were among those newspapers that by October of 1936 reported daily on the soap opera that the relationship between the two had become. The British papers, on the other hand, had gone into a blackout on any story dealing with their King and his romance. This blackout was the subject of an October 18 article in the *Chicago Tribune*. The paper reported that the lack of stories from the British papers were "an excellent example of how, without official censorship, voluntary censorship is imposed by the newspapers on themselves in the matter."[13] This, however, was not quite a truthful statement. While there had been no official state sanctioned censorship, some of the silence had come about by arrangement by the King himself. When Wallis Simpson had filed for divorce from her husband, the King wanted and needed the discretion of the media. To that end, on October 3, the King contacted Lords Rothsmore and Beaverbrook, both famous British media moguls. The King requested that Beaverbrook help him in suppressing the British media coverage of any news of the Simpson divorce and the King's ties to Mrs. Simpson.[14] Beaverbrook worked out a gentleman's agreement with the Newspaper Proprietor's Association and with Walter Lyton, owner of the *News Chronicle*.[15] The idea behind the blackout in the United Kingdom was, as Edward stated, the Monarchy, being the illustrious position it is, must be free from the "cynicism of modern life."[16] In order to protect the institution of the monarchy (and himself) the King was hoping to stifle the press. Within a few days, the King recalled Beaverbrook and asked that he attempt to work with the

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[12] Ibid, 343.

[13] Ibid

[14] William Aitken. *The Abdication of King Edward VIII* (New York: Beaverbrook Newspapers Limited, 1965), 30.

[15] Ibid

[16] Ibid

newspapers in the United States to cease reporting on the event. Beaverbrook during a trip to the United States attempted to persuade a few editors to stop their incessant reporting of Mrs. Simpson and the King. Beaverbrook was not successful in this task, and the newspapers continued to publish the developing drama across the ocean.[17] As soon as it was known that Mrs. Simpson would in fact seek a divorce, the American press almost instantly (and correctly) predicted the King would attempt to marry Mrs. Simpson.

The censorship of the British media finally ended on December 1, when the almost unknown Anglican Bishop of Bradford addressed his clergy on the subject of the coronation, admonishing the King who, according to him, "had not shown his need for divine guidance in the discharge of his high office."[18] The address by the Bishop was enough to obliterate the walls of censorship, for in the crowd was a reporter from the *Yorkshire Post*. As soon as the contents of the address were known and confirmed to be published, Max Beaverbrook dashed to the King to inform him that the gentleman's agreement between the press and the King was null and void. A member of the establishment had, in public, rebuked the King. The newspapers of the Empire would use this as their excuse to publish the myriad of details that had long been absent from the press. The King took the news of the rebuke stoically. He inquired if Beaverbrook knew what the London papers would do. Beaverbrook confirmed that the papers would run with the stories. Edward accepted this and wondered if the newspapers would take a stand yet on the issues. "No. That will be reserved until the results on tomorrow's cabinet meeting."[19] In the next day's *Manchester Guardian*, the first inklings of the constitutional crises that had developed between the King and his Prime Minister were finally and explicitly mentioned for the first time. One of the most influential newspapers in the Empire, *The Times*, quickly showed its support for Baldwin. The editors opined that while the King should be allowed to have friends of his choice:

> He cannot and will not afford-and what the Empire cannot afford-is that the influence of the great office which he holds should be weakened if private inclinations were to come into open conflict with public duty and be allowed to prevail. He is the most visible embodiment of the Monarchical principle; and any personal default of his gives a shock to the principle which is mischievous and even dangerous…the High office which His Majesty holds

[17]Ibid, 35.
[18]H.R.H. Edward, Duke of Windsor. *A King's Story* (New York City: Van Rees Press, 1951), 348.
[19]Ibid, 349.

> is man's personal possession. It is a sacred trust, handed down from generation to generation.[20]

The editors were saying that the King was making a mistake in not listening to the advice of his Prime Minister, and if the institution of the monarchy were to survive, the King must go and make way for a new King. Small comfort though it was to him, Edward was not the only target of the *Times*. The British paper took a shot at its American counter parts for their part in the crisis.[21] The gloves were off, and Baldwin and the King were in a full-scale war to win over the media. As the story broke, the papers took sides. *The Times*, *Morning Post*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Herald*, and all the Kamsley Press newspapers broke for Baldwin on the first day, as did many provincial newspapers.[22] The only major newspapers to jump on the bandwagon for the King were *Express* and some mail groups. The King's support was sparse and tepid at best. Few, if any, newspapers came out in favor of Mrs. Simpson becoming Queen. However, Lord Rothsmore, a close friend of the King, did come out in favor of a morganatic marriage in his *Daily Mail* publication.[23] The next day the nation was shocked when the *Catholic Times* (whose editor was a priest) came out fervently for the King. While the Catholic Church took the same stance on divorce as the Anglican Church, the paper deeply did not want to see the Monarchy be made a pawn of in the game of politics. Two other smaller papers also came out in strong defense of their Sovereign. The *Daily Express* was adamant that "No government can stand in the Kings way if he is resolved to walk that way. Let the King give his decision to the people."[24] The *Daily Mail* took it a step further, declaring, "Abdication is out of the question because its possibility of mischief are endless. The effects on the empire would be calamitous."[25] These two newspapers were the main lines of defense for the King.

Another line of defense for the King came from a Conservative Member of Parliament, Winston Churchill. Churchill had known the

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[20]"King and Monarchy," *Times* (London). *Dec* 2 1936, final edition.
[21]"King and Monarchy," *Times (London)* . *Dec* 2 1936, final edition. "It is a simple fact that the American campaign of publicity, so long and so wisely ignored in this country, has now reached a point at which it goes far beyond that side of His Majesty's life which may justly be held to be private. Transatlantic journalism, as everyone knows whose business it is to follow it-and in this case the flood of letters and newspaper cuttings which is reaching public men in England leaves no escape-is subject to periodical waves of excitement about some particular topic."
[22]William Aitken. The Abdication of King Edward VIII (New York: Beaverbrook Newspapers Limited, 1965) 66.
[23]Ibid, 51.
[24]H.R.H. Edward, Duke of Windsor. *A King's Story* (New York City: Van Rees Press, 1951), 372.
[25]Ibid, 372.

King since the latter's investiture as Prince of Wales, and while their relationship had been strained during the war years, Churchill came out strongly in favor of Edward. Churchill had been raised to venerate the crown and the individual who wore it. He made the King's crisis his own and promised "I shall defend him. It is my duty."[26] Not long after the crisis became public, Churchill gave a speech at Albert Hall on foreign policy. Departing from his prepared text he attempted to rally the multitude to the King's side. He attempted to win them over the by assuring them what a "cherished and unique" King they had. He likewise took time to blast Parliament, demanding they "discharge its function in these high constitutional questions."[27] The speech was a complete lemon. Churchill had hoped to continue to rally support for the King in other speeches, but these plans were quickly scrapped due to the quickly plummeting sympathy for the King.

Nevertheless, Churchill had shot his own cause in the foot. Some of the anger that was building toward the King shifted to Churchill.[28] While the King and the Prime Minister were cloistered away from the nation in the privacy of the King's private retreat, Winston Churchill took to the floor of the House of Commons to address his peers. He began his speech by insisting that "No irrevocable steps be taken," when suddenly his booming voice was drowned out by the rest of the members of Parliament and he was unable to continue his speech.[29] Churchill had failed to see the massive change in support. Not only had the general public fallen in line behind the Prime Minister, practically the entire House of Commons. Conservatives, Liberals, and Socialists alike had all quickly followed their constituents in opposing the King's plan to raise Mrs. Simpson to the throne with him.[30]

The rest of the press establishment coalesced around Prime Minister Baldwin. The *Times* was adamant in their support for the Prime Minister, at times bordering on open hostility to the King. "His Majesties' plain duty is to raise to the proud position of Queen only such a consort as would be acceptable to the millions of his subjects…but when the woman he would raise to the first position of the Empire is one with two husbands living the nation has the right to protest, for such an alliance would be repugnant to millions of his loyal subjects."[31] The Dominion papers, while kinder, also supported the Prime Minister's attempt to remove the King from the throne. The *Observer*

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[26]William Manchester. *The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill: Alone, 1932–1940* (New York City: Little, Brown and Company), 230

[27]Ibid, 222

[28]Ibid, 223

[29]Ibid, 233

[30]Ibid

[31]"Self-Sacrifice and Recompense," *The Times (London)* , December 8, 1936, final.

declared, "In this matter he is asked to sacrifice his personal feelings for the sake of Europe's most ancient monarchy."[32] The *Sunday Dispatch* concurred by pointing out "Rank carries obligation and an obligation too often of self-abnegation."[33] *Reynolds News* reminded the King that he "must accept the advice of his cabinet in all matters which may affect the welfare of the British Commonwealth."[34]

On December 2, the King and the Prime Minister again met. Baldwin made it clear yet again, that a morganatic marriage was not an option. He spoke plainly to his King in that now he had only two options. The King could either renounce Mrs. Simpson or the throne.[35] Should he have refused the advice of the Prime Minister, the elected government would be forced to resign. The King had hoped this could be a solution to his problem. Should he refuse the advice, and Baldwin and his government did resign, he would be able to appoint his own government with members of a 'King's party' which would be created and a new government would be formed.[36] An astute Baldwin however had already guaranteed this plan ended before it could come to fruition. The Prime Minister secured assurances from Labor leader Clement Atlee and Churchill that neither would be an accomplice to the King's plans to bypass his government.[37]

Alternatively, he could follow through with his marriage plans and abdicate the throne. To the King, this was something he had already come to terms with for he would often say resolutely, "No marriage, no coronation" in meetings with his advisers.[38] To Edward, the path was clear. He would abdicate not only for Mrs. Simpson, but, at least in his own mind, for the good of the Monarchy. "The British crown is the living symbol of Imperial unity…it inspires unity. But it would no longer inspire unity if the man who wore it reigned over a community divided."[39] He asserted that he cherished the crown so much; he would give it up rather than risk any damage to the institution and its prestige.[40] Accordingly, the King had made his irrevocable decision. He would abdicate the throne of the United Kingdom in order to marry Mrs. Simpson.

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[32]"Press Views on the Crisis," *The Times* (London), December 7, 1936, final.
[33]"King's Duty," *Sunday Dispatch*, December 6, 1936, final.
[34]"Constitutional Crisis," *Reynolds's News*, December 6, 1936, final.
[35]"The King Abdicates," *The Times*, December 11, 1936, final.
[36]William Manchester. The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill: Alone, 1932–1940 (New York City: Little, Brown and Company), 229
[37]Ibid, 228
[38]William Aitken. *The Abdication of King Edward VIII* (New York: Beaverbrook Newspapers Limited, 1965), 44.
[39]H.R.H. Edward, Duke of Windsor. *A King's Story* (New York City: Van Rees Press, 1951), 385.
[40]Ibid, 385.

Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin had successfully deposed his own Sovereign. From that day forward, no monarch in the United Kingdom would dare to cross the Prime Minister of the day for fear of facing the same constitutional crisis that Edward VIII faced. While the Monarch remains in theory the force from which all political power derives, in reality it is the Prime Minister to whom the Monarch must answer. Stanley Baldwin has ensured the Monarchies' permanent subjugation to the Prime Minister and government at the end of the day. Baldwin was praised by *The Times* for "handling a great national problem in which the loves and standards of millions of his fellow countrymen are concerned, he has no comparable rival."[41] The paper went further in painting a scene of the King as an errant toddler with whom his caretaker, the Prime Minister, had to deal "single handily or conceding a jolt of his own principals which he knew at heart to be those of the people behind him."[42]

In his speech to the House of Commons before the final approval of the *Instrument of Abdication*, Baldwin painted himself as a humble servant of His Majesty who worked with all his might to properly advise his Monarch, but he lamented, "My efforts during these last days have been directed, as have the efforts of those most closely round him, in trying to help him to make the choice which he has not made; and we have failed."[43] Closing his speech, he urged the members of the Commons to rally around their new King. For his part, Winston Churchill rose one more time to defend his beloved King. He insisted that "no Sovereign has ever conformed more strictly or more faithfully to the letter and spirit of the Constitution than his present Majesty. In fact, he has voluntarily made a sacrifice for the peace and strength of his Realm."[44] That night, after finally being allowed to tell his former subjects what led him to give up the throne, the soon to be Duke of Windsor sailed on the HMS *Fury*, bound for a lifetimes exile from his Kingdom.[45]

William Aitken, Lord Beaverbrook, a historian and a key player in the abdication crisis believed the crisis was almost entirely of a religious quality.[46] While obviously a key argument used by the establishment in protesting the marriage, it also came down to the

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[41]"King Edward's choice," *The Times*, December 11, 1936, final.

[42]Ibid

[43]Baldwin, Speech to the House of commons, December 12, 1936, *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 318, cols. 2177.

[44]Churchill, Speech to the House of commons, December 12, 1936, *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol. 318, cols. 2190.

[45]H.R.H. Edward, Duke of Windsor. *A King's Story* (New York City: Van Rees Press, 1951), 413.

[46]William Aitken. *The Abdication of King Edward VIII* (New York: Beaverbrook Newspapers Limited, 1965),

personalities involved in the crisis. The British establishment and the King reviled one another and wanted to check the others power. It was nothing more than a battle of the role of the Prime Minister in relation to the Crown and the preservation of the Monarchy as an institution of unity and inspiration. In order for it to retain these characteristics, it must follow certain rubrics. One of these is to be above every day politics. Edward shattered this particular barrier not long before the crisis hit the British papers. Historian Frankie Hardie pointed out that Edward VIII had defied what was expected of a constitutional monarch by becoming personally involved in politics. During a visit to Southern Wales, he had directly challenged Baldwin's government when he told the poverty afflicted people that "Something must be done."[47] This was seen by many as the King declaring his support for more liberal policies, in direct opposition to Baldwin and his conservative government, obviously making a tense situation between the King and his Prime Minister even worse. Edward again broke precedence by attempting to silence the newspapers in the United Kingdom about the impending divorce of and his marriage to Mrs. Simpson. William Rubinstein agreed with Hardie's assessment of the situation by reflecting that in his attempt to be the 'People's King' he overstepped his duty to be an impartial and non-partisan mediator in the political affairs doomed his reign.

King Edward VIII, who had sought to defy his elected government and the British establishment by both abandoning his political neutrality and by attempting to marry the woman of his choice, was summarily and unceremoniously deposed by his aging Prime Minister. The result of this episode in British history was the final subjugation of the Monarch to their Prime Minister. Never again would a Sovereign dare to circumvent the advice of the elected government. After signing his abdication papers, the breath of fresh air that Edward felt was equally experienced by the establishment of the Empire. Forevermore their elected government would ensure that their monarch would bend to the will of the elected representatives and not attempt to put their own will upon the masses.

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[47]Frank Hardie. *The Political Influence of the British Monarchy 1868-1952*(New York City: Harper & Row Publishing, 1970), 170.