

# IMPRIMIS

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## "The Truth About Public Television"

**Charles M. Lichenstein, former Senior Vice President, PBS**

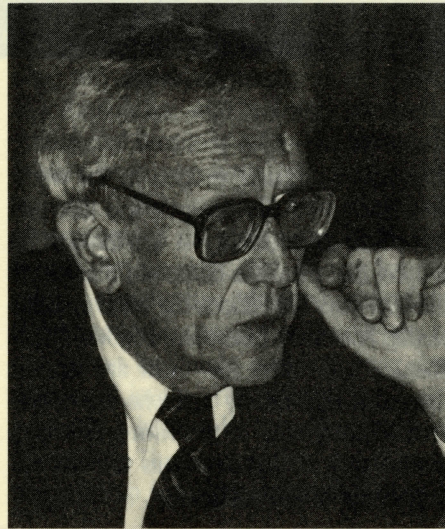
*How has public television become a multi-billion dollar industry? Former senior vice president of PBS Charles Lichenstein carefully documents the way in which government and corporations got into the act and how this affects what we see. This address was part of a Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar held in March, 1989, on the Hillsdale College campus.*

I am astonished to note that this is the first time I've ever been here at Hillsdale. If Paris is the second home of every cultivated person in the world, surely Hillsdale — guided by George Roche — must be the second home of every conservative in the world. And as one of the oldest remaining original mainstream conservatives, I must say it's very good to be home, finally.

My role is that of the oddball in this series on popular culture, because I intend to discuss one vehicle of both culture and entertainment that rather prides itself on being unpopular. It may be making a virtue of necessity, or it may be with a certain degree of conscious deliberation, but public broadcasting always has fancied itself the "alternative" medium, the medium for "serious people," the medium that will focus on what is thoughtful and enduring, and will eschew the faddish and the merely popular. It is consciously designed for elites, or for that aspect of all of us that yearns to be elitist.

To begin, let me tell you a thing or two about public broadcasting from the perspective of my own personal experience. The favorite word in public broadcasting generally, and particularly in public television, is poverty: We don't have enough money. We are on the threshold of bankruptcy. We must have public support, and more of it every year. Yet, at the same time, public television

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is one of the most extravagant, over-capitalized institutions in our society. It is a huge national conglomerate of almost three hundred local outlets. And, unlike any of the three principal commercial networks, almost every one of the major local stations in public television has an elaborate, state-of-the-art, and very expensive production facility. Most of these production facilities are scarcely used, mind you, but there they are: costing money and gathering dust.

This is partly a consequence of the way public television has developed over the years from small, independent educational television stations — often supported by state and local school systems — exploring various

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## "Capturing the Culture"

**Cynthia Grenier, Senior Editor, The World and I**

*Former film executive Cynthia Grenier explains how Hollywood has captured the American culture, for better or worse, and what we as consumers of that culture can do about it. (Also from the March 1988 CCA).*

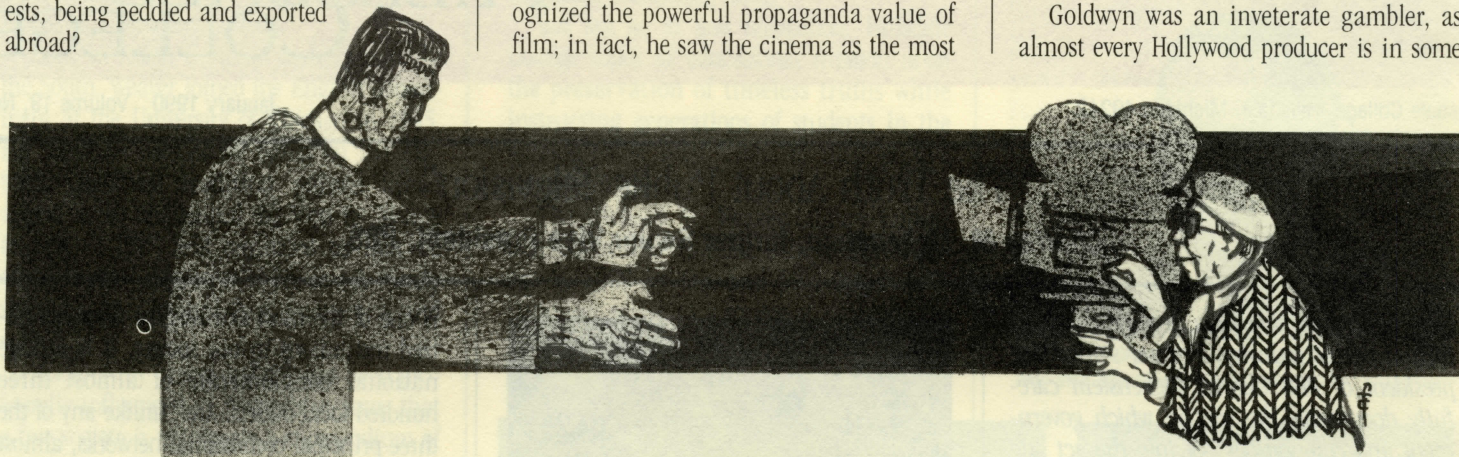
In the 1930s, a prominent film historian advanced the thesis that popular culture reflects and represents the dreams and nightmares of nations. While it was certainly true then, this has not been the case in America since the 1960s. The dreams and nightmares emanating from Hollywood are principally those of a small elite core of people who can hardly be said to represent mainstream America. Politically they have little in common with the people who elected the likes of Ronald Reagan and George Bush. Morally and culturally they have even less in common.

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Grenier  
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How did this come about? Why is the television and motion picture industry — which once sent the American dream around the world and made it, literally, the dream of the world — so hostile to that dream now and so out of touch with the values that made it possible? Why is an alternative dream, one antithetical to American interests, being peddled and exported abroad?



The answers to these questions may be made clearer by examining the life of a relatively obscure Italian philosopher and writer, Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci was born in Sardinia in the last decades of the 19th century, miserably poor and with few prospects in life. As a young man, he became a socialist and a theater critic. He helped found the Italian Communist Party, but was soon to be thrown into jail by Mussolini for his radical views. He died at the end of World War II, still a prisoner. But before his death, he had been remarkably productive as a thinker and a writer. It is to Gramsci that we owe the enormously influential idea of “capturing the culture.”

Gramsci believed that the way for Marxists to come to power was by taking over the cultural institutions of nations: schools, universities, churches, popular entertainment. By working within such institutions and fields, a small number of people could influ-

### Cynthia Grenier

Cynthia Grenier is currently a senior editor at THE WORLD & I, a 700 page monthly magazine devoted to current events, the arts, literature and science. A graduate of Harvard, she has been a reporter for the *New York Times*, a senior editor at Ballantine Books, a vice president for production at United Artists in New York and Interscope Communications in Los Angeles. She is a frequent contributor to journals such as the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Newsday*, *Ms*, the *New York Times*, *Village Voice*, *Sight and Sound*, *Film Quarterly*, and *L'Express*.

ence the thinking of thousands and even millions. In a certain sense, Gramsci's vision has actually come to pass in the United States, not so much a deliberate plan on the part of a few, but more as a natural by-product of the growth of liberalism. The “long march through the institutions,” an idea much bandied about by leftists in the sixties, is what Gramsci foretold.

As early as the 1920s, Lenin himself recognized the powerful propaganda value of film; in fact, he saw the cinema as the most

powerful propaganda weapon in the world, even though the film industry was then still very much in its infancy. It was through his support that men like Eisenstein made films like *Ten Days That Shook the World* and *Battleship Potemkin*. Eisenstein, Podovkin, Davchenko, and others like them are seminal figures in film history and who are considered today giants of the film world even though they used their talents to push blatant Marxist political goals.

### The Old Hollywood

In the 1920s and 30s, Hollywood filmmaking was dominated by a group of producers who were all Eastern European Jews from extremely poor families, and who were desperate to escape their situation. Paramount, Twentieth Century Fox, Warner Brothers, and Universal were founded by men who even in their adolescent years dreamed of coming to the United States one day.

Samuel Goldwyn's story is typical. He was born in a Warsaw ghetto. By the time he was sixteen, he had decided to emigrate. He walked over 500 miles to Hamburg and from there got himself first to England and then to the United States. He became a glove cutter in upstate New York and later a successful glove salesman. Then one day he went to the “flickers” as they were called, and it was a revelation for him. He walked home in a daze; by the time he had walked from the theater on 34th Street to Central Park, he realized that movies were the thing. In no

time, he enlisted his brother-in-law Jesse Lasky, a vaudeville actor, to help him learn how to become a producer.

Goldwyn, then Goldfish, made his dream come true. He raised money; he taught a young man, Cecil B. de Mille, who had never directed a movie and who had only seen a few of them, how to become a movie director. They bought a property, *The Squaw Man*, that became the first Hollywood feature film.

Goldwyn was an inveterate gambler, as almost every Hollywood producer is in some

fashion. It seems to go with the profession. Nobody knows if a movie is going to make money. It is a matter of salesmanship, talent and luck. As a result, we have seen some great movies and some perfectly ghastly ones. Goldwyn had *Wuthering Heights* and *Best Years of Our Lives* to his credit; he also had a lot of perfectly dreadful films which faded mercifully into oblivion, both at the box office and in people's memories.

The Samuel Goldwyns, Louis B. Mayers, and Warner Brothers of the Hollywood world were not particularly loveable men. One would not care to have been their wife or children. But one thing was certain. They had made it in America and they were infinitely grateful. They knew that if it were not for America, they would have ended up in the Czar's army or died in a pogrom, or simply would have never amounted to anything in their native land. They ruled their studios, Hollywood, and, in some sense, American popular culture, with this in mind.

### Hollywood Transformed

But by the 1950s, profound changes swept away the old system; the big Hollywood studios were broken up and box office receipts dropped. Of the million or so people who went to the movies every week, about half stopped going at all. The movies ceased being a mass art form. Television became the dominant popular medium and the movies became an elite form, a status they still enjoy today. The movie audience is tiny compared to that of the television

audience.

During the 1920s and through the early 1940s, screenwriters were always the people at the bottom of the totem pole, the disaffected, the people held in contempt. It is even true today; American producers truly do not believe the writer is essential to the making of a movie. He is the hired hand. He generally gets paid less, and is accorded little respect. It is for these reasons and others that many Hollywood writers were drawn into Communist cells. The writers did have a hard time, even if they were paid magnificently compared to the average U.S. wage earner. Nathaniel West, who was one of America's great natural talents, was told by his supervisor that if he worked very hard he might qualify to write "B" films, but he doubted very much if he'd ever get onto an "A" production. William Faulkner accepted work in Hollywood because he needed the money, but there is little of his work that appears on screen even though he is often listed in movie credits.

By the 1960s, with the old Hollywood having virtually died away, writers had more opportunities to act upon their dissatisfaction. Many belonged to what has been called the soft left, without a hard, radical program, but still ideological in intent. (Even working with an elite form like film, there is the need to appeal to an audience, so hard-line radicalism is out.) The soft left is much more willing than the hard left to float lightheartedly from one notion to the next, often without any clear idea that different political

tics are statistics. They're precious few female Hollywood executives, although there are some token gestures made. Since Ashley Boone has left Warner Brothers, there are no more black Hollywood executives. It is a very closed world out there even though the people who inhabit it are filled with liberal feelings and most anxious to decry the faults of our society: Above all, blame America first and foremost, and export that blame to the world. It is *mea culpa* all the way.

### **Movies of the '80s**

If there is a film that touches on the drug business, for instance, who are the villains? Why, the DEA. Take *Tequilla Sunrise*, a big, big Hollywood movie, directed by Robert Towne. Towne is one of the Hollywood insiders, and he has story-doctored more films and projects than one can think of. He put this film together with Mel Gibson, Kurt Russell, Michelle Pfeiffer, a trio of very popular, very appealing actors. Also included was Raul Julia, who is a well considered professional Broadway actor. The protagonist is Mel Gibson, who has played many a hero in many a film including *Mad Max* as the near-epitome of the modern hero today. But in this film he plays your average loveable drug dealer. He has "dropped out" of the business and the story is a pretext for why he has to get back into one last drug deal because of loyalty. This shows what a nice person he is because he is loyal and sticks to his buddies. The one really bad person in the whole lineup is a representative of the DEA.

able child that he is very good to, he drives a new Porsche, and he gets Michelle Pfeiffer — what more can a man ask? The drug kingpin is Raul Julia who played him as the most singularly adorable character since Santa Claus. The *Washington Post* critic in Washington, D.C., which is the murder capitol of the United States with drug deaths higher than casualties on the West Bank, called it "one of the most sophisticated, sparkling films of the year." The film certainly had glamour and glitter, and it portrayed a very appealing, laid-back lifestyle. The actors were attractive, it was very well shot; it looked good. But what are we being asked to swallow? The message was: "Drugs-why not?"

That is just one of the problems in modern Hollywood. Political films are produced the same way. *Running on Empty* is a Sidney Lumet film about a nice father and mother who have been on the run for twenty years and who turn out to be Weatherpersons. The film is based on a real life story in which two real people were killed in a lab that was blown up by Weatherpersons. In the film, one person was merely crippled. The father and mother in the film are supposed to feel "really bad" about this, but, nonetheless, the whole film projects that there is something fundamentally wonderful about them; something wonderful about two people who were responsible for the injury of another person, who have never faced up to the consequences, who have spent twenty years on the run from society, and finally in a "great" act of bravery let their nearly adult son go off to benefit from a scholarship at Juilliard. It was a film that everyone in Hollywood thought would be nominated for many Academy Awards. The Hollywood world felt proud about the film. The consensus was, "Well, those Weatherpersons had their ideals and we must give credit to idealism where ever we can find it."

Some other left-leaning films were nominated for the Academy Award this year. *A World Apart* is a South African story, billed as a nice little human drama about a teenage girl and her parents. The story is based on the real-life tale of Ruth First who was a member of the Communist Party. Her father was the head of the terrorism wing of the ANC. He is presented in the film just briefly, played by a very sympathetic Dutch actor, and is just shown to be a loveable, caring father. The film is one about which the critics were very uncritical and they couldn't seem to say enough about how wonderful and sensitive it is. They did not say much  
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beliefs rest upon different clear-cut precepts and are sometimes quite incompatible. The defining element of the soft left is a kind of persistent utopianism, in the name of which some shining social ideal, no matter how unworkable, will always be honored.

These days most producers and directors are the children of the 1960s, the children of *Easy Rider*, as it were. They are all college graduates, and are, as several excellent studies by Stanley Rothman and Robert Lichter have demonstrated, basically white, male, Jewish, atheistic, and Democratic. The people in question would feel it was akin to McCarthyism to describe them so, but statis-

The "moderate" is Kurt Russell; he does not get Michelle Pfeiffer in the end because, after all, he's a member of the LAPD. He only gets away with his life because he is the hero's best friend. At no point in the entire film is there *any* hint of what taking drugs can do to people, what it can do to society, or what it does to human relationships.

Few of the film's reviewers even picked up on this. They had a few criticisms of the film, but hardly anyone said, "Hey look folks — we're going crazy about the drug problem and here's a movie making it look like it's no problem at all." Mel Gibson lives in a beautiful house on the beach, has an ador-

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about its strongly biased political message.

One Hollywood film, *Walker*, was written into the Nicaraguan national budget a few years ago, but sank beneath the waves because Ed Harris is not a box office star, and because it was a very amateur production. *The Last Emperor*, which swept the Academy Awards and which is a stunning film visually, had a special proviso written into the contract between the producer and the Chinese Communist government. The proviso stated that the only reason that Bertolucci, a Westerner, was being allowed to shoot the film was because he was a member of the Italian Communist Party. Although the politics are not that obvious, the film presents nonetheless a very slanted version of Chinese history. Once again, the critics and the public remained silent.

One of the more interesting examples of what happens when a political producer gets in the saddle is provided by an examination of the case of David Putnam, who gave us *Chariots of Fire*, *Greystoke*, and *The Killing Fields*, all films that have something of a political cast to them. He managed to maneuver himself into a position of great influence in the studio world. He is not like the old Hollywood producers in that, as a person he appears to be a man of much greater intelligence, education, and personal charm. His grown children claim that "life with Daddy" was wonderful. (At least none of them seem to be seeing psychiatrists, which I suppose says something over the old Hollywood.) When he became a studio head, Putnam proclaimed that he was not going to be trapped by Hollywood; he was going to transform it and make "good little movies" — no more huge multi-million dollar budgets, no *Ishtars*, no *Ghostbusters II* — none of that. He forgot that Hollywood is a business like any other and that profit and loss counts there too. It is one thing to make a political movie that makes money; it is another thing to make a political movie that takes a tremendous dive at the box office. Mr. Putnam headed Columbia Pictures for only one year, and the studio is only beginning to release his films now. See how many titles you recognize: *Zelly and Me*, *School Days*, *Little Nikita*, *Stars and Bars*, *A Time for Destiny*, *Vice Versa*, and *Leonard, Part VI*. Most of these films, with the rarest exception, cost somewhere between five and thirteen million dollars. Most of them grossed under a million dollars and many have not even been released.

There is another film worth mentioning:

*The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, which reputedly cost \$75 million and even as a 18th-century fantasy film manages to have a plea for anti-nuclear activity in the middle of the plot. Somehow, one feels that is not going to add any glory to Mr. Putnam's career either. In any case, Mr. Putnam also spent his time at Columbia doing things like banning the release of all of the studio's films in South Africa. He felt very virtuous even though Jack Valenti of the Motion Picture Exporters Association pointed out to him that 85 percent of the movie theaters in South Africa were at that time fully integrated. When Putnam was virtually fired at the end of the year and he and his wife decided to go on a vacation, they went on a three-month safari in South Africa. There are limits to principles, it seems.

### The Need for Balance

These days, Hollywood is a definitely politicized place. The stars are eager to talk politics and they call the shots on film content in conjunction with a small number of agents and an even smaller number of producers. Bankable actors like Robert Redford and Paul Newman have enormous influence. As do Clint Eastwood, Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Eddie Murphy, but there are more liberal box office stars, so they often win out by simple arithmetic.

Hollywood can be considered as a changing phenomenon, but what has not changed is the fact that our nation's popular culture has been captured by this small town. As a new generation is coming along, a much more conservative generation, there is hope for a considerable change and a return to traditional values, but since everything always moves forward, we will never return to an exact replica of the old traditional Hollywood or its films. For a start, what we can support, as movie-going patrons, are individuals and films that are not ashamed of displaying pride in their own country or celebrating traditional values. It has often been an excuse to say that "Well, we criticize America because we want it to be better." But criticism must be balanced in order to be constructive. The world really doesn't want to see America continue to throw ashes on its own head.

There may well be a new generation of people in Hollywood coming along who will make the kind of films that make Americans feel good about themselves and the world feel good about us. It is to be hoped that this new generation will remember the concept "capturing the culture" and take it to heart. ▲

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ways of conveying classroom information through the medium of television, or even of turning the TV set into a classroom. In these early years, it may well have been necessary, even desirable, to have elaborate production facilities widely dispersed around the country. But over time these lavish physical plants have become local status symbols — white elephants for the most part. An interesting symbol, come to think of it, for an allegedly impoverished institution.

The anomaly of spendthrift poverty is also a function of the fact that government, in one fashion or another and at some level or other, has always been centrally involved in public television. The appearance of affluence, of having it all in the technical sense, is thus in part a consequence of an old-fashioned American custom called the "pork barrel." The federal government got into the business of assisting public broadcasting, initially, by paying for physical facilities. Because there is a public television station in virtually every congressman's district, it became just about inevitable that every congressman would go after a piece of the facilities grants each year, with scant regard for need or utility. This has been one of the peculiarities of public television, one of its "dirty little secrets" as far as most Americans are concerned.

### Two White Knights

On the one hand, the constant refrain of public television is poverty; and, on the other hand, the reality is self-indulgence. In such circumstances, how has public television become a multi-billion dollar industry? Since those early days when it was

#### Charles M. Lichenstein

Charles M. Lichenstein is a Distinguished Fellow specializing in U.N. studies, foreign policy, intelligence, and counterterrorism at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C. He has previously served as the alternate and the deputy U.S. representative to the U.N. Security Council from 1981-1984 and as the senior vice president for promotion, advertising and public affairs with the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). Under the Nixon and Ford administrations, he held a variety of appointments, including special assistant to the President, and executive assistant to the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission. After graduating with a masters degree from Yale University, Mr. Lichenstein taught political science at Yale and Notre Dame and spent five years as an analyst on the Middle East and Africa for the Central Intelligence Agency.

largely the extension of the classroom into the television studio, or vice versa, there have been two principal white knights on whose backs public television has galloped smartly into the future.

The first was (and is) a delightful, talented woman who had an extraordinary idea. Her name is Joan Ganz Cooney and she created the Children's Television Workshop. Back in the early '60s it was her radical notion that quality television programs — educational and fun — could be made for

quarters on the west side of New York City. Largely with the assistance of the Carnegie and Ford foundations, CTW's products became set pieces on every educator's agenda, and began to receive major funding from the U.S. Office (now Department) of Education and a variety of state and local educational bodies and institutions.

In the course of the program's development, Joan Cooney took the idea of *Sesame Street* to the commercial networks. In decisions that rank right up there with the Edsel

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children. And the rest is history. The first CTW program was *Sesame Street*, which I suspect most of you have, at one time or another, been forced to watch as the alternative to eating prunes for breakfast. (Who knows: it may even be better for you!) After *Sesame Street* came the *Electric Company*, whose principal purpose in life was to help kids learn to read. And in the years since there have been programs like *Contact: Three, Two, One, Contact*, which tries to teach kids arithmetic and mathematical concepts.

The Children's Television Workshop was one of those new-wave institutions that dotted the U.S. landscape in the 1960s. Everyone, it seemed, felt compelled to go off in some original, exciting, provocative direction. Moreover, they felt they must make use of new vehicles and new technologies that were rapidly coming on line in every arena of our lives, and nowhere, of course, more spectacularly than in the world of television. Only now are we beginning to assimilate this diverse national experience, and to calculate profits and losses. But the '60s were not a time for prudent evaluations: it was a time for radical and even revolutionary innovation.

Joan Cooney had the genius to bring together an idea and a very talented bunch of people, mostly quite young, and they set out to create a television program for kids that would be at once, as I've said, educational and fun. (The measure of their success still is in dispute among the sciences, both hard and soft, concerned with personality development and the learning process.) But Joan made her way, and the Children's Television Workshop evolved into an enormous bureaucracy, which today is housed in elegant head-

and the “new” Coke, they all turned it down. I suspect that if any one of them had taken it on, that network today would be enshrined as the great benefactor of kids. (It's worth noting, however, that in the world of television, fame is fleeting and not necessarily profitable. CBS practically invented serious television news, and look at it now: mired in third place.) But they all turned it down. Ironically, the Children's Television Workshop today makes millions of dollars on all manner of commercial spinoffs.

But public television did take it on, and started building itself, in my judgment, very largely on the reputation *Sesame Street* enjoyed as having marked a historic breakthrough in TV for kids. Deserved or not, that has been the program's reputation — and, as I said before, the rest is history, for *Sesame Street*, for CTW, and for public television.

*Second Act: the Ford Foundation.* The second of public television's white knights was one of CTW's funders, the Ford Foundation. In the early 1950s, nobody knew what the Ford Foundation was supposed to be or to become. All anyone knew was that it was immensely rich. In the last years of his life especially, and not to put too fine a point on it, Henry Ford was something of a kooky guy. He tended to indulge his kookiness in whatever ways he wanted, and one of those ways was to establish a foundation in his name. It had at first no principal idea or central focus. It was virtually synonymous with the Ford Motor Company: all of the foundation's assets were non-public, non-traded stock of the company. With the death of Henry Senior, and then that of his son, Edsel, the company fell into chaos — and the fortunes of the foundation along with it. Compressing years of high corporate drama into just a few

words, suffice to say that Edsel's widow and her son, Henry II, came to the rescue of both company and foundation and ushered in almost two decades of sustained growth. The reinvigorated Ford Foundation set its course, not without controversy, and in due time targeted “educational support” as one of its key concerns.

Education for the foundation came to include educational television as well. In the 1950s, of course, the commercial networks were not what they are today, except in one sense: they did dominate television, but they were not huge and immensely powerful, and they were not yet perceived as the principal advertising vehicles for goods and services in our society. The future of the medium was still somewhat up for grabs.

With the Ford Foundation's multi-billion dollar funding portfolio also still up for grabs, some of its trustees and program officers apparently decided in the mid-'50s to find out if an alternative television service could be created that would not be contaminated by commercial imperatives, would not have to respond to the discipline of the “bottom line” — would not only not have to show profits but would be almost certain to show plenty of losses. The appropriate vehicle was at hand: educational television stations, still struggling to break out of their local school board shells, not yet “public” in the broader sense (either as to support or appeal), and not yet anything close to a national network.

Don't misunderstand me: I am *not* suggesting that a Ford Foundation task-force gathered one day at the drawing board and consciously decided to grab hold of educational television and transform that essentially mom-and-pop operation into a national network of publicly-supported non-commercial television stations offering a diversified schedule of “quality” or “elite” programming — but, incrementally, by fits and starts, over the course of a couple of decades (and expenditures in excess of \$100 million), that is exactly what happened. And I *am* suggesting that, somewhere along the way, what began as a bunch of experiments did become a developmental plan for a national public television system as we now know it — including major program production centers, a distribution network (ultimately via domestic satellites), and most important, a long-range funding strategy combining government outlays, individual contributions, and big corporate bucks. The Ford Foundation put up the seed money — and produced a bumper crop.

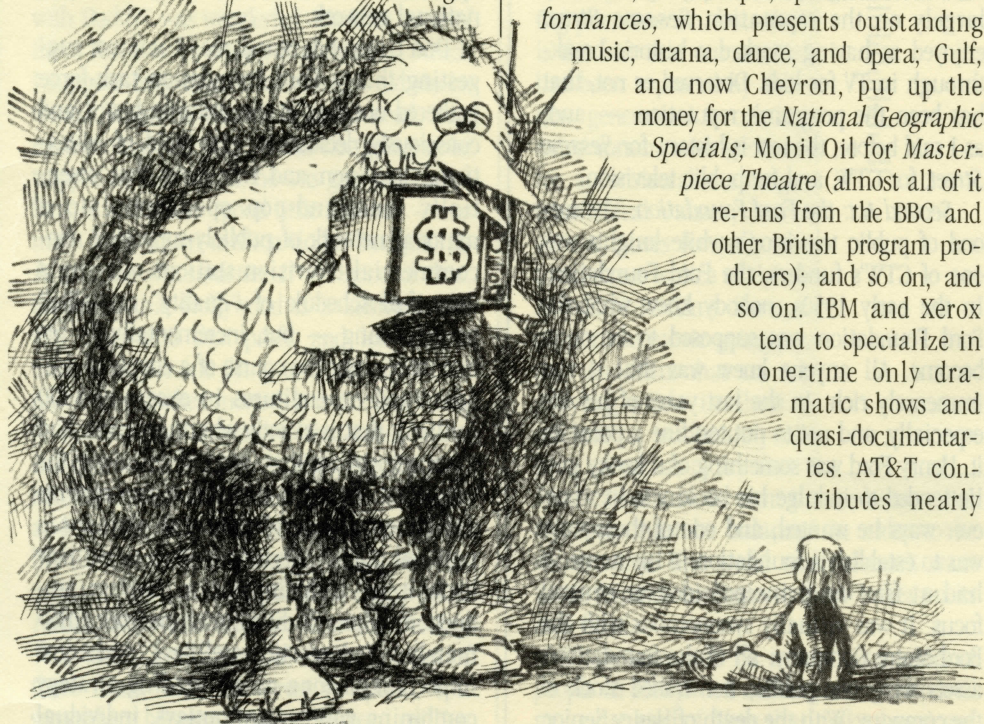
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Early on, it funded a Public Television Workshop (later, Laboratory) which created a program almost as notable in its field as *Sesame Street* was for kids: Alastair Cooke's *Omnibus*. This was the precursor to *Sixty Minutes*, albeit more "cultural" and less of a news magazine. Out of the Workshop also came *The Great American Dream Machine* — deliberately iconoclastic, a sort of a *Saturday Night Live* without the pizzazz. (I've watched some old tapes of *Dream Machine*, and they look like a humor program made by a foundation!)

Ford also gave open-ended grants to educational television stations around the country, helped build statewide ETV networks, and established national program production centers, the major one being the National Educational Television Center, which in the 1960s became WNET, Channel 13, New York, the flagship station of today's Public Broadcasting Service, or PBS.

Then the folks at Ford had another idea: with the cooperation of their colleagues down the street at the Carnegie Corporation (and the explicit endorsement of the White House), the so-called Carnegie Commission on Public Broadcasting was established. Its 1967 report, handsomely crafted by E.B. White, was really the beginning of what we now know as public — as distinct from just "educational" — television. The Carnegie



Commission came out candidly for elitism and argued, somewhat paradoxically, that it should by all means be imposed on everyone. And not only imposed but *paid for* in major

part by everyone: by an annual endowment from the U.S. Treasury, or a TV-set license fee, or a tax on commercial television profits, or whatever. Thus the idea of federal financing for public broadcasting generally, and especially for television was created. President Lyndon Johnson eagerly agreed, and the report was soon translated into the Public Broadcasting Act of 1968. The act set up a Corporation for Public Broadcasting (which later spun off PBS as a networking facility) which would receive the federal funds, disburse them to the local stations and to program producers, and generally ride herd on the enterprise — "in the public interest," it goes without saying.

### Commercial Sponsorship

The Ford Foundation went one better: beyond persuading the federal government to open its capacious pockets for the benefit of public broadcasting, it urged that this financing be used to leverage additional dollars, from states and local school boards, from other foundations, and especially, from the U.S. corporate community. This never has been called by its real name, commercial sponsorship of public television — that would be too crass. So it always has been given the sanitized label of "corporate underwriting." Some of the largest U.S. corporations were thus drawn into the support of public television.

Exxon, for example, sponsors *Great Performances*, which presents outstanding music, drama, dance, and opera; Gulf, and now Chevron, put up the money for the *National Geographic Specials*; Mobil Oil for *Masterpiece Theatre* (almost all of it re-runs from the BBC and other British program producers); and so on, and so on. IBM and Xerox tend to specialize in one-time only dramatic shows and quasi-documentaries. AT&T contributes nearly

\$10 million a year in support of the *MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour*. The umbrella for all of these programs and series — the nationwide network of local public stations — was cre-

ated, in effect, by Ford plus governments, and under that umbrella the U.S. corporate community has been drawn heavily into financing the major shows that dominate prime-time public television (roughly, 8-to-11 p.m.), create its "quality" image, and attract sizeable if not mass audiences.

All of this has been done with a great deal of sophisticated understanding of how the broadcasting business really works. We on the outside tend to think that the prime-time blockbusters keep the networks going. The fact is, however, that the major "cost centers" so-called — the net of advertising revenues minus program costs — are in fact segments of the overall schedule such as daytime television, Saturday mornings for kids, and, of course, sports television.

In public television, it tends to work the other way 'round. The Ford Foundation, plus the federal and other governments, created and now maintain the national network of public stations and the program distribution system — which, as I've noted, is via domestic satellites, the first such system in all of broadcasting. The Children's Television Workshop provided the core programs for kids. The corporate community continues to fill prime-time with major programs and series. But there are a lot of additional hours in the broadcasting schedule, and these hours require an assortment of lower cost shows, produced locally or by station consortia or by state networks, or just bought off-the-shelf from independent program producers: how-to-do-it shows, talk shows, news and analysis shows, so-called "point of view" shows, and documentaries — especially documentaries, many of which fill holes in the prime-time schedule. Neither the Ford Foundation nor the federal government nor the U.S. corporate community in the strict sense finances any of this programming. (In fact, both CPB and PBS control discretionary program funds — almost all of it derived from the federal appropriation — and some of this money is used for documentaries produced by independent programmers.) But they did create and now maintain the nationwide network that provides a home for this programming, and in this larger sense they share in the responsibility for it.

For what purpose? That, as I see it, is the question that scarcely anyone in our society wants to address. Isn't everybody in favor of quality programs for kids? Who's to question the presentation of first-class drama, or the New York Philharmonic, or the Metropolitan Opera? But this is to derail the debate into bland "motherhood" type questions, and similarly bland answers. But the basic ques-

tion remains: What public purposes are served by these essentially public expenditures — either direct, by virtue of public appropriations, or indirect, by virtue of revenues foregone — and by the public television network thus put in place and thus sustained?

Not unexpectedly, both the national network and the local stations long since have been taken over by people of the same persuasion as those who dominate the entertainment, cultural, and journalistic enterprises in our society generally. These people belong to what often is called “the liberal culture.” I’m not sure that “liberal” is the right word. But I do think I know one thing about this culture, partly from my own experience inside public television, and that is that it’s a highly *iconoclastic* culture. It is a culture that likes to trash the “establishment” and takes particular pleasure in tentatively *negative* criticism of our society’s prevailing institutions.

The purpose that is missing from public broadcasting is thus supplied by those who see the industry as a cow to be milked. Very much like the folks who staff the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, *Time* and *Newsweek*, ABC, CBS, and NBC, these people do have a purpose: and that is to influence how the rest of us perceive reality — how we perceive our society and our values and, indeed, *ourselves*. And they are the ones, not the people who sign the checks, who make the critical day-to-day decisions about what programs are made, with what content, and what programs are scheduled and promoted. These are the decisions that drive the net-

work, and weigh heavily in determining its influence.

A few years ago, Richard Brookhiser, an editor of *National Review* and a board-member of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting — appointed by President Reagan, needless to add — did address the question of the purposes of public radio and television, by way of the content of public affairs programs. He proposed that the CPB board undertake a careful, scientific investigation — insofar as program content can be assessed and evaluated scientifically — of program bias. Was there any? Was it “liberal” or “conservative” or neither, or some of both? Was this programming markedly anything that could be identified? His proposal was greeted with hysterical shouts of neo-McCarthyism, and he was accused of trying to limit the options of the creative community. I suspect that all Mr. Brookhiser was up to was trying to answer the questions, “What are we doing?” and “How are we doing?” and “How if at all is the public served by what and how we’re doing?” — and I think these are very appropriate questions indeed for those who oversee the expenditure of public funds. Well, a study was undertaken; it was not regarded as especially definitive; its findings were ambiguous, and the matter was dropped.

Now, please understand me: I do not presume to suggest that public broadcasting is about to bring the walls of our Republic crashing down. I doubt that any institution has that capability (fortunately) in our society. But I do think that public broadcasting has an important influence, that it does

affect public attitudes, and that it does bear also on our values. I think that we need more and more scientific, critical analyses of all television programming — but especially of *public* television programming. In the first place, public television professes to provide a special, first-class, highest-quality program service. It sets itself up as the bellwether for all of television, and so ought it be judged. Then, too, public television is supported in major part by public funds: another unique level of public responsibility. Finally, it draws heavily on corporate support, and so the appropriate role of American business in American society is in question.

I especially want to stress this last point. Surely the management of Exxon, for example, does not think of *Great Performances* as having any purpose other than elevating the tone of American society by exposure to such marvels as the Met and the Philharmonic — and so it probably does (along with giving consumers a nice, warm feeling for Exxon gas and oil). But a lot of other programming rides on the back of these prestigious cultural offerings: the documentaries and think-pieces, for example, designed by the “cultural” iconoclasts who tend to dominate our entertainment and news elites (and who probably rather dislike Exxon among other corporate fat cats). So just how far does Exxon’s responsibility reach?

I do not presume to know the answer to that question, or to any of the others I’ve raised here. But I do think they are important questions for all of us, and for our society. And I think it’s about time we began, systematically, to look for some answers. 🏠

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# “Richard Weaver and Hillsdale College”

by George Roche

Richard Weaver believed in the primacy of ideas. A rhetorician, philosopher, historian, economist and teacher, Weaver argued that modern man has abandoned his moral and ethical obligations. He viewed intellectual history not as a force of progression but as a record of a decaying culture.

Born in North Carolina and educated in the South, Weaver joined the English department at the University of Chicago in 1945. His agrarian perspective based on the Platonic-Christian tradition gained broad appeal as he challenged the West to “define its way of life” and reminded us that we ought to see “judgments of life as not merely shifting and casual but necessary and right.”

Much of my career and life has been profoundly influenced by Weaver’s message that a free society is not simply a compendium of people or political interests or economic drives or cultural norms; society is an idea, and it is fueled by other ideas working in concert or in conflict with one another, creating the institutional structure in which we live.

Another more recent writer has supported Weaver’s claim about ideas. In his epic study, *Modern Times*, Paul Johnson writes: “In the last resort, our civilization is what we think and believe. The externals matter, but they cannot stand if the inner convictions which originally produced them have vanished.”

Examining American culture today, one can find little if any talk of defending “inner convictions.” We see instead wide acceptance of the notion that having convictions is bad; it is better to be “open” to all values, judging none, embracing none.

But not so at this institution. Hillsdale College bases its educational mission upon the preservation of timeless truths while instructing generations of students in the application of such truths to their present responsibilities.

The Richard M. Weaver Library Collection, donated to Hillsdale College on November 6, 1989 by Mr. and Mrs. Louis H.T. Dehmlow, serves as a source of reflection for readers who are encouraged to be ever mindful of the importance of “first principles.”

Weaver made famous a phrase which we are proud to have incorporated into the masthead of this publication and all our endeavors at Hillsdale: “Ideas have consequences.”



Richard M. Weaver, the author of *The Ethics of Rhetoric and Ideas Have Consequences*.



Hillsdale College President George Roche, Polly Weaver Beaton, Carla and Louis Dehmlow.



Mr. and Mrs. Louis H.T. Dehmlow and the sister of the late Richard M. Weaver, Mrs. Polly Weaver Beaton.

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