

TV Restriction Smacks of Orwell's 1984

By Bill Hobby

Notes From a Curmudgeon

People, or at least members of Congress, are concerned about violence on television. I have been, all of my adult life, a radio and television broadcaster. For about one-third of my adult life, I have been an elected public official.

Both occupations are subject to intense public scrutiny. Broadcasting is graded by rating systems that measure how many people watch the program. Advertisers buy their time accordingly. Public officials are graded at every election.

There has recently been much interest in term limitation. But people re-elect their legislators, federal and state, overwhelmingly. They watch the programs about which our would-be nannies complain. If the public officials were not popular, they would not be in office. If the TV programs in question are not popular, they would not be on the air. In other words, term limiters and would-be program censors want to tell OTHER PEOPLE whom they can vote for and what programs they can watch.

If you don't like your public officials, vote against them. If you don't like some TV programs, don't watch them. The officials that OTHER PEOPLE elect and the programs OTHER PEOPLE watch is their own business, not anybody else's.

That apparently isn't what Democratic Senator Paul Simon of Illinois thinks. He wants television networks and stations to send a signal indicating that somebody thinks the next program is "objectionable." Viewers would have a switch that would blank out the program. The "Big Brother" that George Orwell predicted would control our lives didn't arrive by 1984, but he's not far behind schedule.

Senator Simon grew up in the newspaper business. He should have a livelier sense of what the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is about. Apparently he does not.

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How much harassment is enough? (1)

Mr. John Demjanjuk has been acquitted of having been a prison guard at a German death camp during World War II. The trial at which he was convicted was a farce. The evidence against him was that of aged witnesses who "identified" him after 50 years. Russian documents later proved he was not the man the prosecutors claimed he was--or the man the witnesses "identified."

The Israeli Supreme Court, in a belated but courageous act, reversed the conviction. After having wrongfully imprisoned Mr. Demjanjuk and threatened him with death for a decade, did the Israeli government then release him, apologize to him and compensate him?

No. The government held him while trying to decide whether to prosecute him for allegedly having been yet another guard at yet another camp. Did the prosecutors not try their best case first? So much for Israel's claim to be a land of law and due process.

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How much harassment is enough? (2)

For three years the Federal Trade Commission investigated one of America's most successful companies, the Microsoft Corporation (in which I am a small stockholder) for alleged anti-trust violations. The investigation ended with no charges being filed.

The Justice Department has now decided to plow the same ground all over again, doubtless costing Microsoft another fortune in legal fees. Microsoft is the world's dominant maker of computer software. Apparently the government's policy is to penalize success by, in effect, levying fines in the millions of dollars that go to lawyers.

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Republicans like to say that government should be run like a business. Last month Republican Governor John Engler signed a bill repealing all local school property taxes in Michigan, effective December 31, 1993. (The bill was sponsored by a Democratic legislator). That bill takes away two-thirds of the money necessary to operate public schools in Michigan. The legislature has not yet passed the taxes necessary to run the schools in 1994-95.

Is that any way to run a business?

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In June, the United States House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly to stop building the Superconducting Supercollider (SSC). To call the vote irresponsible would be too kind. The vote was part anti-Texan, part Luddite (anti-big science).

Last year the House voted to do the same thing--for similar reasons. The SSC vote was the first after the House defeated a balanced-budget amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The consequences of that amendment were (and are) completely unknown. Texas congressmen, notably Representative Charles Stenholm of Stamford, were among the amendment's most vociferous advocates.

In 1987, Texans overwhelmingly passed two bond issues totalling \$1 billion to help pay for the SSC. The project is now under construction. To abandon the project now would be to walk away from about \$1.2 billion in state and federal dollars already invested. The benefits to the nation and world that can be expected to flow from the SSC are huge, if incalculable.

The project was saved by then-Senator Lloyd Bentsen, chairman of the Senate Budget committee. Bentsen persuaded the Senate of the worth of the project and prevailed in the ensuing conference committee.

That was last year. Bentsen, of course, is no longer in the Senate but is Secretary of the Treasury. This is this year. What were our two Texas Senators doing even as the House was voting on the Supercollider? Clowning around on the Capitol steps with Ross Perot.

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