

TV: The Time Griffin Dropped a Heavy Question

And F. C. C. Chief's Reply Was Edited

By JOHN O'CONNOR

Television has a habit of being so clumsy that it can get to be embarrassing. For today's amusing-depressing capers on "The Merv Griffin Show," the Columbia Broadcasting System's contribution to the wonderland of late-evening talk shows.

Earlier this week, Merv, as he seems to be known to one and all, came up with a program featuring prominent women, headed by no less a prominent woman than Martha Mitchell (many oohs and aahs from the studio audience).

Mrs. Mitchell [wife of Attorney General John N. Mitchell] he explained, was very outspoken and "some of you may not agree with what she says, but that's what's great about this country, everybody can speak out and say what he believes." (Applause.) True, everybody can speak out but that doesn't mean they're going to be heard on commercial television.

However, I anticipate. Mrs. Mitchell came out and she was outspoken, if only on quite predictable topics.

There was the usual talk-show nonsense. Would you, asked Merv, run for Vice President? No, she replied, "I'd rather just help straighten out the country." Then Mrs. Mitchell offered her own insights into various public personalities. On Senator J. W. Fulbright, Democrat of Arkansas: more like half-bright" and "now he's down to quarter-bright." On John B. Connally, Treasury Secretary: "He's done such a job; he thinks he's running for the Pope." On Mayor Lindsay: "It's so good he's out of the Republican party; now we don't have to make excuses for him."

It was, more or less, the

familiar Martha Mitchell repertory. Merv smiled at the "outrageousness" of it all, the audience applauded and Mrs. Mitchell made a graceful exit. Then Merv brought on Pamela Mason, the actress (who did offer the opinion that if Mr. Mitchell didn't agree with Mrs. Mitchell, "she'd be out on her ear") and Dr. Joyce Brothers, the psychologist and columnist.

The show simmered along normally until, near the end, Tom Smothers, the comedian, wandered into the proceedings unannounced. He has a new show being syndi-

cated by the Westinghouse Broadcasting Company, and a generous plug was probably on tap. Somehow, though, the subject meandered onto television censorship and restrictions, and Merv made a vague reference to Nicholas Johnson, Federal Communications Commissioner, being on an earlier show and being "a little misinformed."

Mr. Smothers quickly allowed as how "that's the most absurd thing I have heard," that Mr. Johnson probably has more accurate information on the communications industry than any other person in the United States. Merv backed up a bit, stanchly noting that "anybody who wants to do some straight talking can come on here."

The exchange was brief, and very likely puzzling to most viewers. Its explanation, though, would have to be traced back to the Aug. 12 program with Mr. Johnson and to something more than met the viewer's eye or ear that evening.

That program also began on a cautionary note from Merv, this time to the effect that while most people in this country say "aye" to American life, there are some "articulate, outspoken" rebels and mavericks who say "no," albeit constructively.

Then the host brought on Peter Fonda, the actor, Mort Sahl, the comedian, Michael Crichton, the author (proving perhaps that one man's rebel is another's best-selling Ivy League author) and Mr. Johnson.

For what happened next in the Los Angeles studio, I am forced to rely on the testimony of several "informed sources" who happened to be on the scene at the time. First, of course, there was a commercial break, and the studio monitor carried a spiel on a nationally known brand of aspirin. Then Merv presented his guests with the evening's Heavy Question: "What concerns you the most right now in the nation, maybe in the world?"

Mr. Fonda and Mr. Sahl tossed that one around clumsily for a while, and then about seven or eight minutes later came the second commercial break, with Merv himself "live on film" frying bacon and demonstrating the ability of a certain brand of paper towels to absorb the drippings.

Following that demonstration, however, Commissioner Johnson said he had been considering the question of the evening and, rebelliously enough, he was concerned about those first two commercials. Then came a thoroughly predictable Johnson

assertion on the pervasive affluence of commercials.

For one thing, he maintained, pitches for drugs such as aspirin have contributed significantly to the creation of the much-deplored "drug culture" among youth. For another, aside from the second commercial touting high-cholesterol bacon and ecologically harmful paper towels, it also illustrated the theory that every commercial winds up being a commercial for another product and life style—in this case the deluxe battery-operated pan used to fry the bacon.

This was indeed interesting and provocative talk for commercial television to be recording. It seems, however, that it proved to be too interesting and provocative. That short segment of the show was never put on the air.

Instead, starting quite noticeably in the middle of Commissioner Johnson's remarks, the segment was cut to a short three-and-one-half minutes and, at least in the Los Angeles area, the first two commercials were yanked and replaced. This did make for some awkward moments later in the program. At one point, for instance, when Br. Sahl was getting verbally restless, Merv wryly asked, "Would you like to get back to paper towels?" Pity, once again, the puzzled viewer.

In any case, the usually genial host spent the rest of the program rather hysterically defending the good name of commercial television, milking the studio audi-

'What Bothers You?' Got 'Ads' Answer

ence for obvious applause. ("Wait a minute. What's wrong with entertainment?") and insisting that censorship was no problem ("That's not my problem. C.B.S. censors, I don't. I deliver a package.")

One of the more interesting exchanges:

Mr. Griffin: "It's the last time you're going to be on this show, Nick."

Mr. Johnson (smiling): "Maybe it's the last time you'll be on this show."

Mr. Griffin (jumping out of chair in mock terror): "That just came from the Government, folks. See what they're doing!" (Applause and commercial break.)

Mr. Griffin did, of course,

have an unenviable problem for a talk-show host to handle. But, given his guests and his Heavy Question, that problem was entirely predictable. If he wanted to be provocative and controversial, he could have been much better prepared for it. Instead, in the classic illustration of protesting too much, he indulged in meaningless bromides about "speaking out."

At the end of the Aug. 12 show, he declared: "I do think we ought to give one applaud (sic) to commercial television for allowing all the things to be said here that have been said tonight."

Ladies and gentlemen of the viewing audience, I give you the old Zen sound of one hand clapping.
