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TV: 'Keep the Government Out of the News Business'

AS A CERTIFIED liberal, I should at this point in time be in a terrible state, one verging on hysteria, over the sad fate of public affairs TV shows presented by the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). According to the standard version, one Henry W. Loomis was appointed director of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB)—which serves as the conduit for federal funds to PBS—to break up a liberal faction that had seized control of the public affairs programming. The key figure in this alleged liberal cousinage was Sander Vanocur, who had become the Walter Cronkite of PBS with the incredible salary of \$85,000. Others involved were Bill Moyers, and a group that puts on "Washington Week in Review." The "fairness doctrine" was represented by William F. Buckley, Jr.

Loomis has clearly moved to bust up this public affairs operation and it may be true that he is not ideologically enchanted by the views of Vanocur & Co. However, while I certainly don't want to see Vanocur, Moyers or even Bill Buckley on welfare, it seems to me that most of the discussion about this "purge" has missed the crucial point. I don't want the United States public affairs program on television, whether its content be liberal, conservative, Maoist or vegetarian.

In other words, I am delighted to have my contribution as a taxpayer go to improve public television, which is the mission of the CPB. But I don't want a nickel of it to go into endowing a government news service. I have spent too much time in nations where the state operates TV, and have seen, in France for instance, news programs which—I was convinced—had been personally edited by the late President Charles de Gaulle.

NOW THERE IS a stock reply to this: The CPB should give the money to the PBS with an absolute guarantee

of non-interference. Then public television could set up a "fourth network" which would be unbiased, neutral, objective, etc. This is a charming notion, but inherently preposterous.

It is preposterous, first of all, because it rests on the Platonic premise that out there somewhere in time and space there is such a thing as "objectivity." I reject this premise: Any operation, such as PBS, achieves an ideological life of its own, a dedicated sense of "objectivity" which it is prepared to defend. I like to think that I am objective; so, I'm sure, do Sandy Vanocur, Bill Moyers and Bill Buckley. We can have a grand time competing for the "objectivity" prize of the year, but not while we are running a government TV program.

It is preposterous in the second place because the Congress is charged with responsibility for the expenditure of public funds. If it gives money to CPB with a guarantee of non-interference, why couldn't it do the same thing for the Pentagon? (One can visualize a hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee at which an admiral explains that, yes, it is true that the last three carriers sank on launching. But then Congress really shouldn't interfere in the internal operations of the Bureau of Ships.) Sorry, in a responsible democratic government that dog won't hunt.

To say this is in no way to oppose federal funding of educational television. It is rather to suggest that the funds should be expended on programming that does not get the government into the news business. Not because the news business is "controversial"—hell, I love controversy—but because as an Augustinian liberal, with a profound distrust of human nature including my own, I don't want that kind of power rattling around inside the bureaucracy.

