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The Selling of a Contempt Citation

"Make no mistake. We have clear evidence of deceit—men's words electronically altered to change their very meaning."

"The Subcommittee is seeking information about practices which could, and were designed to, mislead TV viewers into believing they are viewing reality when in fact they are viewing a fiction created by a film editor."

"The art of cutting and pasting TV film is now so sophisticated that a sentence may be cut in half, qualifying words removed and the sentence put together without the least indication that this occurred. This is truly the 'newspeak' of 1984; the age of Big Brother is already upon us."

The quotations come, as you will have guessed, from Congressman Harley O. Staggers and his Commerce Committee Investigations Subcommittee by way of justifying their harassment of CBS News in connection with the filmed documentary, "The Selling of the Pentagon." Mr. Staggers and twenty-five of his colleagues on the full Commerce Committee have already voted to cite CBS President Frank Stanton for contempt of Congress because Mr. Stanton, quite correctly and courageously, refused to honor a subpoena of material that had not been used on the CBS show. Now the question is whether Mr. Staggers and his supporters will be able to persuade a majority of the House to go along with them in their wholly illogical and perilous leap from criticism of particular aspects of a particular program to interference with the network's most fundamental, constitutionally protected rights.

It is not exactly a secret that some of the features of the documentary which Mr. Staggers professes to find so outrageous were the subject of sharp criticism in this space a few months back. That does anything but endear to us his current, misguided campaign to make them the basis—the excuse, in fact—for this abuse of governmental power. Nor do we find the alarm that he and his colleagues have expressed particularly convincing. Go back and read those quotations we have cited. Now recall that a contempt citation, if it comes, will come from those same wonderful people who—on a daily basis—bring you the Congressional (so-called) Record, that most altered, revised, rearranged, cut-

and-pasted version of "reality" that exists among public documents. We will go further. Perhaps you won't believe it, but in the Congressional Record *sentences may be cut in half, qualifying words removed and the sentence put together without the least indication that this occurred.* Members of Congress, in fact, remake their remarks in such a way as to *mislead the public into believing that they are reading what really happened, when they actually are often reading a fiction created not by a film editor but an anxious, second thought-laden congressman.* Make no mistake, as Mr. Staggers might put it—and has, in fact—*we have clear evidence of deceit—men's words altered to change their very meaning.* A student or a reporter could indeed do worse, if this thing passes, than to research the editing techniques of some of those legislators who at present profess to be so disturbed about the dubious authenticity of events and views being presented to the public as a real life version of what happened.

Who is for the pursuit of this contempt citation or of this campaign to wrest from CBS material that government has no business demanding? Mr. Nixon has spoken against it ("as far as the subpoenaing of notes is concerned, of reporters, as far as bringing any pressure on the networks, as a government is concerned, I do not support that"). So has Mr. Nixon's Director of Communications, Herbert Klein. So too has Assistant Secretary of Defense Daniel Z. Henkin, whose rearranged words on the CBS documentary were one source of complaint against it. The problem is that Mr. Staggers is apparently making some headway in the House—working assiduously to invoke support on the floor in his capacity as a committee chairman.

We think it is time for some of those who oppose this dangerous effort and who have lapsed into silence to speak out. And we think, too, that the vote this week will be something of a test of the skill and strength of the new House Democratic leadership. Speaker Albert may be the key man. We hope and trust he will make the necessary moves to turn this vindictive campaign around.