

Poster

Networks' Cop Out

A Commentary *11/17/69*

By Nicholas von Hoffman

The television networks can broadcast live and in color from the moon but not from the base of the Washington monument. NBC had one, mind you, one live camera to photograph the largest political meeting in the history of the United States. It was used three times for a total of five minutes, and that was all the live coverage there was on American television; the other networks had none.

The vast rally was made to order for television. It's the kind of story that makes us old pad and pencil journalists wish we could get into electronics, but on Saturday it was the TV correspondents who were coming up to us and saying, "My God, you don't know how lucky you are to work for an outfit that will cover the news. We collapsed on this story."

Think what it would have cost if the networks had gone out to buy the talent that was performing on the stage across the field from the great marble spike. Arlo Guthrie, Dick Gregory, Leonard Bernstein, Richie Havens, Pete Seeger, Earl Scruggs, Peter, Paul and Mary; Mitch Miller, John Denver, Tom Paxton, John Hartford and the cast of "Hair" singing the super hit song from the show. If that isn't a spectacular, then what is? Companies like Plymouth and Westinghouse pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to put entertainment of that quality on the tube, and here it was for free.

But that wasn't all. There was a supporting cast of hundreds of thousands—costumed in everything from the saffron robes of buddhist monks to cowboy outfits. There was street theater, impromptu traveling bands of music makers, giant puppets, a thousand different kinds of visual jokes, signs and slogans. Just the kind of stuff that drives a writer to make movies or try for a job in television.

On the more sober side, there was the political meaning of this event, which was either missed or mutilated. If, five years ago, somebody had told you that between a quarter and a half million people would turn up at the White House carrying hundreds of red flags you would have had him committed to the boobyhatch. But it happened; there were countless red flags of revolution and black flags of anarchy there on Saturday. On the flag poles planted in a circle around the base of the Washington Monument where the American flag usually flies, there was a Vietcong flag, peace banners with the upside down Y, Yippie pennants and emblems from organizations too new or too obscure to be easily identifiable.

It would have been performing a service television is supposed to perform to show these symbols and how they were used. It would have been useful to let the

television audience see and make its own judgment of how many people in that throng were signifying their politics by making the V-sign and how many were using the clenched fist and shouting, "Right on! Right on!" Because of the television blackout—and that's what it was for practical purposes—the public will have to accept reporters' estimates of these highly indicative acts. We reporters try to be fair but every human being's perception is colored by his beliefs and sympathies, so that each person will make and pass on to the public a different assessment when the public could have made its own.

See COMMENT, D6, Col. 1

THE WASHINGTON POST

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TV 'Blackout'

COMMENT, From D1.

Now let's look at what the networks' schedules show them putting on the air during the hours the President of the United States was hiding in his house behind barricades of buses and battalions of soldiers lest maddened waves of peace-crazed young Americans see him in the flesh and ask, "WHY?" NBC was offering, among other items, "Banana Splits Adventure Hour," "The Flintstones" and "The All-American College Show." About the time this unbelievable march kicked off down Pennsylvania Avenue, Metromedia was airing "The Spirit of Notre Dame," a 1931 movie starring Andy Devine and Lew Ayres, for its Washington audience. Lord, wouldn't it be terrible to miss that one to look at a half a million pinko faggots who ought to go back to Russia?

Later in the day, Metromedia showed the following musts: reruns of "Daktari," "I Love Lucy," "Gidget" and "I Spy." The American Broadcasting Company had a football game on, while CBS checked in with some real heavy stuff: "The Perils of Penelope Pitstop," "Scooby-Do, Where Are You?" "Superman" and "The Red Skelton Show."

However, never let it be said that CBS, with its staff of highly paid, veteran newsmen is not alert to the exigencies of the times. No, no, CBS was on the spot with an evening special telecast, an hour and a half long, and do you know what it was? No, you don't know what it was because you weren't watching. You were too worked up and excited about the March, so you missed it. You missed, "Miss Teenage America With Dick Clark."

A lot of people are going to blame this disaster on Slugger Agnew. Slugger's all right. Don't pick on him, because he's one of the few elected officials we've got who shows himself for what he is. If he feels that his boss isn't getting enough adulation from those Alpo Dog Food salesmen who read the Associated Press wire-

copy on the air, Sluggor muscles himself some airtime to threaten the network executives.

He needn't have bothered. It appears from asking around that the decision to black out this enormous rally in favor of "The Archie Comedy Hour" and "Wacky Races" (CBS, the both of 'em) was made before Sluggor opened America's biggest mouth. And that's the pity of it. They don't need to be threatened with censorship. They'll castrate themselves and call it "sound news judgment."

They are genuinely upset at what Sluggor did to them, because he did it out in the open. They've lost face and been humiliated, and so they're running around to the newspapers saying, "We're journalists, too, we should have the same first amendment-free speech rights as the printing press."

You can't maintain a right without using it and in the case of free speech that means saying things a lot of people don't like. You don't need free speech to put on propaganda plugs for government front organizations like the Boy Scouts and the Red Cross. You need the protection of the first admendment to do things that will get you angry phone calls and letters, things like covering the rally Saturday.

As it is now, we might as well let Sluggor have the networks. That way there won't be any confusion about their being independent news agencies; everybody will know that they will have become, in a more genteel way, the American equivalent of Radio Moscow. We'll all buy ourselves shortwave sets and listen to the Canadian Broadcasting Company.