

# TV Networks Reject Ford Interview

By Jack Anderson

The major television networks, including the Public Broadcasting Service, have refused to broadcast a conversation with President Ford about America.

Philadelphia businessman Edward J. Pizek, who thought the American people should hear what the President had to say, offered to pay the networks commercial rates to present his views during prime time. Still, the networks rejected the program.

The story of their astonishing arrogance is worth telling, as evidence of the tight control a few network czars exercise over the TV channels. Here are the details:

It has been my lot to expose the blemishes on the American system. But the sight of the morning sun glinting off the Capitol dome still gives me a thrill. I arranged, therefore, to do a bicentennial television show with President Ford.

He was to give his reflections on the current condition of America, the health or illness of our basic institutions; the

general outlook for the American experiment after 200 years.

The President talked, quite upliftingly I thought, about the enduring values and strengths as he has experienced them over a lifetime of public service.

He spoke about the changes he would like to see. "There has been a tendency of late," he complained, "to herd people together. . . The government is almost overpowering the individual, whether he is a production worker or whether he is a businessman or whether he is a farmer."

Oh, I asked some impertinent questions: How did he as a politician defend his profession? Has the presidency become too remote from the people?

After reminding him how the British ambassador had been startled to discover Abraham Lincoln shining his own shoes in the White House, I even asked: "Do you shine your own shoes?"

Mr. Ford shot right back: "I shined my own shoes for 61 years, and I can do it. And I made my own breakfast for most of my lifetime."

The program was nonpolitical, noncontroversial. But all in all, it provided a rather intimate glimpse of the President's faith

in the country. I thought it was worthwhile television.

The networks, however, disagreed. This upset Edward Pizek, who had offered to help underwrite the production costs. The son of Polish immigrants, he started out with \$450 in 1946 and founded Mrs. Paul's Kitchens, Inc. Its sales now exceed \$35 million.

For Pizek, the American dream had come true, and he was indignant over the attitude of the networks toward a patriotic program. So he tried to buy commercial prime time to present the President. The networks wouldn't sell him the time.

Each network explained, in effect, that it doesn't carry interviews with the President unless he is buoyed up by a supporting cast of network personalities. In other words, it is not so much the President's answers that matter; it's who asks the questions.

Even more incredibly, public television turned down the show. The taxpayers are doling out \$46.4 million to public television stations this fiscal year, plus another \$9 million for facilities, plus additional funds for specific television shows. Yet the Public Broadcasting System

refused to present, at no cost to the taxpayers, the President talking about the greatness of America.

The explanation, believe it or not, was that the program contained no "hard news," which would justify its inclusion in a line-up that regularly features book reviews and programs about yoga, cooking and chess plays.

The purpose of my conversation with the President was not to make news. Still, there was a time when the opinions of the President of the United States were thought to be news. No holy writ, not even good sense all the time, but always news.

Editors felt that since he was the nation's leader—and since his personality might have something to do with whether there would be peace or war, justice or injustice, order or chaos—even his foggiest notions along with his great concepts were news.

I have been saying for some time that the government doesn't own the news. Network executives don't own it either, and their treatment of President Ford's patriotic comments can only diminish the standing of the free press in America.

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