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TV: U.S.I.A. Propaganda

Questions Raised by Buckley's Showing of Film on Czechs on WPIX Tonight

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

The name of the program is "Senator Buckley Reports." Featuring the Conservative-Republican Senator from New York, it is seen throughout the state once a month. The latest installment will be shown in the New York City area tonight at 10:30 on Channel 11/WPIX-TV. It is, intentionally or unintentionally, an unusually informative installment.

The Senator, James L. Buckley in full, devotes his half hour to the United States Information Agency, whose operations have recently been under the Senate fire of J. William Fulbright. Senator Buckley's guest is Bruce Herschensohn, U.S.I.A. motion-picture and television service director. His interview with Mr. Herschensohn precedes and follows the first showing on American television of a 15-minute U.S.I.A. documentary called "Czechoslovakia: 1968."

The film won an Academy Award for the best documentary short of 1969 and, among other prizes, an award for best documentary in the Israel International Film Festival of 1969.

The agency estimates that the film has been seen on television by 100 million people in 46 nations and that it has been seen in theaters by an additional 12 million in 35 countries. In Mexico, according to agency figures, it has been shown a total of 88 times on 30 television stations to an estimated audience of 12 million.

The agency says that the film has won praise wherever it has been seen but, a release for the Buckley program notes, "leftist papers in various countries have bitterly attacked the film."

Before the showing tonight, Mr. Herschensohn explains the role of the U.S.I.A. "in telling the truth." The agency, he says, under the direction of Frank Shakespeare, produces about 1,000 films a year, but most of these are short film clips and only from 20 to 30 are full-fledged documentaries.

Unfortunately, he adds, it is practically impossible to measure with any accuracy, no matter how many times a film is shown or seen, "what it does to the human mind." and that is the purpose of propaganda. As Mr. Herschensohn says later in the program, "Everyone is a propagandist; we [the U.S.I.A.] simply admit it."

1948, the Russians take over, and again the music turns ominous. A picture of a home shelf is seen with Stalin's photograph in front of a portrait of Jesus.

In the 1960's, there is the noticeable ideological thaw under the Dubcek regime and, then, in 1968 there is the cynical Soviet crack-down. Moscow was caught with its viciousness showing, for the whole world to see and do nothing about.

Czechoslovakia in 1968 provided flawless material for the anti-Soviet propaganda machine. The film, made by Sanders-Fresco Film Makers, makes the affecting most of that material, its clicks and music punctuated with only one word of narrative, the Czech word for freedom: Svoboda.

Before the showing of the film, Senator Buckley concedes that it was an "article of faith" with him that "nothing the Federal Government could do could be any good." After the film, however, he smilingly observes to Mr. Herschensohn that "Senator Fulbright wouldn't approve of this film, would he?" The official, of course, agrees, adding that Mr. Fulbright's current argument that propaganda during the upcoming "period of negotiation" with the Soviet Union should be toned down is "very simplistic, very naive and stupid."

So much for Mr. Fulbright and his direct threat to Mr. Herschensohn's job. But the U.S.I.A. official goes on to make a number of extremely interesting observations on the nature of propaganda.

"The Voice of America, he notes, along with Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty attempts only to 'put facts—that would otherwise seem negative to a foreign audience—in a context of truth.' Yes, he admits, propaganda has an evil connotation 'if it's used for evil purposes.' The point is to reach 'captive nations' with the 'truth.'"

One problem: After watching Czech youths taunting Soviet soldiers, a viewer might conclude that some hope for the future resides in the world's youth. Then, the same viewer might wonder how effective a Soviet propaganda film might be on the shootings of students at Kent State.

Another problem: Do those captive nations include dictatorships on the Right? Or has the U.S.I.A. made a film of British troops firing on civil-rights marchers in Northern Ireland?

The questions go round and round.

Senator Buckley and Mr. Herschensohn chuckle knowingly over the obvious fact that "Czechoslovakia: 1968" has never been shown in the Soviet Union or in Eastern Europe. No chuckling is devoted to the fact that last week the Treasury Department confiscated Cuban-made films being shown in a New York theater.

The entire subject of propaganda is fascinating. So is Mr. Buckley's program this evening.

The film itself is indeed expertly effective. Opening with a shot of a film-slide projector, it introduces the sound of slides clicking by on an automatic track. The numbers on the slide track represent the year. So, slide 18 takes the viewer to Czechoslovakia in 1918, and the years quickly click by over the 15 minutes to the brutal Soviet suppression in 1968.

All, of course, is carefully calculated. In the early years, the pictures contain nothing but smiling peasants, at play or in church, and the music is lyrical folk. Then, in 1938, Hitler invades and the music turns ominous martial. In