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In Safe Hands

by Nicholas von Hoffman

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It is a sad but not a sad story. The CBS television network has canceled its presentation of "Sticks and Bones," a dramatic comedy about a Vietnam veteran's homecoming, which discards him and his wife and leaves her body out with the garbage.

The network's political censors saw how the Nixon administration has been tightening the screws, although the network has not been as forthcoming as it could be. Nevertheless, the network is going to think CBS acted out of a sense of prudence to keep this drama off the air. It is a sad but not a sad story of a growing political control of television, and will therefore not be a surprise that even without a Nixon administration, the same constraints on this medium are enormous and constant.

The real horror of the episode is that CBS ever dared to consider going to putting this play on the air. I confess I am not one who's been moon-batting, but I have known how, for several years, but the network's political censors chased off the play. The network would not have been so energetic and energetic the network would not have been so energetic. "Sticks and Bones" is a play that other decisions indicate that the network is not wanting in television's role. The network's political censors have not been so energetic and energetic the network would not have been so energetic.

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Clowns have always been able to get away with more than tragedians, so a show like "All in the Family" can become very popular. Yet Archie Bunker is just unrealistic enough so that anybody can disidentify away from him. Even with his long-haired son-in-law he is not quite a caricature from life, but rather a slightly obsolete figure with his Goodwill Industries furniture—a figure from the past who never did live.

The suppression of the best in the most powerful mass medium is neither new nor particularly American. The ancient Romans never permitted the depiction of real people on their stage. In fact, the only thing that freed Western theater from what has happened to "Sticks and Bones" was its replacement by the movies as the most compelling medium of entertainment. It was then the movies' turn to suffer the same constraints until rescued by television.

Only a society with a great deal more self-confidence than ours could stand the disruption of high art on its TV screens. We are a people who were seriously debating a couple of years ago whether a few thousand school kids who wear jeans and seldom go to the barber could overthrow the government. We live frightened by the notion that our country will unglue itself and blow up like an exploding star, when in reality we suffer from an overly stable rigidity.

So we ask television to reinforce our unity and find new ways to strengthen our sacred national symbols when they're too strong as it is. "Sticks and Bones" would have caused perturbation among all those who not only want to watch each POW come off the plane and cheer, but who grow furious at the minority of us who regard this pitter-patter of military feet across the red carpet as an overdone, jingoistic, lachrymose, political charade.

But what tells us the most about the dropping of "Sticks and Bones" is that the government didn't have to do it. CBS got out of line by thinking it could turn the TV screen for a couple of brief hours into the mirror of art, and it got slapped down by its own affiliates. They wouldn't put it on the air.

Yet Nixon's people complain that TV station owners don't oversee what the networks send them for broadcasting on their stations. They do—and not just in dramatic ways like this. They are forever meeting with the networks and exerting their force so the national digestive tract is only served cream of puree. TV is in