

Nat Hentoff: Good journalism would suffer if Congress cut NPR, PBS funding

By Nat Hentoff

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THE national, sharply discordant aftermath of NPR's firing of Juan Williams continues with the possibility it may lead Congress to cut government funding of not only National Public Radio, but also the Public Broadcasting System and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. But what if the heads of NPR were removed, and more Americans across party lines realized how much they would lose if PBS and NPR would clearly show the record of their continuous independence under present partial government funding? I will show some of that valuable record.

Here, as of this writing, is the panicked state of the top NPR current management led by president and CEO Vivian Schiller. She handled the Juan Williams expulsion with the finesse of Joe Biden's ad-libbing. I telephoned a first-rate NPR reporter and news analyst who, like his other colleagues, has never been accused of political bias. When I asked what he thought of Williams' termination, there was an embarrassed silence - and then: "I'm not allowed to say anything about that." On National - Public -

Radio, opinions are now as classified as the CIA's?

Not to be silenced, as the Oct. 23 Washington Post reported, were senders of "thousands of e-mails and phone calls" to NPR's Washington headquarters, "The majority expressing outrage." And NPR station affiliates around the country were disturbed by the firing's impact on NPR's Pledge Week. Said Robert Gordon, president of Nashville Public Radio and an NPR board member:

"I've gotten a lot of calls and a lot of e-mails, and in fact, more than we've gotten about anything else." (New York Post, Oct. 23). He added: "We've had a few people make donations in support of the decision, but more decided not to support us."

On Nov. 11, there will be an NPR board meeting, and the current clueless CEO may be looking for a new job.

In any case, this furor has led to a strong movement among some leading Republicans in the House to cut off any government funding from all public radio and television on the ground that no taxpayer money should subsidize any news media, especially controlled by biased liberals. Syndicated columnist Michelle Malkin bluntly summarized this attitude among some other Americans as well: "Not one more red cent of public money should go to NPR, PBS and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting." (New York Post, Oct. 23).



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A clear, rational response to this shouting to free the taxpayers came from Michael Meyers, executive director of the New York Civil Rights Coalition - the most independent news analyst I've ever known. He said (New York Daily News, October 22): "Withdrawal of public dollars ... would only strangle independent voices on public radio, and ... television."

As for NPR, a primary focus of my own columns is the rescuing of our constitutional liberties, and NPR's straight reporting continually gives me leads to check out and validate for further research. I know of no other news source equal to NPR, for example, in tracking government (past and present) contempt for our Fourth Amendment protections from government unconstitutional searches and seizures of our private personal information. This has resulted in the Fourth Amendment now being on life support.

Williams' firing by a vaporous CEO, who makes me wonder how she ever got that job in the first place, has cleared the air - not for the Michelle Malkins and certain House Republicans - but for those of us who know how much we would lose if NPR were seriously weakened.

Syndicated columnist Nat Hentoff is a nationally renowned authority on the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights. He is also a member of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, and the Cato Institute, where he is a senior fellow.

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