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## Free-speech war: Which side for you?

By Nat Hentoff

<http://www.JewishWorldReview.com> | 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." ([JewishWorldReview.com](http://www.JewishWorldReview.com), Oct. 23).

I heard directly from readers who agree with her and the congressional cutters after my column last week on the firing of Juan Williams -- so independent that while he was at NPR and also guesting at Fox News, he angered some Fox News analysts during panel discussions by rebutting their views. Among the scalding e-mails to me from readers appalled at my trying to retain government partial support of NPR and PBS, there was also an accusation -- just one line -- that I had made this reader ashamed to be Jewish. Please let me know, dear reader, just how this proud Jew did that?

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."

Such independent voices as PBS's "Frontline," which singularly continues -- and often exceeds -- the penetrating journalism standards of CBS' Edward R. Murrow. National and global in scope, utterly free of political correctness, "Frontline," for example, has documented attacks on our civil liberties by both the Bush and Obama administrations. On Oct. 29, History Makers -- the key international forum composed of broadcasters and producers from across the globe -- awarded its "Outstanding Achievement Award" to Frontline for "setting the standard for serious investigative journalism for almost 30 years" (WorldScreen.com, Oct. 29).

Among many PBS achievements in illuminating our history, as well as present directions, was a series on founder John Adams that should have been shown and studied in every school in this country.

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.

An Oct. 29 New York Times editorial, "The Noise About Public Radio," speaks urgently of "the worst possible outcome of (this) clumsy contretemps." The surge of accusations about bias and unfairness at NPR and PBS ignore these "vitaly important sources of information in the nation's cacophonous democracy."

The editorial makes the often missed point that the 797 NPR member stations around the country -- "which played no role in the firing -- rely on federal support for about 10 percent of their annual budgets, \$90 million in all." That's no small amount, as indicated by the importance to those stations of the pledge weeks, which also ask for what they have to pay NPR for certain programming on a subscription basis.

"Anyone who listens regularly to NPR news and its local stations," the Times concludes, "can hear the due diligence to fairness in its reports. Any cutback in federal support would hurt the American public."

I hope those members of Congress of either party who listen often to NPR, its local stations and PBS will act accordingly.