

The BUGLE

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Commentary: When the Constitution came dramatically alive on TV

Nat Hentoff

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The most valuable, quintessential American television I have ever seen began in 1983 with the 13-part "The Constitution -- That Delicate Balance" on PBS. I watched, enthralled during the opener, as a former CIA director, a prominent civil liberties attorney, senators, renowned journalists and the head of the [FBI](#) engaged in spirited, often bristling discussions on how this founding document affects each of our lives among present national controversies.

The series, "Fred Friendly Seminars," still continues, not on PBS' core program schedule, though absorbingly available, as I'll show, in other ways. This current PBS mismanagement decision was not caused by Republican efforts to defund public radio and television. It was one of the customary mistakes by clueless executives in any field, including at the current White House. It can be rectified.

As Ralph Engelman writes in "Friendlyvision" (Columbia University Press, 2009), through all these years, the former U.S. presidents, current and past members of the Supreme Court and so many other who's who of American life are "pressed on these programs to think on their feet and explored the contradictions in their thinking."

We see some of that on scattershot Sunday TV talk shows and cable TV squabbles during the week, but the "Fred Friendly Seminars" aim much deeper. For example, the 13-part Constitution series set the standard for the subsequent seminars as embodied by Friendly's introduction to that program and many of the others:

"Our job is not to make up anyone's mind, but to open minds -- to make the agony of decision-making so intense that you can escape only by thinking."

How often does that happen to you in any of the media these days?

Friendly used to tell me: "People in this broadcast business forget that public broadcasting began in order to educate." As a previous partner of Edward R. Murrow in deeply exploratory TV documentaries on CBS, he had shown how rarely, though riveting and educational, commercial television could be.

Subsequently, during his two years as head of CBS News, starting in 1964, Fred continued, and started to expand, the legacy of James Madison, who told us:

"Knowledge will forever govern ignorance. And a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."

Friendly, who often brandished his principles like weapons, fired himself as president of CBS News when, despite his objections, upper management canceled the broadcast of a vital Senate hearing on our war in Vietnam in favor of running a scheduled audience-building rerun of "I Love Lucy." His like has not been equaled there since.

He went on to become the Edward R. Murrow Professor of Broadcast Journalism at Columbia University -- and then as director of the Columbia University Seminars on Media and Society. Friendly had long

believed in the fundamental educational need for the Constitution to be taught and understood. So, with the support of the Ford Foundation and the Annenberg/CPB Project, the "Fred Friendly Seminars" arrived -- like Louis Armstrong playing "West End Blues" -- on PBS with, at first, "The Constitution -- That Delicate Balance."

Anthony Lewis, long an inspiringly knowledgeable educator on the Constitution at the New York Times, said:

"Television is the most powerful medium for getting people to remember, and Fred has found a way to use it that nobody else has."

Consider the national educational impact of this first "Fred Friendly Seminar" series, as Engelman recounted in "Friendlyvision" (Columbia University Press):

"The series had a significant afterlife as widely used teaching tool in high schools and colleges. The Annenberg/CPB Project produced curriculum materials to supplement the videos. Soon after the broadcasts of the series, more than two hundred colleges acquired a set of the videocassettes. In addition, the Annenberg/CPB Project funded a related telecourse. Several years later, Friendly proudly noted that \$800,000 worth of tapes had been sold."

The very first program that the Constitution can pulsatingly come off the pages into the lives of Americans. Friendly retired in 1993 and died of a stroke in 1998. As I shall report next week, the "Fred Friendly Seminars" continue under the leadership of his wife, Ruth Friendly, a significant participant in the series from its beginning, and its president, Richard Kilberg.

Also next week, how you can get "The Constitution: That Delicate Balance" and many of the other "Fred Friendly Seminars" from the web.

During many periods of our history, there has been crucial need of truly informed public understanding of the Constitution's active involvement in many vital areas of our lives -- when not silenced by a president. Never before, however, during the growing suspensions of parts of the Constitution by George W. Bush and Barack Obama has this public education been so critical as now.

Yet many of us, let alone members of Congress, are largely ignorant or dismissive of our founding document. However, since Fred Friendly's death, Ruth Friendly and Richard Kilberg have demonstrated their commitment to Fred's legacy. If PBS were to restore these seminars to its core national programming and more funds became available, a new series of "The Constitution: That Delicate Balance" would again provide the dramatic remedial education of Americans, including our youngest generation, that our national identity is based on the Bill of Rights, the separation of powers and other rights and liberties in that document that makes our survival as a free people more than a Fourth of July flag-waving.

During our conversations away from the television studio, Fred Friendly was an uncompromising mentor for me of who we are as Americans, with the sustenance of our living Constitution.

Nat Hentoff is a nationally renowned authority on the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights. He is 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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