

## Congressional Republicans' gag rule on NPR and PBS

By Nat Hentoff

<http://www.JewishWorldReview.com> | As a continuous critic of the Obama administration, I have been hoping for remediation from congressional Republicans. They've done well exposing the dangers to all of us of Obamacare's health rationing. But now, passionately involved in defunding National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting System, they're depriving much of the citizenry of independent news reporting and analysis at a combustible national and international time.



Predictably, on March 16, the Republican-led House Rules Committee rushed this defunding bill "to the floor under a so-called closed rule, which does not allow for amendments, counter to the promise of more openness by Speaker John Boehner." (New York Times, March 17)

Despite the clamorous charges of NPR's entrenched bias favoring the left, last September's survey by the singularly reliable Pew Research Center revealed (ABC News, Feb. 15) that "45 percent of its audience identify themselves as moderate, while 29 percent identify as liberal and 22 percent as Republicans." And many more independents and libertarians.

As the New York Daily News's ace reporter on radio and all other media, David Hinckley, notes, "the House bill doesn't simply 'defund' NPR. It would change the way public radio could do business.

"Specifically, it prohibits public radio stations from using tax dollars to buy NPR programming -- which is how public radio stations get shows like 'Morning Edition' and how NPR raises much of its money." (Daily News, March 21)

Also disrupted is how PBS does its business. Especially left adrift amid the increasing cacophony of belligerent partisan cable television, blogs, et al. -- as network radio and TV news become shallower due to their commercial underfunding -- will be rural regions where many depend on public radio and television to keep them alert to how infectious global inhumanities are impacting this country and their lives.

As the Republican assault on this essential public service continues, I think of what I and my children, through the years, have learned from PBS and NPR, including what's missing from most public schools -- our own history:

Such as Ken Burns' documentaries that spent many hours giving us the flavor, texture and perspective of our own Civil War; a multi-part, much needed dramatic reassessment of John Adam's pivotal role in our history; and such other deeply absorbing educational programming as the very origins of human life. Even when our economy was flourishing, where was any of that to be seen substantively, if at all, on commercial television?

Currently, although I cover many of the issues and influential personages on "Frontline," I keep learning more about them on this searching program, which, last year, received an "Outstanding Achievement Award" from the international forum, History Makers, for "setting the standard for serious investigate journalism for almost thirty years."

(historymakers2011.com, Oct. 29). How much of this standard do you see outside of public broadcasting now?

I've often described "Frontline" as continuing the illuminating legacy of Edward R. Murrow. Where are the present Murrows in commercial television? Ted Koppel came close when he was head of ABC-TV's "Nightline," but that program now seldom makes news from what's hitherto been left out of the news.

In "Public Broadcasting, a 'luxury' we can't do without" (Washington Post, Feb. 27), Ken Burns reminds congressional Republicans about public broadcasting's " (commercial-free) children's programming as well as the best science and nature, arts and performance, and public affairs and history programming on the dial."

I keep coming back to John Adams (long overshadowed, as he feared he would be, by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison) suddenly bursting into our history. At the time, I was speaking about the challenges and triumphs of the Constitution in schools around the country. In some, where the John Adams series was shown, the kids were excited to meet this sometimes tempestuous Founder.

Recently, as I reported in this column, I first heard from National Public Radio about President George W.

Obama's Guantanamo Bay-like prisons in Illinois and Indiana, its inmates stripped of due process. Where were CBS, NBC and ABC covering it?

As if in answer, there is a book that should be taught in all journalism schools, "Salant, CBS, And The Battle For The Soul Of Broadcast Journalism: The Memoirs Of Richard S. Salant" (former head of CBS News), (Basic Books, 1999). Salant, whom I knew, was a courageous and independent force in commercially sustained broadcast news, but this is how strongly he felt about PUBLIC broadcasting:

"The issue is not whether CBS, NBC or ABC ought to be as nutritious as PBS. They cannot be. And that is why noncommercial broadcasting was created -- to do what the market forces pressing on commercial television prevent it from doing."

Salant recalled, as I do, the documentaries that used to be on CBS News: "More than any other genre, it's the documentary which has produced the most memorable landmark broadcasts of historical significance." They still do -- but on PBS.

I learned a lot as reporter and citizen from what Salant calls "the great Edward R. Murrow and Fred Friendly CBS News Documentaries." They brought down Joe McCarthy by giving him full freedom of speech on that program.

Next week: The equally legendary Fred Friendly, whom I also knew, who went on to bring, through PBS, landmark breakthroughs in our understanding of most vital issues of our time -- a series now continued by his wife, Ruth Friendly.

Fred demonstrated how much more deeply and actively informed We The People can be from truly public broadcasting, which Republicans in Congress are trying so hard to shut down and save some public money. But how much knowledge essential to the public will we lose?

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