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THE STATIC AT NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO

INTRODUCTION

National Public Radio is in trouble again. Last year NPR made the headlines as numerous press accounts detailed a litany of financial and managerial embarrassments that drove the largely federally funded \$23 million broadcasting service to the brink of insolvency in 1983. Money remains a problem. Managerial questions aside, critics long have maintained that NPR's programming is often tasteless at best, and at worst, biased. Broadcast segments are openly hostile toward the Reagan Administration and routinely feature the work and rhetoric of such ideological leftists as poet Allen Ginsberg, Common Cause president Fred Wertheimer, socialist Michael Harrington, and one-time network journalist Daniel Schorr. There is little attempt to balance this with a systematic airing of conservative views. Since NPR programming is carried by over 300 American public radio stations, it seems appropriate to ask whether U.S. taxpayers are getting good value for their money.

NPR defenders, such as Senator Barry Goldwater (R-AZ), claim that, "It fills the need for high class programs that the American people can't get through commercial stations."¹ Goldwater probably was referring to classical music, not the recent observations of an NPR commentator who, after spilling coffee in a friend's house, told NPR's estimated 9 million aggregate weekly audience, "Well, I felt like bird crap on an El Dorado....I left with the sensation like I had just wet my pants in church."² Other program guests and commentators have treated listeners to the proper pronunciation of Konstantin Chernenko's last name and emotions associated with the boorish slaughter of bees.

¹ Interview, January 31, 1985.

² "All Things Considered," March 6, 1985.

This prompts one congressional detractor of NPR to say, "They provide a bunch of programs that nobody wants."³ While that is probably an overstatement, a considerable portion of NPR's news and public affairs programming focuses on fringe elements in American society: drug addicts, radical feminists, militant farmers, and eclectic artists. A favorite target is the Reagan Administration.

Those who charge NPR with an attitudinal bias claim that it runs from the newsroom to the boardroom, where executives appear unable to cope with the hard financial truths of the real world. Despite an \$8.5 million emergency line of credit and a \$7 million loan from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) in 1983, NPR's financial woes are far from over. Last month NPR requested an additional emergency \$1.3 million from CPB.

As a way out of the financial woods, NPR's board of directors has proposed a "five year plan" that, critics charge, would discourage member stations from obtaining programs from non-NPR sources, scuttle CPB oversight authority, and still might not reconcile NPR revenues and expenditures. Says one CPB official, "NPR thinks CPB has it in for them. They seem to think, 'People lend you money and then they hate you.' They don't like the reporting requirements, so they stonewall."⁴ A lack of financial accountability is blamed for NPR's problem two years ago. While the 1983 management has been replaced, new NPR executives consistently have resisted coming to terms with the continuing schism between revenues and expenditures, steadfastly refusing to cut NPR operations adequately to balance the budget.

NPR President Douglas Bennet, in a 1985 budget memo to NPR's board, recommended no further cuts; however, in the same memo, he had no problem endorsing "additions to current policy" that would boost NPR's budget by \$1.9 million. Just days before the announcement last March that NPR needed additional emergency funds from CPB, NPR President Bennet told The Heritage Foundation, "We're going to start a Saturday/Sunday public affairs program."⁵

Although NPR is a publicly funded entity, NPR executives repeatedly refused to provide The Heritage Foundation with budget documents, programming materials, and access to broadcast tapes for this report. There is rising static at National Public Radio but its managers refuse to pay attention to it.

GOING BROKE, THE NPR WAY

Congress created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) in 1967. Through direct contributions to NPR or through

³ Interview, March 29, 1985.

⁴ Interview, March 8, 1985.

⁵ Interview, March 6, 1985.

Community Service Grants (CSGs) to NPR member stations, CPB provides the lion's share of NPR funding. In 1985, CPB supplied \$10.2 million of NPR's \$14.9 million national programming budget. CPB's 1985 Community Service Grants to member stations amounted to another \$20.4 million.

NPR is a curious organization from a structural viewpoint. Although a creature of the federal government, its board of directors is not subject to ratification by the executive or legislative branches. Directors are selected by the board itself and NPR member stations. The board determines how much stations will pay for NPR programming. Although a \$23 million enterprise, NPR collects a scant annual \$1.5 million from its member stations. Only \$500,000 of this is for programming. Because a large portion of NPR's board represents the stations, the board, historically, has resisted raising membership and distribution fees to reasonable levels. NPR also provides stations with "representation" in Washington, for which it charged them \$1 million in 1985.

NPR is an advocacy group and programming source, roles that often are in conflict and stand in the path of efficient management. Beyond that, NPR lobbies Congress for increased funding and covers congressional activities as news, creating yet another conflict of interest. There is little chance that NPR will run a negative story on Representative John Dingell (D-MI), chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, anytime soon. Dingell's committee controls NPR funding.

Congress has charged CPB with financial oversight responsibility for funds that it distributes. The Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 provides that recipients of this funding, "Keep adequate books, records and reports, be audited biannually by independent accountants, submit audit reports to CPB, and provide such other financial information as CPB may require." NPR executives consider these requirements overly burdensome and have never really paid serious attention to them. Says one former CPB executive, relations between NPR and CPB "are thin."⁶ A number of CPB sources told The Heritage Foundation that NPR representatives routinely lobby Congress behind CPB's back. "They're very effective."⁷

CPB-NPR tensions came to a head in 1981. Then CPB Chairman Sharon Percy Rockefeller and former NPR President Frank Mankiewicz collided over the proposed percentage of CPB's budget for public radio. Mankiewicz successfully lobbied Congress for a greater percentage of CPB's budget over Rockefeller's objections. "She never forgot that," Mankiewicz told The Heritage Foundation.⁸ Although NPR acquired an increased percentage of CPB's budget, total direct federal funding to the public radio network had been

⁶ Interview, March 4, 1985.

⁷ Interview, March 8, 1985.

⁸ Interview, March 4, 1985.

on the decline since 1979. Mankiewicz embarked on an ambitious plan designed to free NPR of federal funds by aggressive solicitation of increased private sector underwriting and joint communications ventures with industry.

Called "Operation Independence," the plan was supposed to eliminate the need for federal funding by 1986. "We thought it wind and it was," say a former CPB executive. "They went in to lobby corporations without a business plan."⁹ Mankiewicz says CPB erected roadblocks including petitioning the Federal Communications Commission to deny NPR permits needed for the joint ventures. "NPR's entrepreneurial activity scared them to death" at CPB, Mankiewicz said. Through a spokesman, former CPB Chairman Rockefeller declined comment.

For a myriad of reasons, Operation Independence never got off the ground. By the end of 1982, NPR was running a \$1.5 million deficit. NPR executives had made erroneous revenue assumptions based on the plan and were spending money based on these wrong assumptions. Compounding the problem, employees had run amok with NPR American Express cards, making at least \$85,000 in undocumented charges. Financial reporting ceased for six months. There was no central purchasing strategy. Checks were written against nonexistent funds. At the height of the crisis, top executives were out of town for weeks at a time, vainly trying to raise cash. The problems came to a head at the April 1983 Public Radio Conference in Minneapolis.

Mankiewicz told representatives from public radio stations that NPR's deficit had swelled to \$5.4 million. The number grew. When the smoke cleared, Mankiewicz, his top deputies, several board members, and 138 employees were gone. Temporary management was appointed. Interim NPR President Ronald Bornstein characterized what he found as "a shambles." Withholding taxes had not been paid to the U.S. Treasury in months. Anxious creditors were banging at the door. NPR was threatened with eviction and stood ready to default on May payrolls. It was "a great world of expansionism and dream, a Camelot society," Bornstein said.¹⁰ He instituted vast managerial changes and secured an emergency \$8.4 million credit line from CPB.

Almost one year later, a House subcommittee held hearings on the debacle.¹¹ Past and present NPR management, along with CPB officials and Members of Congress, all took turns deploring the events that created NPR's financial crisis. They said it would never happen again. Yet on March 16, 1985, NPR asked CPB for an

⁹ Interview, March 4, 1985.

¹⁰ The Washington Post, August 15, 1983, p. C1.

¹¹ Hearings before the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, Committee on Commerce and Energy, U.S. House of Representatives, February 10, 1984.

additional emergency \$1.3 million and got \$921,000. CPB approved the authorization after Congressman Dingell intervened. Dingell, in a March 12, 1985 letter to then CPB President Edward Pfister, blamed NPR's financial plight on "revenue shortfalls from CPB and other sources" and strongly urged CPB to allocate the funds. CPB acquiesced. "They caved in to Dingell," a congressional source told The Heritage Foundation.

INSTITUTIONAL BIAS

NPR President Bennet sharply denies that NPR's programming reflects a political bias. "That's a charge frequently made against the electronic media. It's no different here." Despite his denials, the criticism appears valid. On March 15, 1985, NPR's afternoon news program, "All Things Considered," broadcast an interview with the Washington bureau chief of Izvestiya, the Soviet newspaper. The bureau chief related the tender tale of how a Soviet icebreaker freed a trapped school of whales and led them out to sea. Yet, only the month before, the State Department had charged the Soviets with vastly exceeding whaling quotas in U.S. waters.¹² Greenpeace, the environmental lobby, long has criticized Soviet whaling practices, maintaining they violate international agreements and are harmful to the species. The NPR reporter, however, avoided questions on this subject, nor did he inquire about the freed whales' fate once led to open waters.

An institutional bias clearly exists. Comparing it to other electronic media is irrelevant, for these other outlets are funded privately. As a recipient of public funds, NPR has a fiduciary responsibility to the taxpayers to provide competent management and an ethical duty to provide scrupulously objective reporting.

Before coming to NPR, Bennet was Jimmy Carter's director of the U.S. Agency for International Development; he had been a top aide to George McGovern's first 1972 running mate, Senator Thomas Eagleton (D-MO), and had worked for Connecticut's liberal former Senator Abraham Ribicoff. Bennet's predecessor had a similar ideological profile. Frank Mankiewicz, NPR president from 1977 to 1983, served as George McGovern's campaign manager and as Robert Kennedy's press secretary in 1963.

Many other NPR employees come from philosophically similar political backgrounds. NPR Capitol Hill reporter Cokie Roberts is a child of Congress. Her mother is Representative Lindy Boggs (D-LA), and her father was the late Representative Hale Boggs (D-LA). NPR reporter Linda Wertheimer is married to Common Cause president Fred Wertheimer. Commentators for NPR include such political leftists as Lou Cannon, Tom Shales, Daniel Shorr, Rod McLeish, and Tom Noyes.

¹² State Department Cable, February 1985.

NPR does carry the comments of two conservatives, John McLaughlin and Donald Lambro. But they cannot balance the phalanx of liberals NPR airs. Typically, moreover, NPR does not give conservatives a chance to speak for themselves but summarizes the conservative side of an issue or sticks pejorative labels on it. Almost without exception, the most frequent target of this is the Reagan Administration. This was particularly true in late February and early March this year, when NPR attacked the Administration on farm aid, the MX missile, and assistance to Nicaraguan freedom fighters. In describing Administration actions or policies, NPR used language that was so loaded that it would not have been allowed on even the major networks.

When Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega offered to send 100 Cuban military advisors home, for example, NPR reported, "A Nicaraguan peace overture was blasted by the Reagan Administration today as a lot of hot air."¹³

NPR devoted an entire segment to a report released March 7, 1985, by a leftist organization calling itself the International Human Rights Law Group. It documented alleged human rights abuses by Contra forces. Warned the NPR reporter, "They are uniformly gruesome." NPR consistently downplays atrocities committed by the Sandinistas and has stated that "abuses committed by the Sandinistas declined sharply after 1982." Yet, when Miskito Indian leader Stedman Fagoth Muller held a Washington press conference on February 25, 1983, to catalogue Sandinista abuses, including live incinerations, every major media outlet carried the story, except NPR.¹⁴ When, a week later, NPR did cover the story, it devoted 44 lines to Fagoth's charges and 120 lines to discrediting them.¹⁵

Prior to the recent congressional approval of more MX missiles, NPR broadcast a barrage of anti-MX stories from just about every conceivable angle. When it gave former chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Representative Charles Bennett (D-FL), a chance to express his strong opposition to the MX, NPR failed to point out that Bennett's vitriol might have had something to do with his losing his chairmanship to MX supporter Les Aspin, the Wisconsin Democrat.¹⁶ Two days earlier, NPR aired MX criticism from Common Cause's Fred Wertheimer, and husband of NPR reporter Linda Wertheimer.¹⁷ (NPR President Bennet told The Heritage Foundation he saw nothing wrong with such nepotism.) And the day after the House MX vote, NPR broadcast a "news" story that traced the steps of an "undecided" Congressman through the MX vote.

¹³ "All Things Considered," February 28, 1985.

¹⁴ Ben Hart, "Ventriloquist Journalism at NPR," Policy Review, Spring 1984, p. 75.

¹⁵ Accuracy in Media, AIM Report, July A, 1983.

¹⁶ "All Things Considered," March 6, 1985.

¹⁷ "All Things Considered," March 4, 1985.

Predictably, the Congressman chosen for this NPR profile was not one of those who had been wavering but decided to vote with the majority for the MX, but one who voted with the minority against the MX.

NPR's extensive MX coverage pales beside its treatment of the spring's farm policy controversy. In late February, NPR dispatched an "All Things Considered" co-host to Iowa for one week. The reports from the farm were emotionally supercharged.

NPR: "I heard about a farmer not far from here in Ames last spring who got ready to put his crop in. He filled the planter. He got on the tractor. He stopped the tractor. He went and got in his pickup truck and shot himself."¹⁸

On the same program, Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) blamed an increase in rural domestic violence on farm problems. Outside the basketball arena the day before, NPR asked militant farmers who was to blame.

Man: "The President and Block and that Stockman, he's the one who's really hurtin' us."

Woman: "I believe it's a little too late now. I believe the answer was last November, but nobody took it seriously then."

Inside the arena, Bishop Maurice Dingman of Des Moines: "Listen to me. This policy called the maximization of profits is what is truly sacred in this country. Not human beings. Not families. Not communities."

Ten days earlier, NPR Washington commentator Rod McLeish had reached a similar conclusion. Speaking on the farm issue, he told NPR's audience, "Sooner or later, somebody is going to have to figure out just how much social upheaval you can justify in the name of economic efficiency. Benito Mussolini, the Italian dictator, allegedly promised to make the trains run on time in return for depriving his people of their liberties. Presumably, that's going too far...." McLeish blamed the Reagan Administration for farm discomfort.

NPR's farm coverage continued throughout March. Most of it played to President Reagan's critics; little effort was made to analyze or explain the aims and content of the Reagan farm program. NPR President Bennet defends the network's reporting, asserting that NPR's presentation of polar-opposite views balances the news. Yet, the polar opposite of NPR's liberalism is rarely afforded equal time. As the months passed and the major farm

¹⁸ "All Things Considered," February 28, 1985.

catastrophe failed to erupt, NPR did not report, as The Washington Post did, that the predicted farm disasters had been exaggerated.¹⁹

Recently, NPR commentator Daniel Schorr discounted the Reagan economic recovery by stressing reports alleging an increase in American infant mortality. "Thus leaving the U.S. twelfth among developed nations in this key index. This is not the only disquieting trend. A Harvard-based physicians task force has found hunger in America reaching epidemic proportions....President Reagan says the nation is poised for greatness. Maybe, but not all of it."²⁰ NPR ignored the solid data demonstrating that U.S. infant mortality is now at a historical low, while life expectancy is at a historical high.

This April, NPR broadcast an emotional report on pediatric malnutrition. The predictable culprit: "Reagan Administration budget cuts."²¹

NPR and its member stations are more than creations of government; they seem to be unabashed advocates for its perpetuation and growth. Many NPR executives have had long public sector careers. Some NPR reporters prefer what they perceive as the great "creative" latitude they enjoy at the network. Indeed, many of NPR's news features would not see the light of day on commercial stations.

QUESTIONABLE TASTE

NPR claims that its programming is a cut above commercial fare. Yet, much of it is indistinguishable from the worst aspects of what is often heard on hard rock stations. For Valentine's Day 1985, NPR treated morning listeners to singing dogs. The commentary that followed was equally enlightening.

Man: "What do you think, Bob?"

Bob Edwards: "It's important. It makes a statement. It's the anthem of a generation, the Milk Bone generation."

The previous morning, NPR broadcast an interview with Allen Ginsberg, the poet and leftist activist.

NPR: "Allen Ginsberg first gained literary prominence in the 1950s, when he and other artistic rebels were part of the Beat Generation. Now, three decades and many poems later, the beat goes on....In 1955 the lines were considered by some to be offensive. To

¹⁹ The Washington Post, May 13, 1985, p. A1.

²⁰ "All Things Considered," March 4, 1985.

²¹ "All Things Considered," April 5, 1985.

others they were certainly an indication that something else was happening in Eisenhower's America....In this collection, Ginsberg has ordered the poems chronologically. Readers can follow his experiments with words, protests, love, homosexuality, and Buddhism...."

NPR to Ginsberg: "You remained on the cutting edge of whatever was happening, ah, well beyond the Beat Era through Vietnam. You're now working with New Wave people and...."

Ginsberg: "I'm not sure it's a cutting edge, it's just what I'm interested in."

NPR: "Those of us who are far younger tuned out the music 20 years ago, you know what I mean?"

Ginsberg: "Well, I had a curious experience. First of all, there was another generation of poets singing....People like Bob Dylan or John Lennon.... Succeeding Punk and New Wave singers also carried poetry forward in the music. And there was just some natural contact...since I'm an old pederast, I was attracted to young people...."

NPR: (Laughter)... "You put the same things into your body that some of your friends did and...."

Ginsberg (Laughing): "Still do."

NPR: "And they didn't make it."

Ginsberg: "Oh, I think almost all the interesting poets of my generation experimented with psychedelics--peyote or mushrooms or LSD--and did quite well with it, actually."²²

There are many other NPR news features of equal calibre and class. In recent months they have included essays on the Sports Illustrated Annual Swimsuit Issue,²³ "Sleep Guilt,"²⁴ and what men should feed women on dates: "A slab of meat that approximates the size of a small mammal will turn a woman off."²⁵ This year, on the 20th anniversary of Malcolm X's death, NPR's evening news program devoted a 20-minute segment to his life and times, complete with numerous recordings of his inflammatory and racial separatist speeches.

On February 25, 1985, NPR broadcast a telling interview with convicted mass murderer Henry Lee Lucas. The reporter's questions and commentary were more revealing than the killer's answers.

²² "Morning Edition," February 13, 1985.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ "All Things Considered," February 28, 1985.

²⁵ "All Things Considered," March 4, 1985.

NPR: "Henry Lee Lucas sits in the small, cinder-stone interrogation room in the Williamson County, Texas jail, sipping unsweetened black coffee and smoking filterless cigarettes, the ash smoldering down and spilling onto the tips of his fingers as he talks about killing hundreds of people."

After an initial exchange with Lucas, the NPR reporter paints a picture of the killer's upbringing. Lucas's brother stabbed out one of his eyes when he was eight years old, and....

NPR: "Henry Lee Lucas grew up in the hills of Blacksburg, Virginia. He says both his mother and father were alcoholics and as a child he needed to steal--food, clothing, money--to survive. He says his mother was a prostitute. Both Henry Lee Lucas and his sister remember their upbringing as being hard and sad and mean....Criminal experts don't consider serial murder a distinctly American crime, but the circumstances of American society seem to make the United States vulnerable to unsolved serial murders. Henry Lee Lucas lived for years among the rootless, the searching, homeless, and roaming of this country...."

On the same program, a commentator railed against the Reagan Administration for thinking about budget freezes for social services. The sequence of the features may not have been a coincidence.²⁶

Last month, NPR reviewed the play "As Is."

NPR: "'As Is' centers on two former lovers, Rich and Sol, who are reunited when one of them says, 'I have it.' But, starting from the specific, the play also examines a broader universal impact of this modern day tragedy. Author William Hoffman...."

Hoffman: "It reminds me of another experience of my life. I'm Jewish and 50 members of my family were murdered during World War II. I guess I'm what you call a Holocaust survivor. All of my fears of the Holocaust were brought up again by this catastrophe around me. Especially since there was a great denial in the community that this was even happening. Sure, there was media coverage but it was degrading, it was mean-spirited, it was terrorized, terrified. I wanted to be true to the experience, absolutely honest to the experience."

Producer: "It's a very life-affirming play."

²⁶ "All Things Considered," February 25, 1985.

Hoffman: "The play is dedicated to friends of mine who have died of A.I.D.S."²⁷

Is this kind of taxpayer-financed programming appropriate? That question "vexed me all the time," says former NPR President Mankiewicz, who bemoaned the pervasiveness of what he called "Snail Darter Programming" on public radio, referring to successful pressure exerted by cultural and ethnic minorities to win a disproportionate share of air time. No matter how vexing, the question has been answered in the affirmative. NPR's institutional bias has created internal, perpetual pressure by NPR officials for increased programming. While the capacity for radio programming may be infinite, at least in the minds of NPR executives, the taxpayers' capacity to fund it is not. And while Bennet speaks of this new public fiscal attitude, NPR's budget figures do not reflect it. NPR's programming budget shot up 20 percent between 1984 and 1985, an astounding figure, given its high level of indebtedness.

Before its acute financial crisis mushroomed in 1983, NPR's former auditor warned, "Over the past several years, programming costs have increased significantly."²⁸ The warning went unheeded then, as now apparently.

FUTURE OF NPR

NPR's entropic future has spawned national programming competition. A rival, American Public Radio (APR), is making gains on NPR with popular programs such as "Business Times." NPR executives dismiss APR, formed by five "dissident" NPR member station managers, as a masked commercial network. But NPR executives are worried. NPR's proposed "five year plan" would establish membership "...dues which would limit costs to large stations and thereby maintain their incentive to buy the benefits of aggregation from NPR rather than seeking them individually or in cooperation with other stations." This is clearly a shot at APR.²⁹ It is also an attempt to close ranks and establish NPR as the sole programming source for public radio stations. "Stations facing an all or nothing decision are more likely to maintain their subscriptions when budgets are tight."³⁰

While individual public radio stations clearly favor decentralization of CPB funding, very few support the role of NPR as

²⁷ "Morning Edition," March 23, 1985.

²⁸ Report of Deloitte, Haskins and Sells, February 5, 1980.

²⁹ "Five Year Business Plan," National Public Radio, p. 18.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 17.

the sole source for their national programming. APR's popularity has soared. The St. Paul-based network now offers its 297 affiliates 100 broadcasts, an average of 90 hours of programming, weekly. Unlike NPR, which is saddled with high overhead costs and a tightly centralized structure, APR and its ten-member staff act as a clearinghouse for nationwide distribution of programs produced by independent suppliers and individual public radio stations. APR receives no direct support from the federally financed Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Rather, it relies on programming fees charged member stations, private grants, and corporate underwriting. "We fund what's good," says APR's Eric Friesen, the network's executive vice president.

In late May NPR station representatives convened in Denver for the 1985 Public Radio Conference. There, they ratified a modified version of NPR's "five year plan." The Conference-approved plan provides for CPB to distribute all but 5 percent of federal funds earmarked for public radio directly to the individual stations. The plan, as passed, does not require congressional approval, but does require CPB ratification. However, the tenor of the CPB board has changed, and with pressure from Congressman Dingell, ratification is seen as likely. If that happens, NPR could be one step closer to winning its long-coveted monopoly status as the sole national programming source for U.S. public radio stations.

Beyond its possible monopoly status and repeated financial episodes, a question central to National Public Radio's existence remains unanswered: Is it appropriate to make American taxpayers pay for news and public affairs programming laced with institutional bias and dubious taste? The answer is no.

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