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◀ previous Document 4 of 34. next ▶

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There's a 'nuclear option' for PBS' woes as well

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BODY:

The growing controversy over the Bush administration's attempts to replace what it sees as a "liberal bias" in PBS programming with what would appear to be "conservative bias" has forced me to think the unthinkable -- or at least the heretical, certainly in my cultural/ideological circle:

Do we really want or need PBS anymore?

I am not defending the Bush administration's assault on PBS, which is as appalling as it is predictable, nor do I mean to denigrate the fine, often brilliant work PBS has done through the years -- "Masterpiece Theater," "Firing Line," "Bill Moyers' Journal," Ken Burns' epic documentaries on the Civil War, baseball and jazz, among many others.

But when the **Corporation for Public Broadcasting**, the parent of PBS, was created by the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, we lived in a television world largely limited to three commercial networks, a world quite accurately characterized as a "vast wasteland" by Newton Minow, then chairman of the FCC.

We now live in a cable world, a "500-channel universe," and while I would not argue that many of these cable offerings match PBS at its best, they (and Fox) do provide many alternatives to the three original networks we had in 1967. HBO alone has provided some of the best programming available anywhere in recent years, beginning with the best show on television, "The Sopranos."

Of course, cable has two major, perhaps related, drawbacks as an alternative to PBS. Individual families have to pay for it -- \$30 or \$40 a month or more -- which may help explain why about a third of the homes in America don't subscribe.

But politics, not the availability of more alternatives, is the primary reason to question the continued viability of PBS. PBS has become a political football, and in our increasingly polarized and poisonous political climate, that is not likely to change.

Remember, the Bush administration is not the first to challenge the independence of PBS. Back in the early 1970s,

the Nixon administration was so enraged by PBS coverage of Watergate and the Vietnam War that it stacked the board of the **Corporation for Public Broadcasting** with Nixon sympathizers.

"There were tremendous fights, with the Nixon administration trying to prevent public television from doing any public affairs programming at all," Lawrence Grossman, the former president of PBS, subsequently told the **New York Times**.

The Bush administration, which has already accomplished the heretofore seemingly impossible by becoming even more media-averse than the Nixon administration, seems determined to surpass the wizard of Whittier and Watergate in bringing the CPB to heel as well.

Kenneth Tomlinson, the new, Republican, chairman of the CPB, has been pressing PBS so hard to correct what he and other conservatives see as liberal bias that many at PBS think the network's editorial independence is in jeopardy.

Two weeks ago, Democratic Reps. David Obey of Wisconsin and John Dingell of Michigan called for an investigation into the issue.

Though he was originally appointed to the CPB board by President Clinton, Tomlinson previously served as the director of the Voice of America in the Reagan administration and now also serves as chairman of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which oversees Voice of America, Radio Free Europe and what the Washington Post recently described as "other federally funded outlets that broadcast government-sponsored news and information around the world."

"How, some ask, can a man so intimately involved in the Bush administration's efforts to polish its image put politics aside when it comes to running the CPB, an agency created ... expressly to give public broadcasting 'maximum protection from extraneous [political] interference and control,' " the Post wrote.

Moreover, the Post said, Tomlinson "served with President Bush's senior political advisor, Karl Rove, on the board of a forerunner of the BBG during the 1990s."

In other words, Tomlinson is a political operative with deep ties to the Bush administration and its conservative ideology.

Tomlinson has denied that he wants to impose a political point of view on PBS programming and says he seeks only what the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 mandated: "objectivity and balance in all programs or series of programs of a controversial nature."

But Tomlinson wants to replace the current president and chief executive of PBS, Pat Mitchell, with the former co-chairwoman of the Republican National Committee, according to a Page 1 story in the **New York Times** this month that triggered the current debate about the future of CPB and PBS. (Mitchell maintained Tuesday that PBS is free of bias.)

That same story said Tomlinson had "encouraged corporation and public broadcasting officials to broadcast 'The Journal Editorial Report,' whose host, Paul Gigot, is editor of the conservative editorial page of the Wall Street Journal."

The story also said Tomlinson:

* Told members of the Assn. of Public Television Stations in November that they should "make sure their programming better reflected the Republican mandate" at the polls that month.

* "On the recommendation of administration officials ... hired the director of the White House Office of Global Communications as a senior staff member."

* Hired an outside consultant last year to keep track of the political leanings of guests on the PBS show "Now With Bill Moyers."

In an op-ed article published in the Washington Times three weeks ago, Tomlinson said, "To me and many other supporters of public broadcasting, the image of the left-wing bias of 'Now' -- unchallenged by a balancing point of view on public broadcasting's Friday evening lineup -- was unhealthy. Indeed, it jeopardized essential support for

public TV."

Moyers has never denied being a liberal. In fact, he seems one of the few liberals in America who is not afraid to embrace that label in the Bush-Limbaugh-O'Reilly era. Moyers' program featured reporting, often investigative reporting, and since the administration in power since 2001 has been Republican, yes, much of its reportorial firepower was directed at that administration.

But that didn't make the program or PBS biased.

I was intrigued, though, by Tomlinson's reference to "essential support for public TV."

That "essential support" is, of course, financial. Although PBS depends heavily on contributions from civic-minded corporations and individual subscribers, CPB's records show that congressional appropriations accounted for 14.9% of its 2004 revenue. PBS received 24% of its 2004 operating revenue from CPB and federal grants.

It's not surprising that if the federal government is going to help finance public broadcasting, it may occasionally demand a say in the programming, even if public broadcasting is supposed to have editorial independence. This is especially true with an administration that has as little use for a free and vigorous press as the Bush administration, but this problem could easily arise again under future administrations, as it has in the past.

It's that cliché come to TV life -- let the governmental camel stick its nose inside the broadcast tent, and the entire camel, foul smell and all, may follow.

So maybe it's time to get rid of this particular tent and the camel as well, to do away with PBS and its unhappy status as a political football and political target.

Like many other Americans, I would greatly miss "The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer," the best nightly news show on television, and I'd miss all those "Frontline" documentaries and the many other intelligent and innovative programs that PBS provides. So I'm not sure that discontinuing PBS is the best solution to the current problem. But I think it's at least worth discussing.

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO: IN HIS SIGHTS: Richard Nixon co-opted the CPB board. PHOTOGRAPHER: Getty Images

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[◀previous](#) **Document 4 of 34.** [next▶](#)

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