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**Television News and the National Interest  
Leo Cherne**

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## Television News and the National Interest

Leo Cherne

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*Mr. Cherne helped found and is Executive Director of the Research Institute of America. He is Chairman of the Lawyers Cooperative Publishing Company. Since 1951 he has been Chairman of the Board of the International Rescue Committee, which works to assist people who flee from totalitarian governments. He is a member of the Executive Board of the Center for Strategic and International Studies and is Vice Chairman of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board. In 1983 he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Among other honors, Mr. Cherne was awarded the Legion of Honor by France and the Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit by the Federal Republic of Germany.*

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The heart of my concern is the decisive impact on national policy, domestic and foreign, made by television news coverage. The phrase "the news media" has served to shelter television from the examination of its unique characteristics and to endow it with the protection appropriate to the press. Yet the compulsions that move print journalism and those that generate the essential requirements of TV news coverage are different. They affect the public differently; they reward the practitioner differently; they shape national perceptions and policy responses differently.

Television is the most powerful idea- and image-conveying instrument that shapes public views of national policy questions. All public opinion polls agree that more people rely on TV for their understanding of the news than ever before. The numbers of those who rely on newspapers, magazines, and radios have declined. Readers and viewers overwhelmingly assert that they believe what they see on television more than they believe what they learn through any of the other instruments. The intense competition among the networks for their share of this vast market is increasing, as are the revenues that flow from larger market shares. Each rating point added in that competitive share of the audience

is now worth \$10 million a year in advertising revenue, without taking account of the effect it has on programs preceding and following.

At the peak of this competition is the national news segment provided at the dinner hour by the three national networks. Television is the only source of major community power for which there is virtually no countervailing power. It is revealing that no citizen of a foreign nation may own a U.S. television station. If the force being wielded were of little consequence, why would this be so? Another measure of the power involved is the astronomical sums paid to the stars, the anchorpersons who appear to have a significant effect on the number who watch one network news program rather than another. Hodding Carter, in a recent PBS study of anchor people, revealed that Dan Rather's annual compensation (his CBS program, incidently, is number one in this race among the three) is 2 million dollars. Tom Brokaw, number two in the race, earns an estimated 1 1/2 million. Peter Jennings, the spearhead of ABC's third-place effort to become number two, is simply described as "a millionaire celebrity." Another measure of the relentlessness of the competition to dominate the American perception was made evident

during the first weeks after Peter Jennings's selection as ABC's anchor on its national news program. Jennings, a newsman of considerable seriousness, experience, taste, and personal attractiveness (I reflect my own bias — I think he is the best of the three) was sold in the same way that any TV network would sell autos or deodorants.

A former nightly TV person, Betty Rollins, writing an op-ed page column for the New York Times, made some pungent observations stimulated by the Christine Kraft suit. In that piece she said, "Any station dumb enough to pretend to hire an anchor, any anchor of any sex, for his or her journalistic skills deserves to lose a law suit. And just because Ms. Kraft was naive enough to believe the station wanted her for her journalistic skills doesn't mean she didn't deserve to win one."

"But who's everybody kidding? An anchor may be a journalist just as an anchor may be a playwright, but what's that got to do with the job?"

No assessment of television news could be made without acknowledging the often superior presentation, without reference to the point of view being conveyed, of many news specials. The time of day or night and the day of the week selected for the presentation of these journalistically superior news specials often reveals the seriousness of purpose. The competition for audience size has not been forgotten, but it's a competition for a share of a far smaller audience, and far smaller revenues. Prime time is for the high rollers. The contest for audience size defines the essential character of television news.

It is not journalism as recognized by most professional practitioners that dominates this pinnacle of television's nightly news coverage. It is a quite different art (that with the most minor of adaptations fits these requirements): theater. All commercial television is theater, certainly within the hours in which the largest section of the American people watch. The dramatic imperatives apply quite remorselessly to television's handling of the nation's most serious and complex affairs.

The most urgent of those imperatives, if an audience is to be attracted or held, is the existence of tension. Theater requires the sharpening of conflict, the clash of adversaries, and with rare exception, it requires resolution. Life and public events are usually murky, often without endings. Theater usually remains the prisoner of passion created, exploited, and resolved. Theater thrives on good and evil, the clash of human purposes creatively manipulated toward meaning.

Television news is remorselessly moved to that which is the more readily conveyed in its time frame — the violent, the ambitious if not corrupt, the adversarial, the tragic. This is not out of malevolence or some nonexistent conspiracy, but because of the high stakes invested in each 3-second to 3-minute presentation (and a 3-minute presentation is rather rare).

Television news best expresses its purposes and sought-for effects by its traditional abhorrence of "talking heads." Yet we as citizens do most of our living, understanding, and learning in a nearly continuous exposure to talking heads.

I quote James Madison's description of the essential relationship between press and public, the very reason for the special freedom the press enjoys: "A people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy or perhaps both."

One of the ABC TV executives Hodding Carter interviewed for that television show on anchormen states that the hour devoted to local news that precedes the national news is indispensable to grabbing as much of an audience as possible for the Jennings program to inherit. And he observed that ABC local news is known for "flash and trash — as close as you can get to porn in the news business. Our job," he continued, "is to grasp that audience and hold it." In the frenzy of assembling the various pieces needed for the particular ABC national news program that Hodding Carter was observing, one of the principal staff members asked, "How much kaka do you need?" The Inside Story program notes that in the context of assembling a news program, "kaka" refers to the zippy graphics needed to inject color and verve.

Indeed, Roone Arledge, who made ABC the number-one sports network before his elevation to do the same for ABC News, elaborates: "To create this program, there are lights and colors and all sorts of things that have nothing to do with the news at all, any more than type does with the content of newspapers." He unwittingly makes the very point I'm trying to demonstrate. Type in the usual newspaper is neutral. It does not add color, flavor, or the subjective element of effect to a news story. It simply conveys. It is the newspaper's equivalent of the TV camera.

But lights, color, and "kaka" do indeed contribute to the theatrical effect that must be enhanced for that

10-million-dollar rating point that's being sought. TV news handles the abstract and the ambiguous poorly, if at all. With superb skill it conveys the visual, the concrete, the world of action — but not ideas. It poorly serves the understanding of public policy, and in consequence adversely affects the formulation of public policy.

Alexis de Tocqueville made an extraordinary comment on the political behavior of the American people 130 years ago. He said of us that "We cannot regulate the details of an important undertaking, persevere in the design, and work out its execution in the presence of serious obstacles. Democracy has the propensity to obey the impulse of the passions rather than the suggestions of prudence and to abandon the long mature design for the gratification of the momentary caprice."

If he was accurate about our democracy at the time he observed it, it hardly mattered then, and not at all in our relations with other nations. But in time, we became a great power with a capability and necessity to effect international events. Our ability or failure to "persevere in a design and work out its execution in the presence of serious obstacles" is now of critical consequence. Our staying power remains seriously deficient. Closely linked to this debility is the simple fact that if we start anything involving pain, cost, or danger, we had better be able to finish that undertaking quickly and successfully.

Now, clearly, television's coverage of the national news in no way helped shape this characteristic of our national personality or policy, but it can hardly be denied that the methods, thrust, and preoccupation that characterize the intense competition among the three networks and their flagship news programs erode our staying power still further. The electoral process has, in its use of TV, sacrificed much of the educational impact of the campaign or process. Candidate speeches of some length, each designed to elaborate a candidate's view of the major issues, have been replaced by the carefully prepared dramatic vignettes that are the work of a new breed of public-opinion wizards who package the candidate in a series of synthetic promotionals. I recently observed a George McGovern commercial aimed at Massachusetts for the upcoming primary. It fascinated me that George McGovern did not say one word. It simply used his picture on a commercial that described the virtues of the McGovern candidacy.

There are fat cats who provide the staple for TV's remorseless search for drama and its prosecutorial propensity. The most powerful and appetizing fat cat of them all is government. Government — the actions and statements of its leaders, the use of its vast power, its overriding impact on the welfare of the nation's citizens — all of these cry out for the most remorseless observation and coverage by the entire journalistic profession. Even the restraints imposed by the needs of national security must, if they are to be respected, be limited to those matters in which injury to national security is real and compelling, not contrived for serving some other purpose.

However, these commanding considerations, in the interest of the public and the nation, also require that journalists not cavalierly or calculatedly undermine confidence in their governmental institutions. The arbitrary and calculated distortion that occurs when drama is served, when suspicion and disbelief are fostered, serves neither the nation nor a rigorous and skeptical exercise of professional journalism. Among the activities of the national government most adversely affected are those central to national security. If the agencies and personalities involved in this vital function of government are the adversaries in a nightly drama, then those who enjoy the dubious privilege of wearing the black hats are those in any way associated with nuclear weapons and those associated with the intelligence function.

The events in Central America and U.S. involvement in that area have especially fed the belief that if the CIA more generously revealed what it knew, our national interest would be more widely understood and our governmental response to those interests would be accompanied by less disbelief and the possibility of wider support. Now, since it is the rationale asserted by television's news coverage that it pursues the public's need to know and to be objectively informed, and since events in Central America received lavish coverage on the tube, one fact alone makes TV's assertion of serious purpose distressingly hollow. After two years of television's active coverage of the events in Nicaragua and El Salvador, a poll conducted by the New York Times in cooperation with a major network — I believe it was CBS — revealed that only 18 percent of the American public knew that the administration supports the government in El Salvador. Only 14 percent knew that we oppose the Marxist-Leninist government in Nicaragua. Only 8 percent were able to identify U.S. attitudes toward

both countries. In short, the public had been saturated with theater night after night by all three networks. All that was lacking was the audience's understanding of the plot. Would the unveiling of more classified information remedy this appalling circumstance, and if so, at what price?

My view of the desirability of the intelligence community acting to fill the void left by the media — in this case all the journalistic and neo-journalistic instruments — is totally negative. It would be negative even if public understanding would be increased in the process. But a distinguished journalist writing in the *Washington Post* disposes of the illusion that lack of information is the problem. Meg Greenfield had this to say in her article entitled "A Fact Machine Won't Work" that appeared on the Post's op-ed page:

Fact-finding is a governmental passion. From found facts all else is stubbornly expected to flow. I say stubbornly because the desired result almost never materializes. For the first thing that happens is that a journalist or a congressman will assert that some of the evidence is either overstated or untrue. Now this is because a lack of evidence is usually not the problem. What is preventing the acceptance of the government's argument by those it seeks to convince is the disposition not to accept it.

Because it is the particular purpose of this seminar to examine the critical links between communications, command, control, and intelligence, let me advance my reasons for resisting a larger infusion of classified information and judgment into the public discourse.

1. The security of sources and methods must be inviolate. It is essential to recognize that what to laymen may seem to be information which in no way reveals sources or methods can to an intelligence professional be dangerously revealing.
2. The perception of the intelligence community as a source of apolitical objective information and findings must not be sacrificed for an assumed immediate gain in public understanding or support. We must recognize that substantial segments of the public do not entirely believe this to be the case at present. This makes it all the more vital that no change occur that increases that public disbelief or cynicism.
3. The credibility of intelligence content is one of its most important attributes. Painstaking efforts

have been made during recent years to rebuild an effective intelligence capability and restore public confidence in its work. That effort is very far from complete.

4. The intelligence community is not and should not be part of the public debate. The more serious and least considered effect of any weakening of this principle is the deleterious effect it would have on the analysts and others among the staffs of the intelligence community who not only highly prize their objectivity but are frequently exhorted to improve the quality of their analysis and estimates.

5. Intelligence must not be trivialized if it is to retain its credibility. Secrets are the intelligence community's "crown jewels." Their value must not be impaired by enlarging the supply. There is a Gresham's Law in intelligence as in all other valuable and limited properties.

6. The need for wider understanding remains. There is an urgent need, if our foreign policies are to succeed, for public and congressional support of those policies. It is clear that there will be occasions and subjects in which no persuasive presentation of vital foreign policies can be made without resort to declassified intelligence material. But the painful fact remains that other than a limited and carefully considered use of such sanitized evidence risks a kickback injurious to the intelligence community. The obstacles that exist and have the effect of eroding understanding and support of certain of our foreign policies remain. And for some of our foreign policies, the absence of public support is often quite warranted.

7. This national syndrome of detachment and disbelief, which so seriously impedes our efforts to strengthen our national security, must be the object of continuing corrective steps. If these are to be effective, the nature of the problem must be accurately understood if the remedies, difficult at best, are in fact to have a useful relationship to the problem. An unwise and inappropriate use of intelligence may not have just a tangential relationship to the problem; it may, in fact, further complicate it. In this connection, one intelligence fact must be emphasized. In sanitizing intelligence information to protect sources and methods, the sanitizers will, in most instances, be compelled to remove the very core of what makes the particular information persuasive.

Much of what would be made available would still have to be taken on faith.

8. The anatomy of ignorance, misunderstanding, and disbelief must be understood in greater depth. The obstacles — and they are very real — are, I suggest, a sum total of the following factors:

- a. The collapse of what for a period of time was a bipartisan consensus on foreign policy.
- b. The increasing partisan use and politicization of foreign policy issues in the Congress.
- c. The certainty that these pressures will be increased and made more shrill during the months of the national election campaign.
- d. Probably most fundamental, this same problem has bedeviled presidents of the United States during the last fifty years in virtually every instance in which U.S. military participation overseas existed or was suggested. It's worth recalling that only Pearl Harbor ended the long debate about U.S. intervention in World War II. And this was in spite of the historic contribution to bipartisan support by Senator Arthur Vandenberg prior to December 1941.
- e. Understanding and support of our foreign policy is so difficult to attain that a concluding element must be added — the lingering effects of Watergate and the misperceived and exaggerated role of the intelligence community during those events, the details of which were belabored by two congressional investigation committees in the House and Senate.

If this is an accurate diagnosis of the essential impediments to broader public understanding and support of our debated foreign policies, it is important to see which of those reasons would be ameliorated by a larger or more frequent access to intelligence. One must also ask which might conceivably be aggravated by more frequent access.

What, then, are we left with in this effort to understand the impulses that move the electronic media? Two closely related phenomena emerge. They could hardly be more corrosive to intelligent national interests and effective public policy. They are destructive of the functioning of democratic government. In

fact, responsible government is only one of the casualties. All of the major institutions essential to the existence of our economy and society are among the victims.

We are in the 18th year of the measurable crisis of confidence suffered by all of our institutions. Those institutions include medicine, organized religion, psychiatry, education, the military, big and small business, the executive branch, the Supreme Court, the Congress, organized labor, advertising, television, the press, and the legal profession. Until 1965, annual public opinion surveys showed that at least half of the American public invested high confidence in at least half of these major institutions. Since 1965, not one institution has enjoyed high confidence expressed by anything like half of the nation. Now to be exact, medicine, our secular priesthood, has consistently enjoyed the highest confidence ratings, no matter how low they are. Medicine did not slip below 50 percent until 1971; the others did, beginning in 1965. But in 1971, medicine joined the rest of the crowd.

We are living in a time of disbelief. That disbelief focuses with a particular force on government, its purposes, its policies, and its description of the actions it takes in what it believes to be the service of the national interest. The most perceptive elaboration of this phenomenon was recently provided in an address by a gifted academic, historian, and political scientist, Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick. I quote a couple of passages.

Like those famous monkeys who hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil, contemporary Americans, Britons, Germans find it easy to disbelieve tyranny and aggression even in the face of Afghanistan, even with the experiences of Central America. *Surely* those emigrés exaggerate: doubtless they exploited the poor in their own countries. *Surely* they invited "provoked" repression. *Surely* the Soviet Union builds its military because they fear us. *Surely* it would be possible to get real arms control if only *we* tried harder. *Surely*, the Nicaraguans would be willing to live at peace if only their neighbors were more flexible. *Surely*, democrats among the rebels in El Salvador would be willing to participate in elections if only the government of El Salvador made them a better offer.

The will to disbelieve that we value freedom and intend to expand and preserve it has been translated into an expectation that we're almost always wrong. It leads to what one leading Washington commentator has called "reflexive anti-Americanism." That reflexive anti-Americanism is willing to give everybody

except the American government and people, and especially our major adversaries, the benefit of the doubt. Blaming ourselves is the opposite side of the coin to denying the menace outside; it feeds an illusion that we can control events merely by changing our behavior.

That last sentence is especially penetrating.

The importance of the problem can hardly be exaggerated, and in this lecture she called attention to a new book by Jean-Francois Revel, *How Democracies End*, which is thus far available only in French. In his book, Revel comments that the will to disbelieve in our own good intentions has created a situation in which we no longer speak of the struggle in which we're engaged — a struggle of democracy against totalitarianism. "Good taste," and I'm quoting Revel's phrase, "requires today a more neutral formulation, one that is less pejorative for Communism. So we have invented new terms such as the 'confrontation of East and West,' the 'struggle of capitalism and socialism' and the one enjoying the greatest contemporary vogue, 'the contest between the two superpowers.' The struggle of democracy on the defensive versus totalitarianism in full offensive does not even dare to say its name."

Incidentally, earlier in my remarks I dismissed the notion that the skewing of news by the television news program was in any way affected by a calculated conception of what is to be conveyed, let alone any nonexistent conspiracy. My earlier dismissal of politically tilted impulses in effecting the direction taken by some of the daily dramas is a little too cavalier, but I did not want to blunt the point that drama and the thirst for audience size play an infinitely larger role than personal bias, passion, or any other similar attribute. Yet there is a chronic distaste for the main thrust of U.S. foreign policy among those who are involved in television news. Strategic arms policy, the U.S. involvement in Central America, the U.S. side of arms negotiation with the Soviet Union, the descriptions by Ronald Reagan of the Soviet Union and its actions and purposes, are but a few of the vital issues toward which the TV news program can often be counted on to bare its teeth, or at a minimum, hardly subdue hostility. The placement of Pershing IIs and cruise missiles in England and Western Europe has all been conveyed in a manner little different in effect from the position of the

"Greens" in Germany. The Soviet SS20s, curiously, emerge as benign and unprovocative. Afghanistan has not been ignored by television news, but Angola, Ethiopia, and Vietnam's conquest of Cambodia and Laos have been. South Yemen, to my knowledge, has never seen a wandering U.S. TV cameraman.

What has been ignored, and is of far greater consequence, has been the explicit, unaltered, and frequently repeated policy of the Soviet Union to actively support all "wars of national liberation" wherever they occur. Yet the view that emerges from the tube is of a Soviet Union which may be somewhat paranoid, moved as it is by defensive insecurity as it seeks a quiet place in the sun.

The size, the rate of growth of the Soviet military, its increasing power and reach on land and sea, the relative size of the nuclear arsenals in the U.S. and USSR, have been virtually ignored, despite the "kaka" that could make these comparative data vivid and dramatic additions to public knowledge. Yet the clear sense conveyed by the national news is of a stonewalling and cynical U.S. arms negotiating posture.

Our adversaries are sheltered from our hostility, certainly more sheltered than those we have befriended. The leaders who wish us ill are more gently portrayed than those we have elected or those they have appointed.

An event of different character makes the same point more forcefully and it's one to which this seminar, has, of course, paid some rather remarkable attention. Any violation of American privacy attracts, as it should, the outraged battle cries of press and TV journalism. Watergate served to intensify the seriousness of this pursuit. The Freedom of Information Act is a product of that concern. Attorney General Levy's guidelines, sought for and accepted by President Ford, placed the most rigid restraints on telephone intercepts, including wiretaps. No other nation, not one — the closest is Sweden — has comparable restraints or as zealous a federal protection of privacy. Little awareness of any of this appears on television's national news.

Now, this course of study devoted substantial attention to a phenomenon which your findings establish as the most massive interception of America's telephonic communications ever attempted. Your monograph, which was published, as "Private and Public Defenses Against Soviet Interception of U.S. Telecommunications; Problems and Policy Points," by

Greg Lipscomb, is the most complete unclassified study of this subject. It was published in July, 1981 as a public document. That study asserts that whatever is communicated over the telephone system's microwave network is available to a vast Soviet and Cuban listening and recording apparatus.

According to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the *New York Times*, and several other news journals, the Soviet Union uses the top floor of key installations at the highest locations at a number of sites including Riverdale, New York and Nob Hill, San Francisco, which provide maximum uncluttered access to phone calls of government officials, defense contractors, brokers, commodity traders, or any individual in whom it has the slightest interest.

The altitude available to the Soviet Union in the San Francisco installation is an especially interesting one. It gives them a remarkable "oversight" reach into Silicon Valley, the nation's largest concentration of high-technology research and manufacturing centers. I want you to know that our parallel consulate, the one in Leningrad, must be at the lowest location in Leningrad without hitting the water table.

All of this has been the subject of one-day, one-time stories in a few of our newspapers. Now is all of this of no interest to television's national news, the zealous guardian of our privacy? Not quite. On January 23, 1984, nearly five years after the first one-day newspaper revelation appeared, eight years after Vice President Nelson Rockefeller discussed this phenomenon and vented his outrage in a public address, CBS Evening News with Dan Rather finally discovered the Soviet intercept operation for the first time. It was a one-day story.

In no instance has this massive invasion of privacy of the United States been more than a one-day story in a single journal of which I am aware. Now suppose the United States, or even Canada, Germany, or France had been the violator.

This is 1984, and the book George Orwell wrote in 1948 is the object of very substantial TV news attention. But it was not the year 1984 which so obsessed Orwell. What obsessed Orwell was a Soviet Union and its potential for total control. If we are to judge from what he said about his own book, the potential for total control is what animated his frightening futuristic fantasies, *1984* and *Animal Farm*. TV national news, however, is not preoccupied with Orwell's vision of the Soviet Union. It was intent on

observing the distance U.S. life has advanced toward the 1984 vision. After all, computers now contain many details of our lives, our credit records, tax returns, personal details, police records, etc. The implication conveyed was that the instruments of total control in the United States are now in place. What is seen and shown on TV news screens is that we are moving toward the total control of 1984.

Now compare Orwell's words with what the national television news thought Orwell was writing about. Though written years ago, Orwell might well have been addressing our three network news departments. And I quote him: "A thing which has struck one in recent years is that the most enormous crimes and disasters — purges, deportations, massacres, famines, imprisonment without trial, aggressive wars, broken treaties — not only fail to excite the big public, but can actually escape notice altogether, so long as they do not happen to fit in with the political mood of the moment."

"If you could have taken a Gallup poll in 1939, I imagine you would have found that a majority, or at least a very big minority, of adult English people had not even heard of the German concentration camps. The whole thing simply slid off their consciousness because it was not what they wanted to hear. So also with the USSR. If it could be proven tomorrow that they detained 18 million prisoners, as some observers claim, I doubt whether this would make much of an impression on the Russophile section of the public."

In my view, the inaccuracy and cynicism (or ignorance) with which TV news turned Orwell's 1984 into a cautionary tale about the United States is at the heart of the theatrical imperative which is as ready to injure the national interest as it is to make light of the balanced truth, or simple fact.

**Student:** I don't think that a daily newscast is news in any sense of the word. You said it was theater. I don't think people watch it for the news content. Do you?

**Cherne:** I do not know of one poll, including those that could be biased, that suggests otherwise. The most important polls, or those most frequently referred to, are the ones conducted by the television networks themselves, and they very strongly indicate — I don't think they're jiggering the numbers — that the public relies on television as its primary source



of news. Other polls taken by the Roper organization, Opinion Research, and Gallup hardly differ in the numbers and they also do indicate that though you may have discovered that it's not news, the public hasn't discovered it. The public turns to television for the news and says it believes what it sees and hears on TV more than any other instrument. And the degree of reliance on the printed word has been declining.

It's interesting to compare the way television news is treated by the three networks in this remorseless contest — the dollars are great — and the way it's treated by the independent networks. For example, in New York, there's a Channel 9 and a Channel 11 that provide an hour of television news and, by golly, it's news. There is none or very little of the theatrical element in the presentation. As a matter of fact, one of those smaller independent networks within the last month ran a full-page ad, obviously seeking a larger audience, in which it made a point about the distinction between its news program and the national networks' news programs.

Having given you the public's description of its reliance on television news, why is television as low down on the scale of confidence in institutions as it happens to be? That is a fascinating fact. TV is at the bottom third of the "confidence" totem pole. In this crisis of confidence in institutions, television is not increasing confidence in its own existence.

**Oettinger:** But I think that's it. I've been trying to figure out your premise from the beginning, that TV is the most powerful. It may not be. People say they get their news from it, but clearly they don't get informed about much of anything. You then also go on to point out that you wouldn't necessarily increase the intelligence usage because the facts don't make much difference. The only way I can reconcile the whole thrust, when I get through hearing you out, is that you're wrong in your opening statement that TV is most powerful. Perhaps you're correct in saying that it's theater, and that the public is not a lot dumber than you are, and that it realizes it's watching theater. The public may say that it's watching TV for the news, but there's a different and well-known phenomenon. When we talk to the people from the *New York Times*, they're always moaning about the fact that whenever somebody takes a survey of readership, they come out on top. They point out that if there were as many actual readers of the *New York Times* as people who claimed they were, they'd be

swimming in money. So it seems to be prestigious to say you read the *New York Times* but many really don't buy it. Even assuming there's no lying, TV has a stake in saying it's powerful, etc., but the fact it is theater and most of the public maybe is like our student here and treats it as theater. Your argument then becomes consistent in saying, as you did toward the end, that maybe there is a mild though not necessarily conspiratorial bias in the plots coming out of, perhaps the demands of, theater. Or occasional events that lead to that effect, and if the public then discounts the whole thing, exactly why are you worried? I'm left puzzled.

**Cherne:** If I had a disposition — which I do not have — to be open-minded on the question of whether the television news has an effect, let me tell you that events of the last few weeks, some of them not many miles from here, would have disabused me. The (presidential candidate Gary) Hart phenomenon is television pure and simple. And in fact, the whole phenomenon of the primaries, ever since an earlier New Hampshire one which led to Lyndon Johnson's withdrawal is a significant demonstration of television's impact.

**Student:** What is news? Just to play the devil's advocate, people get what they pay for. It seems to me you're confusing power and influence with information. In the sense that the news does influence us — and certainly we've seen it in the Hart phenomenon — and certainly some people, if you ask them about Central America might say, "The U.S. is doing bad things" and that's the way it's assumed. But when you ask them about the specifics, the details of the information, that's not what they pay attention to. You get an impression from a 30-second blurb on Nicaragua, but you don't get "the U.S. is supporting whoever happens to be in power," and I think that is a very important distinction.

**Cherne:** I don't think I need to define journalism, I think we have a reasonably clear notion of what the journalistic imperative is. It's often violated, but we know what the journalistic imperative is, it even animates the "new journalism" which quite explicitly is disinterested in what its proponents see as an impossible objectivity.

**Student:** Aren't you questioning the TV news, the fact that TV news coverage does not fall under the rubric of journalism?

**Cherne:** That is right. But it wears the garments of journalism. It is perceived as journalism. It is not understood that it is following certain very clear imperatives designed to attract and hold the audience, and those are theatrical imperatives — using the news as the plot in a drama. It leaves the audience with the sense that they now know the story, and they don't. They've been exposed to a skewed story.

**Student:** I thought that perhaps you could address the issue of exit polls and the broadcast of the results of exit polls before the polls close. I thought that might be a way of giving some definition to this issue of the power of broadcasting.

**Cherne:** Well, I did not think that I had to demonstrate the power of this instrument. I would even be inclined, were this not such a literate group, to use a very different illustration. The Fonz, in one of his little weekly dramas, took out a library card. In the two weeks that followed, there was a deluge of young people in the United States taking out library cards. In short, we are dealing with a very powerful instrument and I thought that beyond dispute. You're not challenging that.

**Oettinger:** Yes I am, but I should let others talk.

**Student:** I accept that and say so what? I've been listening to you and thought to myself, "I know this." I know the news is drama, is entertainment. I'm a journalist by training and I know that the government's institutions are being run down and there's this question about weighting the Soviet position against the U.S. position, ignoring the fact that the U.S. position, from a newsman's standpoint, is much more accessible than the Soviet position. What are we going to do about it?

**Cherne:** I wish you hadn't asked the question. I cannot find myself accepting anything other than self-imposed discipline as an answer. My regard for the First Amendment is so great, I'm not willing to risk tampering with it. If, therefore, self-discipline is (at least to me) the only acceptable corrective instrument, then there has to be much wider understanding of some of these facts, those that will hold up after the kind of critical examination you give them. Television will respond to that kind of examination, but not completely. We are going through a period now

in which I perceive a growing amount of self-examination. You know, once you get to work on a subject you all of a sudden become aware of so many things happening in that subject. It may well be that I wasn't aware before, but my impression is that there is a degree of self-examination now that's larger than anything that has occurred before. I would be very unhappy if the Federal Communications Commission enforced the very clear and specific "fairness" requirements that are in the FCC grants of licenses. Television as I've described it, or even television cut down to a tenth of what I described, violates the requirements of the Federal Communications Act, but I would be loathe to see the FCC enforce them.

**Student:** It seems to me that the real problem is market entry, meaning that you're viewing it as three TV news stations. Then you said, "Well, there are two local competitors and they give real news." And it may be that really what you want for the solution is to have more entry into this market and let things sift out as they may so you'll have more voices and more opinions. The real problem is that now you have three limited major markets.

**Cherne:** I don't know if it's the real problem, but it's clearly part of the problem. I am delighted that cable now exists if only because cable news does a journalistically adequate if not superior job, and it is not caught up in the kind of theatrical phenomena I was talking about. Therefore we do have, now, a new market entrant. With each month, an increasing number of people watch CNN (Cable News Network) and I have no doubt that this is beginning to trouble the networks. It's not just entrants; I've already said there are independent new networks that by and large do a very creditable job. But they don't attract the audience that the three television networks do. Now I don't know how you overcome that.

**Student:** I've got a question to follow up on the self-examination topic. Has it gone to the point where there has been any enunciation of principles by the networks other than "Well, if it's news and we think it's true, we'll go with it?" Have they gone beyond that?

**Cherne:** No, not to my knowledge. About 10 years ago, Freedom House conducted a conference with

representatives of the television news networks and a number of very distinguished print journalists, and we encountered very deep hostility to the notion of a formulation of guiding principles. The biggest hostility was to an outside entity sticking its nose into questions considered the exclusive province of practicing journalists. The Freedom House effort got nowhere. We were seeking to encourage them to formulate a set of ethical concepts, or professional concepts. I'm disappointed. I don't know what it is that the leading schools of journalism may have done in this field. I'd be very surprised if they have not done a great deal. Am I correct?

**Student:** Are you talking about the teaching of ethics?

**Cherne:** Not the ethics so much as professional standards and their application to the coverage of television news. To television's coverage of news.

**Student:** No. As far as I know, it's not a subject that's taught.

**Student:** I'm having a bit of difficulty making the translation from the theatrical premise to this cynicism and the running down of institutions in the United States, this almost conspiratorial type of news presentation. For instance, I don't have any problem translating the example you brought up about the Soviet intelligence networks. I could make a very theatrical presentation of that on the news. Why then does the theatrical premise translate itself into the cynicism about all institutions in the country and the running down of those that are in positions of authority? How do you make that translation?

**Cherne:** First of all, let me separate out this very curious myopia about the Soviet intercept effort. It is not in any way related to the theatrical character of television news coverage. It's something else. I said earlier, "there is evidence here and there of bias," but I completely reject conspiratorial notions.

How do I connect theater with cynicism? In theater, the whole range of human purposes, emotions and motivations is explored, the noble as well as the mean. I suspect there is a greater amount of drama devoted to the ignoble. It's much easier to write a drama about the ignoble than about the noble. That takes a much higher level of dramatic craftsmanship.

But the limitations of dramatic talent, the nature of the news — which lends itself, incidentally, to the adversarial, the tension-filled — the inability to grapple with abstract questions, and the ease with which it can focus on the ostensibly real and immediate does drive it toward the institution-destroying, institution-weakening, distorting result. Finally, there is the pressure of time. The pressure of time is a terribly corrosive element. It is one of the reasons CNN does as good a job as it does. It's under no pressure in time. If you have 30 seconds, at most a minute, for a major news story, and if in addition you want to make it a compelling one, I say you cannot avoid images that destroy truth and complexity.

**McLaughlin:** You've said a couple of things that trigger something else. For example, competing outlets for news. As somebody who reads the *Journal*, the *Globe*, and sometimes the *Times* every day, I still feel compelled to go home and watch the news. Now I have other choices. I have 70 channels and all kinds of possibilities, but I will put on one of the evening news programs for social connectivity purposes. I want to see what's being reported, what most of the country is hearing. And, seeing that show will give me an understanding of how it is going to be discussed. As a matter of fact, I would argue the evening news is like the country store for its exchange of some kind of common perception of the world, maybe in the same sense as theater being some kind of device that is supposed to help us understand ourselves and the world and what's going on.

I had a discussion recently with an army colonel who's working on how TV affected our perception of the Tet offensive. He was saying, "Gee, you know, the TV coverage of Tet was what made us turn tail and lose, and we were really winning the war and in retrospect Tet was a great victory." And I say to that, "bull." Three and a half years into the war, after winning the war every other month in public pronouncements on TV, Tet proved that we hadn't won the war. It didn't prove we lost, but what people were reacting to, or what was being shown on TV, was a reflection of what they were seeing around them. The caskets were coming home. The caskets were coming home in increasing numbers. They had seen the war go on for a number of years — again, it might be like going down to the general store and sitting around the stove and finding out

that this is true not only in New Jersey but it's true in California as well and there is some shared perception there. I guess a lot of that leads me then back to your other point of, "So what?" in terms of how people regard institutions. And I guess I think that healthy skepticism of our institutions may be a good thing and that if you really probe on the polls of this, you get a much richer texture, a better understanding at a second level of analysis. And if you talk to people about the medical profession as a whole, they are very skeptical. If you talk about their doctor, it's not the same thing. Congress as an institution is way down there at the bottom with used car salesmen, but people go out and vote for their own Congressman for re-election time after time. If you ask them about their own Congressman, on the same poll, you get perhaps 60 to 70 percent levels of confidence. I think that what we have been seeing since 1964 is like this perception of the Vietnamese War — we're seeing one thing on television, but also seeing the realities. You have had a generation which has been raised with much more skepticism. It may be coincidental with the rise of TV news rather than a product thereof.

**Cherne:** Well, you said a great many things and some of the things you said I cannot disagree with. I think you've helped clarify an important function of the national television news. It is the country store. I too watch it for very much the same reason. I feel required to watch it to know what the country is seeing.

**McLaughlin:** I wonder how many people feel required to watch it.

**Cherne:** But it doesn't matter why you either think or in fact know that you're doing something. That doesn't dissipate all of its effects. I rather doubt that we have a nation of social critics who are observing "the box" in order to have a sense of what social change is taking place. I don't think you and I are typical in our reason for watching television.

**McLaughlin:** I think that may be an overly elitist view of the world. In fact, while a lot of people may not label themselves social critics, I think a lot of them shake their heads in wonder at the latest fad being covered in California.

**Student:** I may be unfairly opposing your observation but I see two problems with what you've said. And my impression of what you said is that the news is a good window on the world and one reason to watch it would be to get a picture of what's going on in the country, or the country store feeling. The problem with the window is that, in the first place, it can only have so much in it and the networks are controlling what that window looks at. And, second, not only does that window have just a certain amount in it, but the networks, in order to attract an audience, may have to add some sort of seasoning or form the news in such a way that it builds and holds audience share.

**Cherne:** This point may, curiously enough, be more important than anything else I've said. Unlike news — printed news forms, newspapers, news magazines, the others — there's a devastating thing about television news. You can only watch one station at a time, and that also has a bearing on having other market access. Not only can you only watch one station at a time, you cannot review what you've watched. I now know how hard it is to get a record of what you've watched. Unless you are equipped with three video tape recorders and have the time to look at all three, you're a prisoner of a deceptive notion of choice. Once you've chosen, you've blocked out everything else. I asked for a copy of the Bill Moyer interview on "Entertainment Tonight." And I just got from Paramount Pictures a contract of eight pages stating the severe limits of what I can do with this "Bill Moyer's Commentary." If I were to do nothing else but publish this damn contract, I would prove the case I'm making and, in fact, if I ever do publish the larger piece of work which I've done on this subject, I am going to include that contract. Its use by a newspaper would simply be out of the question.

**Student:** Are there people who want quality news who aren't getting it because they're only watching TV?

**Cherne:** People who want quality news do, on TV, have means of getting quality news. The McNeil/Lehrer program is quality news commentary. Incidentally, quality news, just straight news on television, is not as readily available. Except, as I said, the independent networks do try to approximate that coverage.

**Student:** But the people you're talking about are also reading the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. I'm talking about the people who are getting their news from the networks. Is there some component of that crowd that you believe wants better news and isn't getting it?

**Cherne:** No, I think probably not, but that's an elitist notion. Boy, that's really an elitist notion.

**Student:** I wanted to get back to the other point Professor McLaughlin made. I'm having trouble fitting this relation with the idea of the news as theater and the declining belief in all our institutions. I'm part of this generation. I was four years old in 1964 and I've grown up with this kind of cynicism about government. I was in my teens when Watergate hit and I haven't particularly trusted government since. I certainly don't see that as linked to what I see on the TV news. I didn't even watch the TV news until last year. I'm having trouble seeing this link that you seem to have brought together with your whole talk.

**Oettinger:** I cannot forbear jumping back into it here, because what you're suggesting I do not believe. I disagree, I guess, with the fundamental premise. I think that it is both elitist and, perhaps, a prisoner of TV's own self-made image. And let me make some points about the alternatives. One of them is the new use of telephones for political purposes. A few years ago a study was made in Chicago by Bell Labs. A couple of the findings were interesting. One is that the use of long distance telephones is unexpectedly high among poor Chicago blacks. Where is that communication going? Well, a lot of it is going to the South. What's the political meaning of this? How does it relate to TV news? You see, if somebody in Chicago and somebody in Mississippi compare notes by telephone, they may discuss what they saw on the evening news, or what they saw in a political ad. It might be that the effect is not that powerful. Not to deny that perhaps the voters in New Hampshire thumbed their noses at what they saw on television or that people went out and got library cards because of the Fonz, I won't deny those as facts. The notions that TV news shows are the most powerful influence does not necessarily follow from that.

**Rowell:** In the early part of your talk, you mentioned that you didn't feel it was appropriate for intelligence to be used in public debate and so forth. I'm doing some research and there was a great deal of discussion over the SALT II treaty and verification. There were people like William Colby and others who suggested that we take these pictures and sanitize them and bring them before the public. A larger concept is that the President — maybe it's one of these institutions without very much confidence — has to manage this debate about ratification. It involves verification which is a very difficult question to debate publicly. What can the President do to try to manage these delicate intelligence questions? Are there things that he can do in public to gain support for his attempt to ratify SALT II by somehow using the intelligence? What are the risks involved?

**Cherne:** First of all, regrettably, there is no way of conducting our foreign policy in certain areas without a judicious sanitizing and making available of intelligence-provided content. That is clearly true. I would guess more so as it involves nuclear arms, nuclear arms control, and nuclear arms ratification more than any other subject. There is simply no other way of addressing yourself to that need for public education if you're the President or the Secretary of State without dealing with information that has been secured by the intelligence community. There's no other way in which you are going to get it and if you don't release it, there's no way in which you can make your case for verification or the absence of it. My argument was against those who would take the wraps off and infuse the public debate with a great deal more intelligence. I was terribly distressed to read that Bill Colby, to whom you referred, has now jockeyed himself into the position where he wishes to make all intelligence public. I think this is Bill Colby's problem, not the nation's.

**Student:** Edward Teller takes almost the same position, that there should be no intelligence except for the quickly degradable, such as submarine locations, and that it should all be public because it would inform the debate.

**Cherne:** Interestingly enough, in the public stereotyped view of Edward Teller, one would associate him with the maximum of secrecy. He has held the view, I think for as long as I've known him, that no

intelligence should be kept classified more than a year. It's his view that anything beyond a year can no longer be kept secret and should not be. From him, that's a rather dramatic thing.

To return to only one comment of the many you made, I would be very eager to have a long discussion with you about the reporting of the Vietnam War and Tet, but I strongly urge for those who are inclined to go further into this question, the essentially unchallenged study, Peter Braestrup's *The Big Story*. It's a study of the way the Vietnam War was covered by journalism, broken into press and television. What emerges is that the war as it was seen by the journalists in the field is not the war as it was seen by the rewrite editor. And the war as it was seen by the rewrite editor is not the war as it was written and finally published in the press and seen on the screen. Even the President of the United States was not immune to altered perception when he was the recipient — reader or viewer — of the third part of the process.

**Student:** I was concerned about a comment earlier — the compression of news into 1½ minutes or 30 seconds worth of theater in the evening. That somewhat correlates with a statement that Dr. Beal made in this class two weeks ago concerning the National Security Council. He stated that over 600 messages per day were flowing into the National Security Council on the Iran/Iraq situation, and that one of their jobs would be to compress and synthesize these 600 messages to a minute and a half for the President and in doing so, they were looking at the written word as being *passé* and looking at some of the advantages that video can offer. Is there some way to play theater and make it real? Is there some way of synthesizing without losing the kernel of news that might be there? Are we in danger as we incorporate new techniques?

**Cherne:** There's simply no question that the condensation of very complex or very copious materials puts meaning and accuracy at risk.

**Oettinger:** I think it's important to make a distinction here. Video technology is the only thing in common between Beal's situation and what we're talking about here, TV news. Much of what Leo is describing about the television news has to do with its institutional setting and the way it gets paid for, which is

not necessarily the same imperative as in Beal's situation. The fact that they happen to have a common technological substrate is minor. Substance, format, and process should be considered. The compression, for example, that a video display gives to a pilot who is doing an instrument landing is, I dare say, accountable for the fact that a number of us are alive who otherwise either wouldn't be or would be still waiting for the fog to clear in San Francisco. So it's very dangerous to confuse technologies and institutional studies all in one bundle.

**Cherne:** I think you misunderstood me in that, only on this point. I said that condensation of complex or copious material runs a high risk of loss of information, loss of vital information — that's high risk. It's not inevitable. You and I know the kinds of materials that provide the briefings the President receives. They are prepared with great care, but of necessity, they are very limited by time and space. You and I have a sense of the volume of material from which it's drawn. There are any one of several stages at which the information can be distorted, not for reasons of intention and certainly not for theater. Here I'm not talking about the theatrical impulse. The interjection of human judgments multiplies the chances of vital information loss and that of course increases the chance that the outcome may be deficient.

**Oettinger:** OK, but I would like to leave with the class this unsolvable dilemma of the balances to be struck. The alternative is drowning in unassimilated data and the key problem is where to strike that balance. Anybody who believes that there is some kind of easy fix is either a knave or a fool. It's an incredibly difficult balance to strike between the risks, as Leo points out, of those multiple stages of condensation and the equally horrendous *prima facie* possibility of drowning in all the stuff that's available at any instant in time about any subject.

**Student:** But video is positive, in that case, for the National Security Council as far as moving information, more information, correctly to the President.

**Oettinger:** Possibly.

**Cherne:** There are certain areas in which there is no question that video makes a contribution for

clarity that is very difficult for alternate means of communication.

**Student:** Don't you think there's a possibility that the role of the American public, American public opinion, is setting forth policy that is ambiguous to begin with? Don't you think that role might be negated even further if we say that television's portrayal of the issues is not very responsible? Don't you think that's a way of saying that the public shouldn't have much of a role in setting forth policies because they're not getting the right information?

**Cherne:** Well, while it's not what I intended to say, I can't altogether dismiss the effect you're suggesting. I may be romantic or altogether unrealistic in a continuing hope that if the public is alerted to the dubious quality and the exact character of what it is getting, it may be more attracted to something better in the way of a product. I must honestly tell you, I don't have high hopes of that.

**McLaughlin:** Again, that's my argument, basically. I'm not sure you can blame TV for the fact that not more than eight percent of the American public knows the difference between our policies in El Salvador and Nicaragua. I think most people don't care and I think that's why they don't know. The other important point is that there's something about news as raw data compared to finished intelligence. Just about every study ever done says the people don't know what they think about these things until they talk to someone, in most cases to someone who is their information intermediary, their facilitator, who helps them make up their minds. And almost all those same sources say that intermediary is somebody who goes to a lot of sources and is the person who reads the paper and the weekly news magazines as well as watching TV news. I think it's wrong to think necessarily that people are taking actionable information from TV news. They're collecting data and at various points it will get reprocessed with something else.