

Banning the Bomb: Four Decades Too Late?

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For forty-one years we have lived in “the shadow of the bomb,” and as nuclear arsenals multiply, the shadow lengthens. That nuclear holocaust would be an unspeakable catastrophe requires no argument. As the bumper sticker reminds us, “One nuclear bomb can ruin your whole day.” But the present state of nuclear deterrence, in which the superpowers aim tens of thousands of warheads at each other, is viewed by many as a nightmare in its own right, and a moral abomination.

In *The Abolition*, Jonathan Schell argues that by consenting to live under the doctrine of deterrence, “we bear responsibility not only for the lives of the people whom ‘we’ may kill but also for the lives of those whom ‘they’ would kill; namely, our families, our friends, and our other fellow-citizens. . . . Our acceptance of nuclear weapons is in that sense a default of parenthood, of love, of friendship, of citizenship. . . .” Quoting Khrushchev's remark following the Cuban missile crisis, that the smell of burning flesh was in the air, Schell observes, “in truth, that smell is never far from our nostrils now.”

Of course vast numbers of people carry on with their daily business for the most part oblivious to the realities of nuclear deterrence, giving little thought to the weapons targeted against them, less to the weapons their government targets against others. If this is so, then, according to Australian philosopher C.A.J. Coady, so much the worse, morally, for them. He likens those who avert their noses from the threat of nuclear incineration to those good German burghers who failed

to notice preparations for the Nazi death camps.

Coady holds nuclear deterrence to be immoral. He also recognizes, however, that it is not clear exactly what follows from that admission. The issue is not whether we should bring nuclear weapons into existence. The weapons are with us, and our policy is in place. The difficulty arises, in Coady's view, because "the matter of retreating from the policy of threat has pragmatic and moral aspects itself," leaving "room for a gap to arise between the judgment that [nuclear deterrence] is seriously immoral and the decision what to do about avoiding or abandoning [it]."

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Nuclear deterrence—the promise to punish any nuclear transgression with the "assured destruction" of the enemy and, maybe, of oneself and the rest of the world as well—is hardly, on the face of it, a palatable alternative. But, Schell suggests, "there is nothing wrong with the doctrine of deterrence which is not wrong simply with the possession of vast nuclear arsenals." So-called war-fighting strategies to employ those weapons in some "limited" nuclear exchange are, if anything, less reassuring still. The problem lies not in doctrine, he argues, but in "existential features" of the weapons themselves. Thus the hope is to "ban," not deterrence, but the bomb—in Schell's words, to get rid of the bomb before it gets rid of us.

The Strategic Defense Initiative

One way to escape from the bomb, short of eliminating nuclear weapons altogether, is to construct defenses effective enough, in the hope of President Reagan, to render ballistic missiles "impotent and obsolete." In March 1983 the president unveiled his "Strategic Defense Initiative," calling on the scientific community, which gave us nuclear weapons in the first place, to develop new technology to save us from them. The image conjured by the imagination is of a huge bullet-proof bubble arching over the Earth, sheltering allies and adversaries alike. (Reagan has vowed to share defensive technology, once developed, with the Russians.) Against such an impenetrable shield, nuclear weapons, as in a Saturday morning cartoon, bounce off and fall away, harmless. With a defensive system in operation, innocent civilians on both sides would no longer be held hostage to the threat of nuclear war. And, once useless, swords could be beaten to plowshares, or simply forgotten.

In reality, the "bulletproof bubble" is to be a vast

network of laser interceptors, coordinated with split-second timing and perfect precision by a computer program of unparalleled complexity. Will it work? Will it work well enough to make nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete"? Leon Sloss, a leading spokesman for strategic defenses, cautions, "At this stage in our knowledge of advanced defensive technologies, it seems unlikely that we can create a perfect defense or eliminate nuclear weapons at any time in the foreseeable future. Even if SDI is successful, it will not provide defense against all nuclear weapons." Sloss recommends, not supplanting offense by defense, but a mix of offensive and defensive forces: "Defense should not be seen primarily as defending specific targets, but rather as providing one of several layers of protection which will add greater uncertainty and ambiguity to the calculations of Soviet planners." Defense, then, is one more tool for us to use in maintaining deterrence against the Soviets, not a protective umbrella shielding us both.

For this reason Henry Shue, director of the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy's Working Group on Nuclear Policy and Morality, argues that the pursuit of SDI cannot be construed as the moral high road, for "we are keeping the offensive missiles, which are what the moral argument condemns. . . . It is planning to retaliate, not being retaliated against, that just-war morality requires us to eliminate." Other critics charge that far from demonstrating the futility of further developments in offensive weapons, SDI will spur yet another escalation in the arms race. According to Harold Feiveson, of Princeton University's Center for Energy and Environmental Studies, "defense of population is likely to sabotage efforts to restrain the arms race and to provoke an offensive response by the adversary which could well result in still greater damage

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in the event the arsenals were actually used." We build defenses, they build offenses to counter them. They spend money, we spend money. And in the end?

Deep Reductions

A second way to back off from the bomb is through deep and dramatic reductions in the number of nuclear weapons. Feiveson advocates a 90 percent reduction in superpower arsenals, arguing that "essentially all the roles claimed for today's absurdly bloated nuclear arsenals could be achieved as well with drastically reduced numbers of weapons." The foundation of

nuclear deterrence is the relationship of mutual vulnerability, in which one side deters the other from a nuclear attack by threatening nuclear retaliation and is itself deterred by leaving its own population unprotected against retaliation for any transgression of its own. "Certainly," Feiveson maintains, "both superpowers have far more weapons than needed to hold hostage the adversary. . . . In fact, the mutual hostage relationship is clearly a very hardy one. No disarmament (short of virtually complete disarmament), no offensive buildup, no defensive umbrella, appears likely to upset it in the slightest."

In *The Abolition* Jonathan Schell takes the argument for reduction one step further, pressing to the conclusion that "in the nuclear world the threat to use force is as self-cancelling at zero weapons as it is at fifty thousand nuclear weapons." Schell advocates abolishing nuclear weapons altogether, keeping only the factories for manufacturing them, and, most important, the knowledge of how to do so—"knowledge that nations are powerless to get rid of even if they want to." This alone—the fact that nuclear weapons can never be uninvented, nuclear innocence never regained—keeps deterrence sufficiently robust that the weapons themselves become superfluous. "It has often been said," Schell notes, "that the impossibility of uninventing nuclear weapons makes their abolition impossible.

But . . . the opposite would be the case. . . . Once we accept the fact that the acquisition of the knowledge was the essential preparation for nuclear armament, and that it can never be reversed, we can see that every state of disarmament is also a state of armament. And, being a state of armament, it has deterrent value."

One considerable advantage of deep reductions in nuclear arsenals, according to Feiveson, would be a savings in money and resources: "it cannot be denied that the arms race, as now constituted, involves an abhorrent waste of resources in a world stained by hunger and poverty." This advantage would be eroded, however, if money were lavished instead on building up even more expensive conventional forces. Both Feiveson and Schell also defend their plans as leading to greater stability in times of crisis. As Schell puts it, "We sometimes say that we live on the brink of nuclear destruction. But . . . it would be more accurate to say that we are hanging by one arm from a branch that sticks out over the brink." Abolition, he argues, would at least return us to the brink again.

Sloss replies, however, that it is at best a "tenuous proposition" that the degree of danger is directly proportional to the size of the arsenals. "One can argue that very small arsenals are more unstable than large ones, because of the potential risk from cheating on the size of the arsenals; the increased temptation with a limited force to attack limited numbers of high value targets (i.e., cities); or the added leverage given to a small power to threaten a large power." Critics speculate that we might do better to leave the missiles slumbering in their silos than to pace the floors of the factories feverishly anticipating a signal to race into production.

A second objection is that shrunken arsenals might nevertheless be targeted at innocent women, men, and children (though Feiveson emphatically rejects direct targeting of cities); even on Schell's proposal, as he himself admits, "we would still be implicated in the intention—somewhere, someday, perhaps—of slaughtering millions of people. Instead of rejecting nuclear deterrence categorically, we would still be relying on it." Both Feiveson and Schell defend their proposals, nonetheless, as decisive steps in the right direction. Feiveson hopes that reduced nuclear forces would lead to scaled-down notions of what nuclear weapons can be used for and mark the beginning of serious detente. Schell hopes that abolition of nuclear weapons would at least succeed in pushing nuclear terror "into the background of our affairs . . . thereby clearing a space into which the peaceful, constructive energies of humanity could flood."

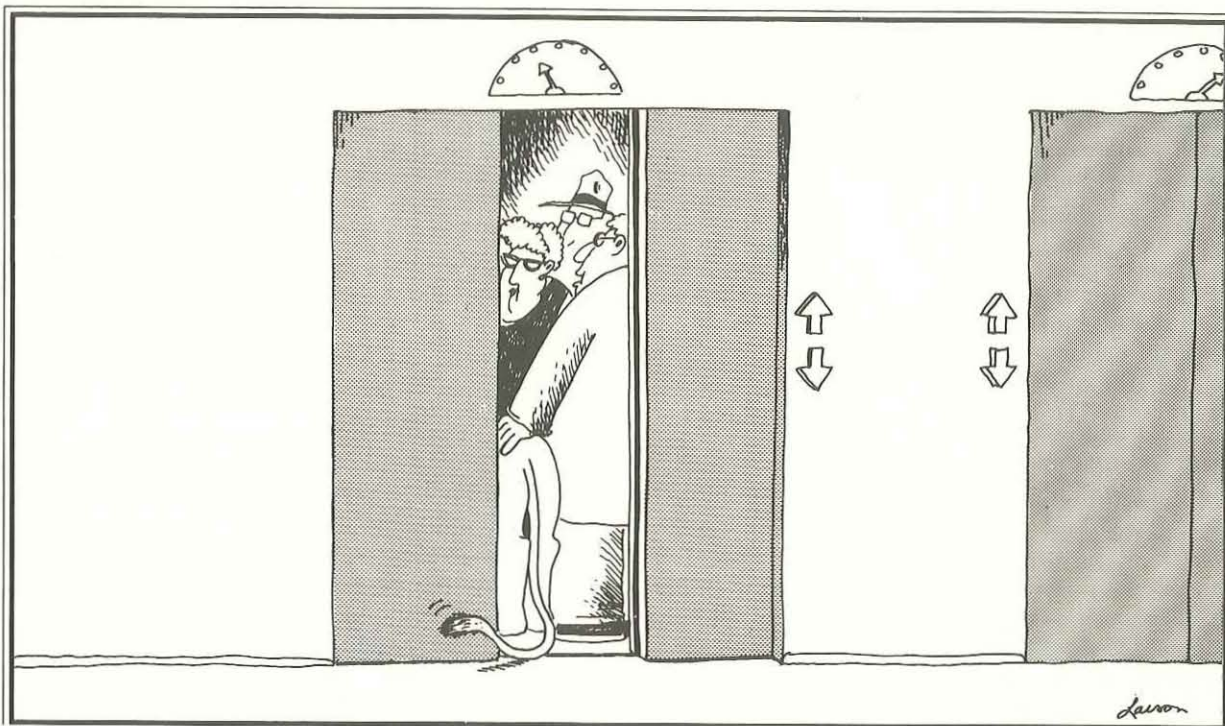
A final problem—or challenge—for both proposals is that both depend critically on bilateral, mutual reductions. The United States and the Soviet Union are to join together in deeply cutting—or abolishing—their nuclear stockpiles. But Sloss comments, "The post-war record of limiting and controlling armaments offers little promise that negotiation is the route to security. . . . arms control negotiations are the product of an adversarial relationship which, if it changes at all, will



Drawing by H. Martin; © 1982
The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

"I figure the universe was formed with a big bang
so it might as well end with a big bang."

"The Far Side" cartoon is reproduced by permission of Chronicle Features, San Francisco.



"Don't be alarmed, folks. . . He's completely harmless unless something startles him."

only change gradually." Indeed, Thomas Schelling, professor of political economy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, lambastes arms control negotiations as themselves driving the arms race. He charges that the purchase of, for example, MX missiles seems to be "an obligation imposed by a doctrine that the end justifies the means—the end something called arms control and the means a demonstration that the United States does not lack the determination to match or exceed the Soviets in every category of weapons." Of late, investment in SDI has been championed, not as contributing to defense for its own sake, but for its usefulness as a bargaining chip, and as a threat to lure the Soviets to the bargaining table.

Schelling holds out hope, however, that "something that deserves to be identified as arms control can come about informally and without being recognized as arms control by the participants." For example, with no formal Soviet acknowledgment of the principle that a war in Europe should be kept non-nuclear, both sides have proceeded to some extent to pursue that objective de facto by purchasing and installing appropriate weapons. However, it seems that the kind of reciprocal restraint Schelling describes aims at maintaining a robust status quo of deterrence rather than trying to achieve any radical overhaul of the nuclear balance.

Unilateral Disarmament

If it seems unlikely that the superpowers can cooperate on any significant initiative toward bilateral disarmament, the option remains for the United States to lay down its arms unilaterally. The United States could decide simply that the deadly game of nuclear terror

is one that it declines to play. While the American political climate at present is hardly conducive to such a proposal, it remains in our power to adopt, and some might argue that its adoption is morally incumbent upon us.

As Shue outlines one rationale for unilateral disarmament, "avoiding the commission of a wrong yourself takes moral priority over preventing even very bad things, for which you are not responsible, from happening." We threaten nuclear attack against the Soviets to deter them from attacking us, or our allies. If deterrence works, then, it serves to prevent the Soviets from inflicting terrible harm. But if the threat itself is immoral, we have ourselves committed a grievous wrong, and it is our job to look after our own conscience and let the Soviets look after theirs.

With this reasoning Shue emphatically disagrees. If our withdrawal from the nuclear brotherhood would be destabilizing (for example, by alarming allies like Germany and Japan, who then might begin their own, perhaps more threatening nuclear build-up), that increase in risk must be on our conscience as fully as our own continuing participation in deterrence would be. "If the choice to abandon deterrence unilaterally would in fact create an unstable situation in which nuclear war would occur, that choice can hardly be described simply as letting other people kill each other. It is contributing knowingly to the occurrence of great harm. In a situation of interdependent decisions, what you do—not a distant *consequence* of what you do—may be to increase danger with which others must deal."

On a small, crowded planet, after so many mistakes have already been made, it may be that we cannot

preserve our moral purity single-handedly. Progress toward peace and stability may have to come through international cooperation, not by our own isolated action, however high-minded it might be.

Conclusion:

In a more perfect world, nuclear deterrence would be no one's first choice for how to conduct the world's business. That we aim tens of thousands of warheads at the Soviets as they aim tens of thousands of warheads at us is, at best, a peculiar premise for global harmony. But that nuclear deterrence is morally flawed unfortunately need not mean that any other course of action now open to us is any better. As Shue points out, "It may well be that all the options toward nuclear deterrence still available now are wrong, but that some are more deeply wrong than others. Nowhere is it written that in every situation there is a right way out—indeed, nowhere is it written that in every situation there is any way out." But that all options are flawed does not mean that any choice is as good as any other. It means we must choose the least bad—that is to say, the best available. If this turns out to be a continued reliance on some kind of deterrence, then that may be the choice that now lies before us.

Maybe the first steps we can take to retreat from the nuclear brink will not be major policy initiatives, but more humble, homely measures: a shift away from inflammatory rhetoric, an encouragement of friendship between Soviet and American communities, families, children. If the bomb cannot be "banned," perhaps it can be moved from the center to the periphery of human affairs—a last resort made progressively more remote. If we cannot get rid of the bomb, perhaps we can rid ourselves of the kind of politics that relies upon it, by abandoning the illusion that nuclear missiles create political power.

In the meantime, Schelling reminds us, "Most of what we call civilization depends on reciprocal vulnerability." A balance of deterrence doesn't have to mean a balance of terror: "People regularly stand at the curb watching trucks, buses and cars hurtle past at speeds that guarantee injury and threaten death if they so much as attempt to cross against the traffic. They are absolutely deterred. But there is no fear. They just know better."

The views of C.A.J. Coady, Leon Sloss, and Harold Feiveson are quoted from papers prepared for the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy's Working Group on Nuclear Policy and Morality, to appear in *The Shadow of the Bomb*, edited by Henry Shue (forthcoming). Henry Shue's views are quoted from his papers "The Moral Defense of Strategic Defense" (condensed and adapted as "Are Nuclear Defenses Morally Superior?" *QQ* vol. 5, no. 2 (Spring 1985) and "Redistribution of the Risk of Nuclear War" (unpublished manuscript). Jonathan Schell is quoted from his book *The Abolition* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984); Thomas C. Schelling from his article "What Went Wrong with Arms Control?" *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 64, no. 2 (Winter 1985/86).

Diverging Paths for Deterrence April 22–24, 1987

A conference sponsored by the
Center for Philosophy and Public Policy
to be held at the Adult Education Center
University of Maryland, College Park
funded by a grant from the Ford Foundation

Philosophers and strategists from the United States, Germany, Japan, and Australia will explore three alternative ways of departing from deterrence as usual: finite deterrence, the strategic defense initiative, and conventional defenses for Europe.

Civic Education and Traditional American Values

"Something has gone tragically wrong with our society in recent years," begins a recent report of a commission on civic education. What has gone wrong, the report charges, is this: we are failing to educate future citizens for citizenship, and the core of this failure lies in a falling away from traditional American values: "a lack of honesty and integrity among . . . citizens [is] directly related to the failure of our institutions to effectively transmit the values contained in our cultural heritage." This report is very much a product

of its time: countless local and national groups, study commissions, education lobbies, and reform movements are decrying disrespect for traditional values and advocating a rekindling of tradition as a remedy for the various public ills that assail us.

The traditionalist's argument has not met with universal assent, however. What is controversial about inculcating traditional American values? What should we conclude about the persistence of this kind of controversy? These questions force us back to a prior ques-

tion: what is *meant* by "restoring traditional American values"?

Teaching Virtues

"We need to restore traditional American values in the schools" might mean that we need to work more deliberately and consciously at the training of character. We need to teach the virtues, which we can divide into four groups: 1) *the moral virtues* — honesty, truthfulness, decency, courage, justice; 2) *the intellectual virtues* — thoughtfulness, strength of mind, curiosity; 3) *the communal virtues* — neighborliness, charity, self-support, helpfulness, cooperativeness, respect for others; 4) *the political virtues* — commitment to the common good, respect for law, responsible participation.

Now, what could be the argument against teaching some or all of these virtues in school? The moral and intellectual virtues are essential constituents to being a good human being; the communal virtues are essential constituents to being a good neighbor; and the political virtues are essential constituents to being a good citizen. As responsible parents and teachers, surely we can be committed to no less than making our children good persons, good neighbors, and good citizens.

As long as we propose teaching honesty, charity, and respect for others without specifying the operational content of such teaching, then there seems little basis for controversy and dissent. But controversy and dissent will emerge the moment we begin to specify how and what we will teach in teaching honesty, charity, respect, and so on.

Controversy necessarily emerges because of the nature of the virtues themselves. The scopes of individual virtues overlap, and on occasion the same action that will be charitable will be untruthful and a neighborly action will be unjust. Moreover, an action that will be courageous in one situation will be foolhardy in another; a statement that in one circumstance is honesty in another is inappropriate candor. The mature moral consciousness can make the right distinctions here, but the mature moral consciousness comes at the end, not the beginning, of moral training. At the beginning the virtues have to be taught by simple rules: do not lie, obey the law. The rules selected to be taught and the way they will be taught can be controversial.

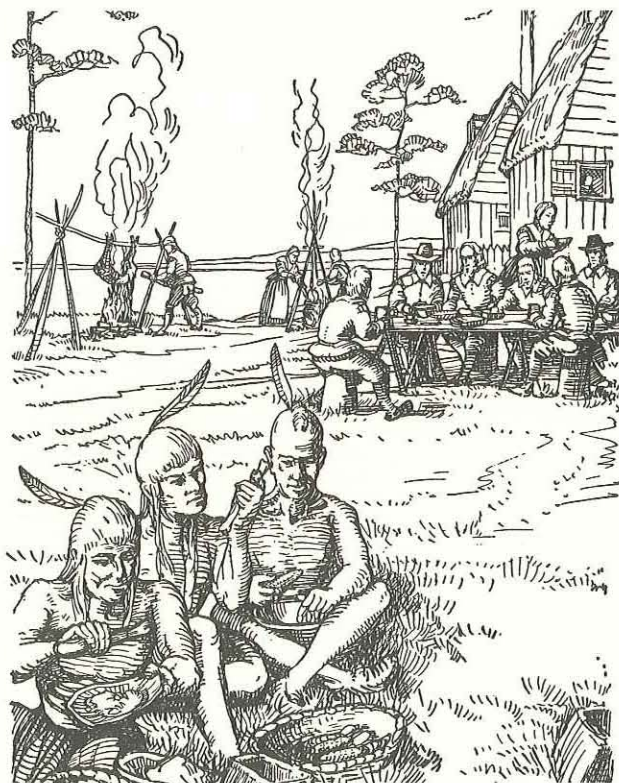
This is especially true when the teaching device is the institutionalization of codes of conduct. According to some university honor codes, for example, it is a violation of honesty not only to cheat on an exam but to fail to report the cheating of others. Such a rule teaches a student about honesty. It also requires him to betray his fellows. Moreover, a fixed rule preempts the student's own judgment on the matter. Another's cheating is wrong, but sometimes the appropriate response to wrong is mercy, not punishment; support, not abandonment; silence, not accusation. Rigid adherence to rules circumscribes the student's autonomy as a moral actor. Thus, both moral and pedagogical concerns might be raised about rules for teaching virtue.

That legitimate concerns can be raised about efforts to teach virtue does not imply that the efforts are not on balance justified, as imperfect as they may be. Given the centrality of the virtues to a worthwhile life, we may have no option but to stumble through as best we can. Controversy is endemic to the enterprise of teaching the virtues but may be contained within tolerable limits by a larger consensus about the goal of forming adults who are honest, decent, respectful, and helpful.

Restoring Customary Practices

However, where differing ideals themselves clash, controversy may become intractable. This point is illustrated by the second thing that the call for traditional American values might mean. It might mean a return to *customary practices* or *norms* of behavior. For example, it might mean a return to older norms of sexual behavior in which sexual activity not confined to marriage is immoral, a matter of central concern to many of those in the back-to-traditions movement.

Controversy about sexual practices is complicated by the fact that prudential arguments and moral arguments can follow parallel lines. Sexual promiscuity can be warned against to avoid venereal disease and teenage pregnancies. Such a prudential argument would seem neutral about sexual ideals, condemning no form of consensual sexual behavior as bad in itself. In fact, it is hard to find prudential policies that are truly neutral among sexual ideals, as the persistent controversies over sex education classes demonstrate. Opponents of sex education classes argue that by their very nature they foster particular sexual ideologies.



Parents may believe that when schools treat sex education in a business-like manner, as another subject along with health, geography, and math, they convey certain attitudes about the place of sex in our lives, attitudes incompatible with the sexual ideals the parents hope to foster in their children. Even sexual knowledge itself in their children may be opposed by parents as incompatible with ideals of chastity and innocence.

When ideals clash, two strategies are available: insulation or domination. On the first, we look for arrangements that allow the conflicting ideals to coexist.

We are a people because we have common icons—the Pilgrims and Thanksgiving, the Founding Fathers, Lee giving his sword to Grant, Babe Ruth pointing to right field—but only at the most shallow level do they define common goals or projects.

On the second, we seek the triumph and domination of the “correct” ideal. The back-to-traditions movement uses both strategies on issues of sexual morality. It wants sex education out of the classroom so parents can teach their children their own sexual ideals without fear of counter-teaching in the schools. In the larger national arena, however, traditionalists often want the state to give positive support to dominant sexual ideals by suppressing pornography, prostitution, and other sexual behavior at odds with those ideals.

National Identity

Both of the two meanings of “returning to traditional American values” that we have examined — teaching the virtues and restoring customary practices — have little to do with anything distinctively American. The virtues are virtues whether practiced in Washington, D.C., or Stockholm. And America shares its basic sexual, cultural, and religious mores with many other countries. A distinctively American, and distinctively civic, content requires that we turn to a third meaning of “traditional American values,” *national identity* and *collective aspirations*.

Here the concern is about forming a self-concept as “an American” and acquiring the patriotic attitudes appropriate to such a self-concept. We view ourselves as Americans because we share with other Americans a common history and a common understanding of what America stands for. But if this is true, how can it be that our political life consists in never-ending struggles to define the national purpose, the meaning of our common life, the content of the national interest?

We are a people because we have common icons — the Pilgrims and Thanksgiving, the Founding Fathers, Lee giving his sword to Grant, Babe Ruth pointing to right field — but only at the most shallow level do they

define common goals or projects. Our central authoritative texts — the Declaration of Independence, Washington’s Farewell Address, Lincoln’s Second Inaugural and Gettysburg Address — declare our commitments to freedom, justice, equality. But these vague commitments are susceptible to many different plausible readings. Thus, the continuous political struggles to give specific definition to Americanism and to tie American ideals to this or that policy, this or that cause. What does this say about teaching our children to be Americans?

If we are to make our children into Americans, we have to start with the teaching of national history, and such teaching has a high place in the back-to-traditions movement. But although there may be broad agreement about the importance of teaching American history, consensus soon breaks down when we turn to questions about the content and implication of history. In a speech last year to a conference on “Civic Virtue and Educational Excellence,” Secretary of Education William Bennett urged that students would have a better appreciation of current U.S. foreign policy if schools did a better job passing on a “proper sense of American values and history.” “Our students will not recognize the urgency in Nicaragua if they cannot recognize the history that is threatening to repeat itself,” he said.

But how will history lessons instill support for U.S. policy in Nicaragua? What history lessons about the United States and its Latin neighbors are the schools failing to pass on? The Monroe Doctrine and the Good Neighbor Policy? Or dollar diplomacy and filibustering? Will students be more or less inclined to accept current American policy at face value by studying U.S. machinations to strip Panama from Colombia? By learning of persistent U.S. interventions in the Caribbean

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and Gulf of Mexico to defend American financial interests?

The point is this: there are lessons aplenty to be learned from American history, depending on what we select to teach. Thus, the perfectly sensible proposal to increase the teaching of American history in the schools is bound to raise questions about what parts of that history to emphasize and what not. Ideological divisions about what America really stands for will be reflected in contests about the appropriate picture of the past to present to children. The fights about history in the classroom will have the same character as the

fight about sex education and school prayer. They will be contests of ideals struggling for hegemony.

These contests will also have the same character as the fights about teaching virtue. We can see this by seeing how the teaching of national history works in forging national consciousness. A child learns moral lessons by reading stories of moral deeds — deeds of courage and physical valor, of intrepidity and persistence against odds, of strength of character and integrity in the face of temptation. When such stories are drawn from national history, however, they connect a child to moral deeds in a special way: these were the deeds of *his* forefathers and foremothers. The child's social identity, not just his character, is formed in relation to these stories.

Thus, for young children anyway, there are things history cannot be if it is to be a vehicle of patriotism. It cannot be "debunking"; there have to be forefathers and foremothers worth admiring and emulating, and moral enterprises in which pride can be taken. Nor can it be "objective" where this means introducing the full complexity of all the issues surveyed. Just as teaching the virtues must start with simple rules, teaching national history in order to develop civic attachments must start with simple (and thus selective and distorted) accounts of the course of national development. So, once more, the quest for traditional American values leads to controversy.

Tradition and Controversy

It is not surprising that the quest to inculcate traditional values spawns controversy. The surprise would be if it didn't. Must we be dismayed that the controversies are deep and not easily dispelled? Perhaps not. After all, incessant controversy is itself a great American tradition! It's the genius of American political institutions that controversy contributes to our stability rather than our instability. The ideological struggles

are valuable resources from which we sharpen our own self-understandings of our relationship to community and country, and they do not divide us to the point of political breakdown. Our political and legal practices allow controversies to be talked to death. To the strategies of insulation and domination, mentioned earlier, we have to add one more: the strategy of exhaustion. No one wins big and no victory is long secure. So controversy does not undermine civic education: it is the best part of it, since the lesson the democratic citizen needs to learn is to be able to live with controversy without taking alarm. Perhaps, then, we can end on an up-beat, positive note, after all. That, of course, is itself an American tradition.

This is one way to picture the fruits of controversy. But can we really take pride in a system that dampens and defuses and defrays controversy, co-opting every vital and vibrant dissent? Should we teach our children that the most important thing is to temper their ideals to the exigencies of co-existence and not to trample on the values of others, no matter how pedestrian or banal they may be? Should our democratic civics lessons teach future seekers after Truth, Beauty, and Justice to trim their sails so as not to unsettle what H. L. Mencken called the great "booboisie"?

The real question I mean to pose by these remarks is this: do we perhaps buy the taming of controversy and a stable social peace at a greater cost than we think? I pose this question not because I seriously want us to rethink American institutions but in order to deflate just a little bit that final American tradition — the propensity to pat ourselves on the back.

—Robert K. Fullinwider

This article was condensed and adapted from a talk Robert K. Fullinwider gave to a Workshop on Teaching Philosophy and Public Policy, sponsored by the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy, held on June 18–20, 1986, in Washington, D.C.

Teaching as Politics

The purpose of a liberal education is not to make students well-rounded individuals, who can speak intelligently on a range of acceptable topics at mixed cocktail parties because they have learned a little of this and a little of that. The purpose of a liberal education is to create liberals—or persons, if you like a different rhetoric—creatures who are in a position to guide their lives by their own lights and who can respect others in doing the same. Put bluntly, the proper function of college education is to save students from their parents,

their religion, and twelve years of state-mandated indoctrination into the ordinary. This end chiefly entails two educational tasks for which the philosophical teaching of public policy issues is especially well suited—one methodological, one substantive.

The first is to develop students' intellectual skills to appraise policies and practices so that one's beliefs become freely chosen and appropriated as one's own. The other is to attack petrified social norms so that one can come to see alternatives, which then might be tested

as being suitable to oneself. Education should provide, to the extent that words can, Mill's prerequisites for self-realization: freedom and a variety of situations.

Teaching Critical Thinking

My sense is that critical intellectual skills are more likely to be developed in applied philosophy classes than in courses specifically labeled "critical thinking" or "informal logic"—the courses that unfortunately are increasingly the bread and butter that sustain philosophy departments in the face of enrollment-driven financing. These courses thrive on the clever example and tend to trivialize the power and importance of critical thinking. Since it is really the formalism that is being taught, course names notwithstanding, content simply gets lost. For the rote-learned rules to apply and fifteen fallacies neatly to be discovered, the content of such courses has to be simplified to the point of distortion. The result is that these courses generate a certain glibness about thinking—just apply the right rule to the cute example and you can think critically and carefully about anything. In a way the courses become a denial of the very ambiguity that they are carefully trying to get their students to be able to discern. Thinking has been reduced to a parlor game.

The importance of discerning ambiguities in arguments is more likely to be noted and remembered by students if, for instance, in the course of debate on abortion, one points out that the slogan "right to life" is ambiguous than if they're taught a limerick on rare rubies and rare steaks. And in public policy courses the point about ambiguity turns out not simply to be the negative one: avoid using ambiguous terms as the middle term in syllogisms. The point becomes a positive one, that we make intellectual progress when we are able to make relevant distinctions. If one believes that there is a right to life where that means merely a right not to be killed unjustly, that will commit one morally to one thing; if, on the other hand, one believes there is a right to life and means thereby a right to sufficient means for continued biological existence, that will commit one to something quite different. Not only is glibness avoided if critical reasoning is taught in practice, it is only there that it has its full import.

Offering Alternatives

The other educational function for which the philosophic teaching of public policy issues is also uniquely suited is pedagogically more sticky—the provision of a variety of situations. For the way to do this is to push a specific line and to push the line that is, most often, at odds with the received opinions of our culture, the ones students most likely already have. In teaching public policies this means that the classroom will be politically highly charged.

One needs to push a line in order to be intellectually honest and to do what philosophers indeed do. It would be odd, after teaching in critical thinking classes that it's worth arguing about arguments, to find in the end that all arguments are equally good, equally bad

or mere dilemmas, paradoxes, and antinomies. If we are to teach students how to think, we must be willing to show them how to draw conclusions. One does that by playing out some line of argument to its end. In classes that are allowed to be all discussion and no conclusion, cynicism holds the reins while skepticism rides shotgun.

Further, if we wish students to have access to a variety of life situations, it is not enough just to discuss classical liberalism as a general philosophical position, though it is useful to point out what its commitments are. One must also persuasively introduce students to specific positions contrary to the ones they likely hold, otherwise the old ways will win out by default. The balancing of views, touted by some as a way for all sides to be equally heard, results again in a skepticism in which none of us actually believes. Such balancing ought to occur rather against the general cultural background. When this is done one is able both to argue for a specific position and yet have all sides be aired for the sake of fairness.

This means arguing for positions like the right to abortion, gay rights, for pornography, euthanasia, and affirmative action and against the death penalty. All but

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the last are going to actually affect the way people in the class live and are issues where feelings run deep. Further, rudimentary arguments on these issues have been bruited about by The Right and to a lesser degree in the popular press, so students may not only feel strongly on these matters, they may also think they know what they are talking about. Set against explicitly politicized teaching, the combination can be explosive. Most teachers take a safe course and try to avoid potential, soul-saving controversy. Like a Rogerian psychiatrist, they just let students talk their minds, themselves not plumping for one side or another. The result is usually what my C-minus students claim when they complain at course's end, having missed its entire point: "I thought it was just an opinions course." After all, nothing matters.

Alternatively, for lack of courage professors will back whatever position will for them least rock the boat politically. Courses end up being politicized this way, too, only insidiously so. Yet assuming one has the requisite courage, there are a number of precautions one can take to enhance the prospects that explicitly political teaching will nevertheless be fair to students. Mentioning some of these might encourage others to

take the plunge and teach explicitly political courses.

Six Guidelines

First, be forthright about your prejudices. This likely involves waving some of your privacy, but as in electoral politics such a loss comes as part of the job. Students should be told up front what one's general political orientation is, what one's religious beliefs are generally, what one's sexual orientation is, what sort of political and social organizations one belongs to. This is not to get chummy with them, and there should be no expectation that they should reciprocate; indeed that generally should be discouraged. The reason for such disclosures is the same as for high-level politicians putting their finances in blind trusts: so that one cannot manipulate the affairs of an unwitting public for one's own benefit. The effect of such disclosures is to assure the students that nothing is being pulled over on them. There are no hidden agendas; the cards are on the table.

Second, offend everyone. Anyone with appropriately strong enough opinions to be teaching adequately should have no problem with this. A classical liberal position which argues strongly for individual rights especially against government, but also sees a role for

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government in enhancing the circumstances in which and out of which independence may be realized, will usually offend everyone in the right degree. Those who but for boredom and ignorance would be Nazis will be offended by the degree of individual choice advocated in this view. Commies—there are always a couple—will think that government has not gone far enough on this model and possibly will attack the very notion of individual rights as a bourgeois conspiracy, while libertarians—there are usually a couple Randians in class, too—will think that the state has gone too far. Now, it's hard to offend everyone equally, but if people see all others getting shot down now and then, they will realize that one is not playing favorites.

Third, provide students some time to express their opinions, though don't indulge views that are clearly off the wall (students are surprisingly sensitive to this and are unhappy if you let it eat up much time). I find a pseudo-socratic method or directed discussion works best for me. Both argument and objection are expounded by asking students questions. They in turn get to ask questions and raise objections along the way. Straight lecturing, though it makes for cleaner exposition of arguments, tends to leave them brittle, and it fails to engage students, fails to pique their curiosity—at

least beyond the point of wondering whether this is going to be on the examination. Too often, teaching is like inquisitorial torture: it tries to get at the truth but instead simply gets the victim to say whatever the perpetrator wants to hear.

I call my method socratic, for when a student advances a position, by advancing a series of contrarily leading questions I will run the position through the standard philosophical gauntlet to see how it stands up. Sometimes admittedly the student feels badgered or bulldozed. If that occurs, it is useful to summarize how the position or argument has been clarified or elaborated in the testing of it. In this way, the examination is shown not to be mere browbeating or one-up-manship. One can try to strengthen the student's own position by indicating on its behalf distinctions, principles, and connections which the student has failed to note, but such a move, even when carried out in good faith, will as likely as not be viewed suspiciously as a sleight of hand. To a degree the suspicion is justified. I call the method "pseudo" for there is no pretension that I, the questioner, don't have a position that I'm advocating.

Fourth, admit failure and ignorance. Teachers are supposed to be authority figures, or so we are told. And we are supposed to be the teachers, not the students, chiefly because we know more than they do. As far as it goes, this is true. But many teachers over-generalize and act as though they know everything or at least think it too embarrassing to admit failure as somehow undermining their authority. The good teacher admits error when he finds he has made a mistake in an argument or when a student correctly points out that he has just contradicted something he said three weeks ago. Even in response to a largely irrelevant query after some factual matter, an admission of ignorance is to most students a breath of fresh air. It shows that the politicized teacher, as pushy and self-assured as he may appear, is not speaking *ex cathedra* but honestly believes, as he has been claiming all along, that there are better and worse arguments and better and worse reasons.

Fifth, take the argument one more step. If you're teaching an article with which you basically agree, it is helpful if you can tease out some problematic feature that hasn't been fully worked out in the piece but which nevertheless does have a solution within the general framework it assumes. This strategy is especially effective in dispelling skepticism and cynicism. For it shows that there can be progress in ideas. The political teacher is not committed to final solutions; he claims only that there are better positions and worse ones, and what better way to show this than to show that positions can get better and better.

Sixth and finally, don't grade politically. Be sure to have enough graded assignments early on so that students can be assured that they aren't being judged by their degree of conformity to the teacher's views, but on how well they can argue for a position, whatever position it may be. The student must be allowed to

advance his own position in exams and papers; don't degrade your students in the name of efficiency by giving them multiple choice, true/false, or short answer exams. This is a terrible thing to do normally, for such an exam assumes by its very structure that students have nothing worth saying, and it is intolerable in a politicized class, for the student is then left entirely to second-guess the professor's motives in so-called objective questions.

With these dogma-dispelling safeguards installed in classroom controversies, one can at least feel confident

that one is doing the best one can in handing out to students the palm of liberty.

—Richard Mohr

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Children's Television

Afternoon in America, and millions of kids are sprawled on the floor watching television. On one station, the Masters of the Universe (available from Mattel at \$4.97 each) triumph over the forces of evil; on another, the Defenders of the Universe (sold separately for \$3.97 apiece) do the same. Turn the dial, and an animated rubber Gumby figure (in two sizes: \$2.99 and \$1.50) attempts to tug on viewers' heartstrings ("If you've got a heart, then Gumby's a part of you"), his adventures punctuated by commercials for Circus Fun cereal (featuring chocolate-covered marshmallow animals) and Snickers bars. It's hard to resist the conclusion that commercial children's TV is a wasteland.

Yet children aged six to eleven watch an average of twenty-seven hours of television a week, for a total of 1,400 hours a year; preschool children watch even more. By the time the average American child graduates from high school he will have logged more hours in front of the TV than in the classroom. How worried should we be about what our children are watching—and about what's being sold to them as they watch? And should we be trying to do something about it?

It's Not What You Watch

It seems obvious that it is better to have children learning their alphabet on "Sesame Street" than watching shoddy, violence-packed cartoons. But against this it has been suggested that the medium of TV itself dominates any message, for good or ill, it might seek to convey.

Cedric Cullingford, Dean of Educational Studies at Oxford Polytechnic, argues that it doesn't matter what children watch because, "even at its most intense moments," television "can appear as little more than background." Children "associate the pleasures of television with a mild form of boredom," which they

nonetheless turn to fondly because "boredom is so little trouble." Like adults, kids watch TV for "entertainment without demands," and what they watch makes very little impression on them, emotionally or intellectually: "Of all the information that children will have seen over an evening's viewing, of all the hours of action, children remember very little. They know that they have *seen* the programmes but can say almost nothing about them." Thus Cullingford turns a skeptical ear to stories of TV's supposed great dangers to the minds and hearts of youth: TV doesn't *matter* enough to pose any real threat.

Marie Winn, author of *The Plug-in-Drug*, agrees that it doesn't matter what children actually watch on TV, but for the opposite reason: not because watching TV is so harmless, but because it is so harmful. Winn sees television watching as essentially a passive experience, a "one-way transaction" that induces in children a zombie-like state: "The child's facial expression is transformed. The jaw is relaxed and hangs open slightly; the tongue rests on the front teeth. . . . The eyes have a glazed, vacuous look. . . ." Winn also claims that TV, far from powerless, is addicting. She concludes that it doesn't matter what children watch any more than it matters whether an alcoholic drinks Jack Daniels or moonshine. In fact, Winn goes so far as to say that the interests of children are better served by simply broadcasting junk, "since conscientious parents are more likely to limit their children's television intake if only unsavory programs are available." How children of less conscientious parents would fare under unrestrained industry indifference Winn does not say.

The most vociferous advocates of improved content in children's programming have targeted two key areas of concern: on the positive side, the educational potential of television; on the negative side, its pervasive

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violence. The educational promise of television has so far best blossomed in "Sesame Street," launched in 1969 by the Children's Television Workshop with lavish budgets and extraordinary participation by educators. Early studies by the Educational Testing Service in 1970 and 1971 indicated that the young watchers of "Sesame Street" made great gains as a result of their viewing experience, but later studies attributed these rather to concerted parental involvement in the viewing. Teachers report that "Sesame Street" has helped young children to recognize numbers and letters, but this early boost has not translated into improved language skills later in school. Certainly disadvantaged children, however long and hard they stare at the tube, have not caught up academically with children of educated parents. But that television has not been strikingly successful at imparting factual knowledge or teaching language skills does not mean that it teaches nothing. "Sesame Street" may be as important for elevating children's aesthetic tastes or for fostering nonracist attitudes as for drilling the alphabet. Even Cullingford concedes that children pick up from TV such amorphous things as "tone, gestures, and attitudes," which may shape their world view.

By now it is hardly news that American television is violent: by age 5 the typical child in the United States has viewed over 200 hours of violent images and the average fourteen-year-old has witnessed the televised killings of some 13,000 human beings. The number of violent incidents on TV is rivaled only by the number of studies on their effects. The prevailing view seems

to be, to quote the conclusions of the National Institute of Mental Health's 1982 report: "Violence on television does lead to aggressive behavior by children and teenagers who watch the programs." Many studies have been criticized, however, as relying too heavily on laboratory simulations; others show a correlation between television viewing and aggressive behavior without proving any causal connection. And definitions of "violence" in television are so elastic that conclusions about its frequency must be drawn with some care, lest a comedian slipping on a banana peel be classed as an incident of violence. It seems fair to say, nonetheless, that violence on children's television, and on television generally, should be monitored vigilantly.

For the rest, does it matter what children watch, or not? Judith Lichtenberg, director of the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy's project on the media, likens the charge that program content doesn't matter to the frequent claim that it doesn't matter *what* children read, only *that* they read. But just as few are convinced that comic books are just as good for young readers as the enduring classics of children's literature, so it is hard to accept that beautifully produced television dramas are just as bad for children as their present alternatives.

A final issue concerns children's advertising. A National Science Foundation study estimates that on average children are exposed to some 20,000 commercial messages each year, most for toys, cereals, candies, and fast-food restaurants. (Few tout, say, the importance of eating spinach.) The NSF report cites evidence that children under eight years of age have substantial difficulty in comprehending the difference between commercials and programs. Younger children also

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express a greater belief in commercials and request advertised products more frequently than more mature youngsters do. This raises special questions about the appropriateness of advertising to children in this age group, particularly when so many of the products advertised (e.g., highly sweetened products) are arguably harmful for them.

Funding Public Television

There are two chief avenues by which these concerns about children's television can be addressed. One is to increase the support given to public television, which generally has superior programming for children and no commercials. According to Edward L. Palmer, Vice President and Senior Research Fellow at the Children's Television Workshop, our PBS lags far behind the British BBC, which airs 840 hours of at-home children's television each year, representing one-eighth of the total program schedule carried on its two stations. Of these, 630 hours (75 percent) are newly produced programs. By contrast, PBS carries about 150 hours a year of new children's programming, with repeat programming hovering just short of 90 percent. Palmer sees investment in children's television as a singular bargain: the cost of "Sesame Street" averaged over the more than nine million preschoolers who tune in the show comes to less than a penny a day per original program. Even a children's programming budget adequate to provide daily programming for all age groups (which Palmer puts at \$62.4 million) is, he points out, but a tiny fraction of the over \$100 billion we spend each year in this country on public education.

The implied analogy is that the same reasons that lead us to support public education should lead us to support public television. We support public education because we have a common interest in preparing future citizens to participate intelligently in our democracy and because we want, both for prudential and for moral reasons, to help children grow up into capable, employable adults. If some cold water is dashed on television's hopes as an educator, these arguments cannot directly translate into support for publicly funded programming. But much of the curriculum of our schools is not specifically designed to turn children into future voters and workers, but to enhance their lives, and our collective life, in other ways. The rest of us have a stake in how young minds and hearts are formed and how America's children spend the better part of their waking days. Improving the quality of television seems as important an objective as, say, offering art and music appreciation classes, or physical education, in the schools.

Public television is often criticized as coercively elitist. Aren't some select groups taxing the majority to provide programs catering only to their high-brow tastes? Whatever their general merits, such arguments fail to convince when the issue is children's television. No one denies that paternalism is justified with children or that adults—parents, teachers, society at large—are entitled, indeed obligated, to shape and mold children's prefer-

ences and values. We cannot appeal to children's existing tastes to determine what should be offered to them, since their tastes are in flux and will be determined largely by what in fact we offer.

Regulating Commercial Television

However rich the offerings on public television, the audience for it seldom exceeds 5 percent of the population. If we are to make any significant effect on what children are actually watching, we must consider mandating certain levels of quantity and quality for children's programming on commercial stations and regulating children's advertising—or banning it altogether.

Regulation of the broadcast media has always been more stringent than regulation of the print media, based partly on the argument that since broadcast outlets are licensed by the government, it is appropriate for government to allocate them in a way that serves the public interest. But regulation of the media, and of advertising as well, raises charges that it conflicts with freedom of expression.

Lichtenberg replies that measures to give neglected groups greater access to the media do not conflict with the objectives underlying freedom of expression but indeed support them. We want freedom of expression in part because we oppose censorship: one should not be prevented from thinking, reading, writing, listening—or broadcasting—as one sees fit. But opposition to censorship does not exhaust our interest in freedom of expression, in Lichtenberg's view. We also want diversity of expression to flourish; we want to hear a multiplicity of voices. And this can include the voices of children and voices speaking directly to their concerns and needs. Freedom of expression rests on both the rights and interests of speakers and the rights and interests of listeners. Certainly the rights and interests of children as speakers have traditionally been ignored ("Children should be seen and not heard"); they are an all but voiceless group in the public sphere. But their rights and interests as listeners have been neglected as well, and improving children's programming would work to redress this imbalance.

Advertising, too, is a form of expression, and free speech arguments can be given for protecting commercials as well as the content of programs. However, courts have not extended to commercial speech the full range of First Amendment protections. The Federal Trade Commission requires that advertisements be truthful and that their factual claims be substantiated, requirements that would not be tolerated in other realms of discourse. And, according to philosopher Alan Goldman, any moral right to advertise "does not include a right to defraud, or moral license to mislead people into buying harmful products."

Goldman suggests that we need to consider "first, the audience to whom the advertisement is addressed, and second, the degree of increased risk of serious harm from being misled into use or misuse of the product. If a specific audience is addressed, typical members of that audience ought not to be misled. But

as the risk of serious harm increases, the prohibition against deception must become more strict in order to prevent deception of less circumspect consumers."

Both considerations are crucial in assessing advertisements targeted to children. With adults the standard presumption, perhaps mistaken, is that the typical consumer is able to recognize the persuasive intent of commercials and discount their claims accordingly. But with young children at least, the *typical* viewer is far more susceptible to the manipulations of Madison Avenue. With adults we can say, "If people are gullible or careless enough to fall for *that*, so much the worse for them." But the vulnerability of children cannot be dismissed in this way, and when children are deliberately or inadvertently misled by commercials, standards of truth in advertising are compromised.

How much harm is done to children by their naive trust in advertisements? It might be argued that any harm is relatively minor, since final purchasing decisions are made by adults, who should be able to assess the merits of the coveted products more wisely. Of course, a whining child can wear away many a parent's better judgment, but the purchase is still mediated through an adult's judgment. (Children's vitamin ads were removed from the air because the vitamins were directly consumed—eaten—by children in toxic quantities.) Children may in the end be worse off, of course, if they wheedle their parents into feeding them junk food and straining the family budget by foolish toy purchases. And if we are concerned about the effects of television on children's values and attitudes, we have

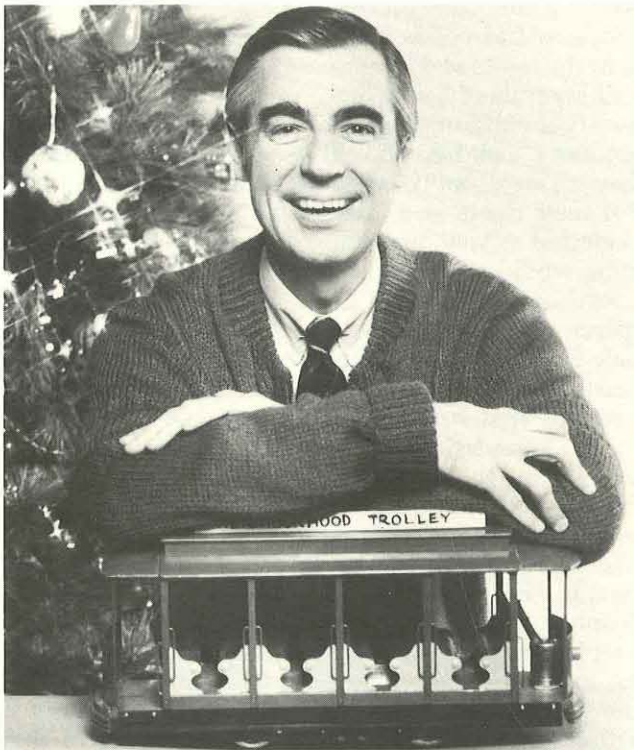
to worry about the relentless materialism that bombards young viewers via the constant stream of commercial messages.

What Should We Do?

The political climate at present makes unlikely both any increase in funding for public television and any tougher guidelines for advertisers and programming directors. In 1983 the Federal Trade Commission ruled against Action for Children's Television's long-standing petition for reforms that would require all stations to broadcast a minimum of 14 hours of children's programming each week and would ban all advertisements on children's programs. A bill is now pending in Congress (H.R. 3216) that would set a more modest programming goal and "investigate" program-length commercials like "He-Man." Its chances are less than good. In the meantime, parents can take advantage of a technological marvel called the off button. It may be the most potent weapon parents now have against low-quality children's television.

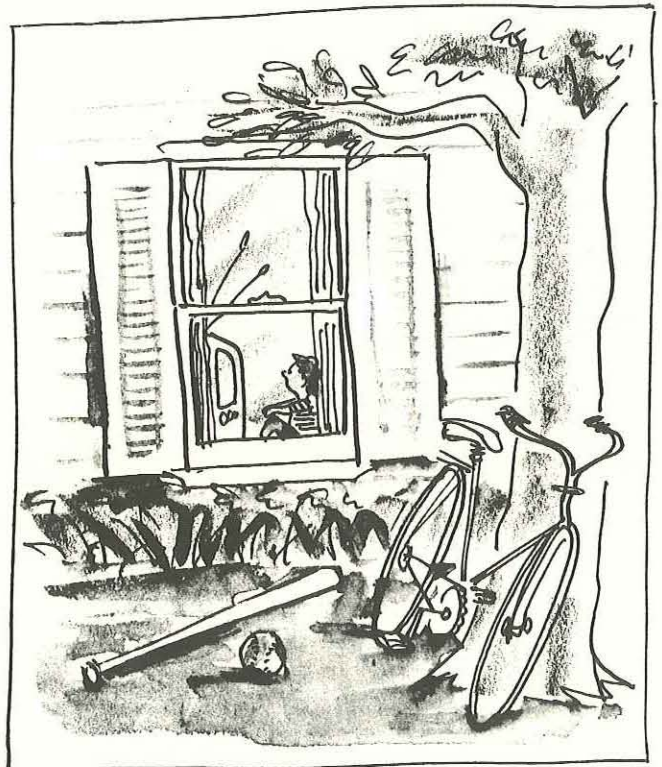
—Claudia Mills

Sources quoted in this article are: Cedric Cullingford, *Children and Television* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984); Marie Winn, *The Plug-In-Drug* (New York: Viking, rev. ed. 1985); Edward L. Palmer, "Providing Quality Television for America's Children," in *The Future of Children's Television: Results of the Markle Foundation/Boys Town Conference* (Boys Town: The Boys Town Center, 1984); Alan Goldman, "Ethical Issues in Advertising," in *Just Business*, edited by Tom Regan (New York: Random House, 1984); and Judith Lichtenberg, "Free Speech, Diversity, and Access to the Press" (manuscript), and conversation.



PBS

Action for Children's Television



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