

## “Boxed-In: Television and the Press” (1991)<sup>1</sup>

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The crisis of the Cold War coincided with the emergence of a technological novelty called television, an inescapable medium that quickly rivaled the power of movies, radio, and mass-circulation magazines to transmit ideas and images. In 1950, 3.1 million television sets could be found in American homes. By 1955, the figure was already up to 32 million, and ten thousand Americans a day were buying their first TV sets. Already by 1953 half of all families owned a set, an instrument that was permanently altering the nation’s entertainment preferences and habits of acquiring information.

The results could be readily measured. Movie houses, for example, closed in droves. In 1950-51, the last picture shows were exhibited in 134 cinemas in southern California, 61 in Massachusetts, 55 in metropolitan New York. In 1951, ninety million Americans were still going every week to the movies. By the end of the decade, weekly attendance had been sliced in half, down to forty-three million. Radio also lost much of its audience. Comedian Bob Hope’s radio ratings were 23.8 in 1949, 12.7 two years later, and only 5.4 by 1953. A 1959 poll indicated that, as a popular source of news, television had already vastly surpassed magazines and the radio and had matched newspapers in terms of popular trust.

Television was crucial to the destruction of the general magazines (the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier’s*, *Look*, *Life*) that had been pitched to the middle-class audience. In one six-month period in 1954, the newsstand Circulation of *Life* skidded 21 percent, as the moving images that flickered inside most American homes made its famous photographs seem anachronistic. And because those houses were increasingly located in suburbs, the voices of newsboys screaming the evening headlines were stilled. Potential customers were no longer implored to “read all about it” when “it” could be seen and heard—and updated—on the tube at home. Because commuting was commonly done on highways, where it was impossible to drive cars and read simultaneously, fewer customers dropped by the subway newsstands or the neighborhood variety stores for the latest newspaper or magazine. As the general magazines headed toward extinction, others—aimed at newer styles of leisure and entertainment—were born, such as *TV Guide*, which in 1954 gained 98 percent in circulation.

The pioneers of the medium that *TV Guide* made its beat were eminently respectable (unlike the moguls who built the movie industry), and the network bosses therefore quickly acknowledged their political responsibilities during the Cold War. Frank M. Folsom, president of Radio Corporation of America (RCA), claimed in 1951 that television was a vital source of information “when swiftly changing events may otherwise cause confusion and alarm to the detriment of unity of purpose in safeguarding the democratic institutions of our land and our determination to assist other freedom-loving people against aggression.” RCA’s subsidiary, NBC, joined its major competitor, CBS, in August 1951 in an attempt to spike Soviet influence during the World Festival of Youth in East Berlin. The Department of State asked the networks

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to put up huge color television screens in West Berlin, hoping to counter—by this demonstration of American technological superiority—the spread of Communist propaganda among the two million young people in attendance. In the early 1950s, the networks also cooperated closely with the federal government in airing civil defense programs. Rather than adopting a detached or independent position, which the First Amendment presumably permitted, television tended to vindicate a militaristic response to the Soviet challenge. Live telecasts of nuclear explosions in Nevada were welcomed by the Pentagon, which wanted to reassure viewers of American nuclear superiority. One atomic blast was even “sponsored” by the Advertising Council. Such live coverage tended to reinforce an uncritical attitude toward American foreign and military policy, foreclosing consideration of alternatives to an expanding arms race based on ever-more-destructive nuclear weapons.

Since dissent seemed to slide so uncomfortably close to disloyalty, since controversy had become a code word for trouble (rather than an inevitable feature of democratic dialogue), official views were rarely and insufficiently challenged on television. When disagreements were presented, the framework of analysis was so narrowly circumscribed that television became a custodian of the cultural Cold War. Its viewers were boxed-in to a tight consensus. Radio had offered a less constricted political perspective during the Great Depression, when socialist tribunes like Norman Thomas and feisty libertarians like Roger Baldwin were included in the range of legitimate opinion. *America’s Town Meeting of the Air* had begun on ABC radio in 1935, without unsettling audiences or inspiring social revolution. Fifteen years later, this show established a beachhead on television as well. But the availability of a forum for left-wing opinion might generate unnecessary friction, might even appear vaguely unpatriotic when unity against Communism was so urgent. *America’s Town Meeting of the Air* was dropped from television in 1952, though the radio version of this public affairs program hung on for a few more years. NBC’s *American Forum of the Air* lasted longer but offered even fewer divergent opinions, as the guest slots for Norman Thomas and other non-Communists on the left disappeared. The spectrum of acceptable views thus narrowed; the air became thinner.

Fear of the off-center pervaded the medium. James Wechsler had been a regular panelist on a television show, *Starring the Editors*, that Grand Union grocery stores sponsored. But because the editorial page of the *New York Post* was firmly liberal and anti-McCarthy, Wechsler was attacked by a rival newspaper, Hearst’s *Journal-American*. That made Wechsler “controversial” —a word, historian Jacques Barzun complained, that had come to mean “something (or someone) about which we cannot afford to engage in controversy—virtually the opposite of the former meaning.” Wechsler was dropped from *Starring the Editors*. “Such furtive pressure was operating all over the TV-radio world,” the editor commented. “An accuser did not feel morally obligated to prove a case; by merely bringing any charge, he made his victim ‘controversial’ and this was sufficient ground for exclusion.” Television programming thus fit—and contributed to—the proclivity to hang a giant Do Not Disturb sign over the nation, what CBS commentator Edward R. Murrow in 1958 called “a built-in allergy to unpleasant or disturbing information....Television in the main is being used to distract, delude, amuse and insulate us.” Such functions were more consistent with the needs of the sponsors who determined programming than with the purposes of the First Amendment.

To be sure there was “no room for a crusading journalist” in Russia, as Justice Douglas had proclaimed in a speech at Occidental College. But on American television there was no room for a crusading journalist either. The prime example of the species began his own four-page radical newsletter in 1953: *I. F. Stone’s Weekly*. Its eponymous editor-publisher-sole contributor had no difficulty securing a second-class mailing permit, and the five thousand subscribers he attracted were enough to pay the bills. In two years his readership doubled, to about .00006 percent of the American population—few if any of whom exerted clout in Washington. Stone was so much of a loner that even his fellow journalists in the National Press Club banished him, after he had invited a black to lunch there. In researching his own articles, Stone turned his hearing defect into an advantage, as he made himself a close reader of government documents and the daily press. (He especially cherished the excitement of reading the *Washington Post*, “because you never knew on what page you would find a page-one story.”)

Obscure but not obstructed, Stone was a throwback to the dissident pamphleteers who are exalted in histories of the press. His impassioned, don’t-tread-on-me tenacity contrasted sharply with the mainstream media. A veteran of left-wing newspapers over two previous decades, Stone was not much of an anti-Communist and did not seem morally vexed by the character of Soviet society or its champions. He pleaded instead for adapting to reality. “We must live with the revolution in peace or destroy our own society in a futile effort to smash it,” he argued in 1952. “Coexistence and the peaceful competition of diverse societies represent the only sane and humane solution....Communism is in the world to stay, and we must reconcile ourselves to it, as the crowned heads of Europe had to reconcile themselves to republicanism and democracy.” Though Stone’s newsletter was to survive and even prosper for nineteen years, his heresy was never expressed on television in the 1950s.

## 1

Amplification of the Cold War consensus was especially apparent in television’s coverage of international relations. In the articulation of foreign policy, no one besides Eisenhower bestrode the video colossus more formidably than Secretary of State Dulles, who was given eighteen separate opportunities in less than seven years of office to report to viewers on the state of the planet. His speeches were televised (live or on film) not only when he addressed the UN General Assembly but also when he spoke before the American Legion and the 4-H Clubs. Rarely was he countered with a contradictory opinion on his conduct of foreign policy. His diplomacy seemed the projection of the national purpose that brooked no second-guessing or partisan criticism, and his views and visage were so ineluctable a part of news coverage that he seemed almost like a serial character. It was fitting that both CBS and NBC canceled their regular daytime programming in May 1959 to televise his funeral.

By then Dulles had traveled over half a million miles as secretary of state, and trips to forty-seven nations had provided plenty of opportunities to make “departure statements” and “arrival statements” from the collapsible lectern that was taken on his flights. Television and film cameramen were often encouraged on these occasions to shoot their peripatetic subject from a low angle, giving Dulles a redoubtable “American eagle look.” When he happened to be in

Washington and gave a press conference, any film of the event had to secure his approval; he insisted on the right to examine the transcript and to make cuts. Certain journalists were given off-the-record “background” sessions, with Dulles serving as the “high government source” who was quoted or paraphrased. The consequences, as television historian Erik Barnouw pointed out, were that viewers tended to see international affairs “through the eyes of Dulles....A filmed press conference excerpt, or a newsman’s report ‘from a reliable source,’ or a filmed statement by Dulles from a lectern at the edge of an airstrip, *became* the news. For networks he often seemed a welcome *deus ex machina*. In a fifteen-minute newscast, a ninety-second report on Southeast Asia by the Secretary of State himself seemed grand and took care of Southeast Asia nicely,” since the networks had no bureaus close enough to film anything in the jungles of Indochina.

If American statecraft in that era has appeared in retrospect to have been less interventionist and militarist than under the presidents who succeeded Eisenhower, that is largely because the CIA was then deployed so completely outside of public—or even congressional—scrutiny. Because the agency’s director was Allen Dulles, foreign policy was an instrument of brotherly love of sorts. The combination may have thrown America’s enemies off balance, and it has bemused later historians. For one brother had a habit of denouncing the deceitfulness of “atheistic communism” with such moralistic fervor that Ike compared him to an Old Testament prophet. The other brother, also a quondam partner in the Wall Street law firm of Sullivan & Cromwell, engaged in such cunning and morally hazardous methods that, according to Senator Richard Russell (D-Ga.), “it almost chills the marrow of a man” to hear about them.

The classic case of such operations—immune from serious journalistic scrutiny or criticism—was Guatemala, where the CIA arranged the overthrow of the government of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman in 1954. In June, mercenaries invaded from bases in Nicaragua and Honduras, countries whose dictators were friendly to the United States. Four American pilots also flew P-47 Thunderbolts over the capital, Guatemala City. Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, who had been trained at Fort Leavenworth, arrived from exile in the plane of the American ambassador. With notable bamboozlement, John Foster Dulles then proclaimed that the intolerable situation that the Arbenz government had created was “being cured by the Guatemalans themselves.” After Arbenz fled, Armas seized power, imprisoned thousands of political opponents, disenfranchised three-fourths of the voting population, ended the secret ballot for the rest, abolished all political parties and independent trade unions, canceled Arbenz’s agrarian reform law, and governed by decree. The American government rewarded Armas with ninety million dollars in aid in his first two years in power, though he was assassinated soon thereafter.

What crime had his predecessor committed to require the clandestine intervention of the United States? Arbenz had not illegally seized power, having become president of Guatemala, Allen Dulles conceded, “through the usual processes of government and not by any Communist coup.” And even though Ike had called Arbenz’s regime “a Communist government,” Communists did not serve in the presidential cabinet. Only four served in the congress (out of fifty-six members), though they were important in the land-reform and education programs. Arbenz’s real crime was different: in one region of Guatemala, he had expropriated 234,000 acres of uncultivated banana land belonging to the United Fruit Company. He had offered compensation, but United Fruit rejected the proposal. Meanwhile, he had begun action to expropriate another 173,000 acres of the company’s land in another part of Guatemala. Perhaps it

was only coincidental that United Fruit was a client of the law firm of Sullivan & Cromwell. In any event, Armas revealed the purposes of this particular application of the Monroe Doctrine by restoring ownership of the expropriated land to United Fruit and by abolishing the tax on interest and dividends that had been imposed on foreign investors.

Secretary of State Dulles managed to explain these startling events without mentioning the role of the CIA, as though a spontaneous popular uprising indigenous to Guatemala had pitched “red colonialism” out of the Western hemisphere. “It is the policy of the United States not to intervene in the internal affairs of other nations,” his department insisted. “This policy has repeatedly been affirmed under the present administration.” Dulles told a television audience that the Arbenz policies were part of “the evil purpose of the Kremlin to destroy the inter-American system.” Though the Soviet Union undoubtedly harbored such a design, no evidence suggested that the government of Guatemala intended to be its instrument. Never in its news digests did the Voice of America refer to the hand of the CIA, while Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge replied to protests at the UN by categorically denying any American involvement in the sudden collapse of the Arbenz regime. No American correspondent pursued clues of CIA involvement, and, though the United Fruit Company was treated as a reliable source, the counterclaims of the legitimate government of Guatemala were not reported. Thus, the press never challenged the “cover story” (a euphemism for mendacity). Hadn’t George Kennan persuasively argued in “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” (1947) that “the secretiveness, the lack of frankness [and] the duplicity” of the Russians distinguished their diplomacy from ours?

Dulles was even more effective in restricting information about mainland China. The United States did not get around to rapprochement until 1973, exactly two decades after the Republicans took over the executive branch with the accusation that the Democrats “lost” China. Ever since the Red Army had entered Peking in October 1949, no subject of political conversation was more sensitive. Indeed, Dulles snubbed Premier Chou En-lai in 1954 by refusing to shake his hand during the Geneva conference that confirmed the French expulsion from Vietnam. Though Justice Douglas called for recognition of the Communist regime in China in the fall of 1951, the proposal only heightened his reputation as a maverick and proved that he no longer hoped to be president. Public discussion of the question was virtually closed. Except in high school debate contests, which formally required two sides to every question, China meant only Chiang and his forces, which were confined to Formosa (the Japanese word, then in common use, for Taiwan).

With some exceptions, the American press concurred in this denial of reality. Television was not the only medium that downplayed or ignored the less pleasant side of the story of how and why the Kuomintang regime had lost the civil war to the Communists, after nearly half of its own soldiers had defected by early 1948. The United States had given Chiang two billion dollars in aid, and yet about 80 percent of the equipment that it donated had somehow disappeared—either sold on the black market or transferred to Mao Tse-tung. One American ambassador was candid enough to call Chiang “the best asset the Communists have.” But the generalissimo was a convert to Christianity and he hated Communism, and to pick apart his defects as a statesman was to forfeit serious public attention.

Dulles’s most important journalistic ally was not any of the network executives but the head of Time, Inc., Henry Luce, who liked to tell friends that “the only ambassadorship I would

take is to a restored democracy in China.” Such an appointment was not within the power of even a Republican administration to make. But the single most powerful influence on right-center opinion—that is, on American public opinion—remained haunted by the country where he had been born and raised, as the son of Presbyterian missionaries. Indeed, by the time the Nationalist government had fallen, Chiang had appeared on the cover of *Time* more often than anyone else—even more frequently than Roosevelt or Churchill or Hitler. Sprucing up the virtues of the Kuomintang became an obsession of the Luce publications. John Hersey, who was also the Chinese-born son of missionary parents, had covered China during World War II for *Time*. But so altered were his dispatches that he told Luce to his face that the weekly was no more truthful in its reporting than *Pravda*.

In Chungking, Hersey had hired Luce’s other star correspondent in China, Theodore H. White, who had studied the Chinese language at Harvard. Luce considered him the most talented correspondent he had ever employed, and White became the first reporter ever to get a by-line in *Time*. But he resigned after the magazine refused to publish his reports on the depth of popular disaffection with the Kuomintang. (Luce was not alone in refusing to believe White’s gloomy reporting from China. The other impediment was Chambers, *Time*’s foreign editor.) Chiang’s loss of the mandate of heaven, through ignorance and corruption, was presciently treated in *Thunder out of China*, the bestseller that White and Annalee Jacoby coauthored in 1946. Seven years later, after Cohn and Schine discovered *Thunder out of China* in the Berlin library of the International Information Agency, the copies of this Book-of-the-Month Club selection were burned.

Having quit Time, Inc., in 1946, White found himself “being nipped at for my past reporting of China. Even my old friends at *Time* magazine referred to me in their columns as ‘pinko’ Teddy White....The harassment of others was closing both my movements and my outlets.” Fearing that “no large or distinguished magazine or newspaper would hire a known ‘left-wing’ writer,” he joined “a marginal news-feature service called the Overseas News Agency, a service which was still unafraid of the growing paranoia against liberal journalists.” The account of White’s pariahdom in his autobiography is overly dramatic and not strictly true. For he wrote on politics for the Sunday magazine of the *New York Times*, served as national political correspondent for the *Reporter* (circulation almost 200,000), and then repeated the same assignment for the mass circulation (4.3 million) *Collier’s*. Luce even invited him back to Time-Life, an offer the journalist declined. And though CBS producers informed White that he could not be cleared as a guest on any of its network shows, his claim was much exaggerated that he “had become an outcast of American journalism early in the McCarthy years.” White’s analysis of postwar European politics, *Fire in the Ashes*, became a Book-of-the-Month Club selection in 1953, when McCarthy was very much on the warpath. White nevertheless wrote nothing on China from 1954 till 1972, and only four articles on Vietnam—in part because of his own uncertainty, in part because of self-censorship. He also avoided defense or foreign policy, because “too much danger lurked there.”

At least Hersey and White had gotten the chance to report directly from China. By the 1950s, American reporters could not cover the mainland at all. The obstacle was not only totalitarian xenophobia. Peking offered to admit American journalists in August 1956, provided that their own government reciprocate by allowing in their Chinese counterparts to cover the

United States. Dulles adamantly refused and then, after strong criticism, acknowledged that such Chinese reporters might be admitted—provided that they were not Communists! Such a condition was, of course, unacceptable. Three plucky American reporters nevertheless decided to defy the State Department ban by visiting the world's most populous nation. Among them was the *Baltimore Afro-American's* William Worthy, whose short-wave broadcast from Peking was picked up by CBS. An undersecretary of state thereupon phoned William Paley, the network's chairman of the board, urging him to carry no further broadcasts from China. Not only did Paley promise that this breach of political decorum would not happen again, but CBS also silenced its own commentator, Eric Sevareid, who had wanted to blast the administration's effort to maximize American ignorance. Never before had Sevareid's entire program been scuttled. Murrow tried to save the network's honor by addressing the issue on his own radio program, for which CBS in turn rebuked him. He also wanted to contribute a brief in Worthy's behalf, when the reporter's passport was revoked upon his return from behind the "bamboo curtain." But Worthy lost his suit against the Department of State in 1959.

In 1956, Murrow again risked official and corporate displeasure when *See It Now* interviewed Chou En-lai, whom Luce's *Life* magazine had two years earlier called "a political thug, a ruthless intriguer, a conscienceless liar, a saber-toothed political assassin." But Murrow and his partner, producer Fred W. Friendly, protected themselves from charges of providing a conduit for Communist propaganda by capping the interview with a live panel consisting of two fierce anti-Communists: Carlos P. Romulo, the Philippine ambassador to the United States, and T. F. Tsiang, the Nationalist Chinese delegate to the UN. A wall of silence had been at least momentarily pierced, however. After Marshal Tito of Yugoslavia was interviewed on *See It Now* the following year, another impeccable live panel was arranged. It included Clare Boothe Luce, then the U.S. ambassador to Italy; Hamilton Fish, the editor of *Foreign Affairs* and director of the Council on Foreign Relations; and the *New York Times's* William Lawrence. Also in 1957, CBS's *Face the Nation* dared to give an hour to Khrushchev, who was interviewed by three journalists, without a live panel afterwards—just as it did with more conventional political figures.

This willingness to trust viewers to make up their own minds infuriated the commander of the Catholic War Veterans, who wired CBS to cancel *Face the Nation*. Three days later, President Eisenhower dismissed the show as a stunt, because "a commercial firm in this country [is] trying to improve its commercial standing" (a peevish objection from the head of so pro-business an administration). Interestingly enough, the commercial firm's two rivals, NBC and ABC, did not defend CBS's right to telecast the interview. It was left to network president Frank Stanton to assert that "Khrushchev and his views are of great importance to our world and the world of our children. The less this man...remains a myth or a dark legend or a mystery to the American people, the more certain they are to size him up correctly."

The need to make so obvious a statement suggested how limited an effort television made to enlighten its audience, which was thus unprepared in the ensuing decade for any critical assessment of the military intervention in Southeast Asia. An audience that got the impression that a secretary of state's pronouncements were sacrosanct, that had rarely been challenged by a wide diversity of opinions, and that confused credulousness with patriotism was easily misled as the disastrous involvement in Vietnam deepened. Though democratic institutions were supposed

to require an informed citizenry, the torpor of television programming had helped atrophy whatever mental habits of skepticism and independence the mass audience might have cultivated. Television reporting and commentary need not be singled out as the only culprit in journalism. But the case of television was the most acute, and its failure probably the most consequential.

## 2

Because of the political emasculation of television, which hesitated to adopt the independent perspectives that the First Amendment sanctioned, the medium faced its earliest—and greatest—test not in the labyrinths of foreign policy but in the domestic Cold War. That test was personified by McCarthy, who was peculiarly a creature of the media attention that he seems to have craved more than power itself. No politician of his time was craftier at exploiting the habits of the press for his own self-aggrandizing ends. In *The Fourth Branch of Government* (1959), Douglass Cater explained how, “late one afternoon, Senator McCarthy might name a person, more likely a series of them. All through the evening the accused’s telephone kept ringing. He was told briefly the nature of the charge against him—let us say, ‘top Soviet agent’—and asked for a brief reply. But the dilemma for the reporter and the headline writer remained. McCarthy’s charge was controversial and unexpected—a news count of two. The denial was controversial and completely expected—a news count of one. Both were equally lacking in proof. Nobody carried credentials on his person to prove that he is not the ‘top Soviet agent.’” So the lies became amplified.

Though reporters were often stymied in their efforts to combat such methods, McCarthy’s unscrupulous demagoguery also met much spirited resistance. From virtually the beginning of his career, he was subjected to severe journalistic criticism, beginning with the two most important newspapers in his home state, the *Milwaukee Journal* and the *Madison Capital-Times*. The *New York Post*’s “Smear, Inc.: Joe McCarthy’s One-Man Mob” called him “the hoax of the century.” This seventeen-part exposé torpedoed his pretensions as an authority on Communism and defined McCarthyism as a sort of “Political Murder, Inc.” That is why the *Post*’s editor was hauled before McCarthy’s committee, and why Wechsler told the senator: “The *Post* has been fighting Senator McCarthy for a long time. Our editorial page, I am happy to say, has never wavered on this point. It is not going to change now.”

Within the limits of the ideal of “objectivity,” reporters like Philip Potter of the *Baltimore Sun* and Murrey Marder of the *Washington Post* were critical as well. The editorial antagonism of the *New York Times* was consistent. Not only the liberal press (such as the weekly journals of opinion) but also the Luce magazines were forthright in their opposition. Columnist Drew Pearson was so hostile that McCarthy once kicked him in the groin (and then, with a malevolent cackle, boasted about the incident). Martin Agronsky skewered McCarthy on ABC radio in 1953 and was nearly fired after the senator pressured more than half the local sponsors to withdraw. Commentator Elmer Davis attacked McCarthy with impunity, as did Walter Lippmann, the century’s most cerebral journalist. Indeed, one of the last holdouts among the elite of the Fourth Estate was Murrow, whose impact was magnified because his resistance stiffened in the glare of national television.

When the chairman of CBS's board was once asked at a stockholders' meeting why his salary was lower than Murrow's, Paley shrugged and said, "I guess he's worth more." Murrow's broadcasts during the Battle of Britain in 1940 ("This...is London") had made him the most famous foreign correspondent ever to work on radio. He then made himself into the most admired journalist ever to work on television. Though his *See It Now* developed into the preeminent weekly public affairs program, its corporate origins were somewhat less exalted than the legends of crusading liberalism might suggest. In 1951, Alcoa had decided to sponsor the show because the company, which controlled 90 percent of the aluminum market, had just lost an antitrust suit and needed to scrub up its image. In a celebrated assurance, Alcoa president Irving W. Wilson told Murrow and Friendly: "You do the programs, we'll make the aluminum. Don't tell us how to make the aluminum, and we won't tell you how to make the programs." The promise was kept. But except for a four-minute segment a month after *See It Now* began, Murrow and Friendly did not tackle McCarthy directly until the spring of 1954, having ducked opportunities to do so for well over two years.

The method that they employed was the evidently fair one of letting the senator impale himself, showing him in his characteristic poses. For over a year, *See It Now* had been saving film clips for "A Report on Senator Joseph R. McCarthy" (March 9, 1954). But the corporate leadership of the network put daylight between itself and the program. CBS ran no advertisement to promote it. Nor did it permit Murrow and Friendly, who put up their own money and signed their own names to an ad, to use the CBS logo. The company's public relations unit was also thoughtful enough to cable the FBI, notifying Hoover about the upcoming program about his friend. Though this particular exposure of McCarthy became in retrospect the most important single show in the history of television, saving from utter disgrace a medium that had evaded the central issue of fear that he engendered, CBS took no pride in the journalistic achievement of *See It Now*. Indeed, a frightened Stanton told Friendly soon thereafter that, because of the political pressures that could be applied through the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), "You may have cost us the network." The CBS president also showed Friendly the results of a poll: more Americans found McCarthy credible than Murrow. After McCarthy had used free air time to call Murrow "the leader and the cleverest of the jackal pack which is always at the throat of anyone who dares to expose individual Communists and traitors," a third of those polled believed that Murrow was either a Communist or a Communist sympathizer.

After the evisceration of McCarthy on *See It Now*, Alcoa received plenty of hate mail, felt pressure from its dealers, and was sharply criticized by conservative columnists. Aluminum companies such as Alcoa also marketed fluorides, which right-wing fanatics regarded as a Communist plot; but curiously enough, little seems to have been made of such products in the attacks on *See It Now*. Perhaps the timing was merely coincidental, but Alcoa withdrew its sponsorship a year after "A Report on Senator Joseph R. McCarthy"; the show limped along with only partial or occasional sponsorship for the next three years. CBS slashed its hours, altered its time slots, changed its name, separated Murrow from Friendly, and in 1958 finally dropped *See It Now*. "Alcoa's fidelity in the face of pressures remains legendary," Professor Barnouw noted, but then raised some pertinent questions: "Must the existence of such a series, which leading critics considered a historic contribution to the democratic process, and which had apparently helped mitigate prevailing hysteria—must such a series depend on the appearance of a courageous

sponsor? Or on a sponsor with image problems? Is television journalism to be a by-product of public relations crises?"

Murrow himself complained in 1959 that "the timidity of television in dealing with this man [McCarthy] when he was spreading fear throughout the land is not something to which this art of communication can point with pride, nor should it be allowed to forget it." It was more a matter of blind luck, and McCarthy's own self-destructiveness, that the army hearings in the spring of 1954 were conducted at all. But they gave television an opportunity to show what Joseph Welch called the "recklessness" and "cruelty" of the junior senator from Wisconsin. The only two networks that carried the hearings live (ABC and Dumont) were the weakest, lacking virtually any other morning or afternoon programming. NBC presented the army-McCarthy hearings live for only two days, at a cost of \$125,000 in lost advertising revenue. The network opted thereafter for a late evening summary. CBS never showed the hearings live at all because its schedule was swollen with heavily sponsored soap operas and game shows, and only CBS viewers who remained awake at 11:30 P.M. were informed of what had happened that day in the Senate Caucus Room. Local variations also affected this diagnostic test of democratic institutions. The afternoon hearings were not shown in Cleveland because the machinations of the most dangerous demagogue of the era were not permitted to preempt the baseball games of the Indians, then a pennant contender. Local affiliates in Baltimore also considered the fate of the Orioles more important. Thus, the hearings eventually reached only 60 percent of the television market. Later reminded that licensees were expected to satisfy "the public interest," CBS's Stanton told the FCC that "a program in which a large part of the audience is interested is by that very fact...in the public interest."

### 3

Though television was inadvertently pivotal in dooming McCarthy, it rarely challenged the operations of McCarthyism, and indeed contributed to the sour and irrational vindictiveness that he incarnated. The fledgling industry demonstrated its commitment to the Cold War by participating in the blacklist that also affected films and radio. Because the three major networks were themselves beholden to advertisers, the effects of such political purification rites were perhaps even more severe than in the movies. From network executives down to local affiliates, from sponsoring corporations to advertising agencies, virtually everyone cooperated. The primary form of cohesion was the loyalty oath, which NBC, for example, had compelled its new employees to sign since the mid-1940s. In 1950, CBS went even farther in its assessment of the dedication of its work force to "the American way of life." Though presumably without access to classified or militarily sensitive information, the employees of a private corporation were expected to respond to the following questions:

- (1) Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist Party, U.S.A., or any Communist organization?
- (2) Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of a Fascist organization?

- (3) Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of any organization...which has adopted a policy of advocacy or approving the commission of acts of force or violence to deny other persons their rights under the Constitution of the United States, or seeking to alter the form of government of the United States by unconstitutional means?

The network fired anyone who did not cooperate in the completion of this questionnaire or did not resign. Of the three major networks, the most resistant to imposing such political tests was ABC, which won a special Peabody Award in 1951.

But since authentic Communists might well have signed such loyalty oaths or denied Party membership anyway, independent monitoring of political reliability had to be added to the arsenal of the networks. In June 1950, a new publication appeared entitled *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*. Its authors were three former FBI agents who formed American Business Consultants, Inc., which was financed by Alfred Kohlberg (a key figure in the pro-Chiang “China Lobby” and a fervent McCarthyite). According to *Red Channels*, anyone in broadcasting who promoted civil rights or opposed the fascism of Franco’s Spain could be considered traitorous. This 213-page booklet, which identified 151 entertainers as “subversives,” became one of the most consulted reference works of the cultural Cold War.

Impresario Ed Sullivan, for example, discovered that a tap dancer named Paul Draper and a harmonica player named Larry Adler were “pro-Communist in sympathy.” Since both had already appeared on Sullivan’s variety show, *Toast of the Town*, he quickly offered a public apology to his possibly compromised sponsor and to its possibly embarrassed ad agency. To his distress, Sullivan had booked “performer[s] whose political beliefs are a matter of controversy.” Realizing that future guests on his show would need clearance, he eventually urged the entertainment industry to establish a committee to review the political loyalty of performers, so that “if they can’t clear themselves, the industry can blacklist them with a clear conscience.” Draper, an unusual showman who tap-danced to the music of Brahms, Handel, and Bach, had aroused the ire of the ever-irate columnist Westbrook Pegler, who called him a “mincing twerp” with “twittering toes.” Draper exiled himself to Switzerland, and Adler never played his harmonica again on television. When the music he had written for the film *Genevieve* (1953) was nominated for an Oscar, the conductor of the orchestra was listed as the composer instead of Adler, who became an expatriate in England. The blacklist victims had committed no crimes and were never put on trial, imprisoned, or deported. They were only deprived of the fullest opportunity to cultivate and exercise their talent and to be rewarded for it.

*Red Channels* and the newsletter *Counterattack*, which American Business Consultants also published, were more than guides to employers. They were instruments of political shame and economic reprisal as well. Take the case of the Block Drug Company, which made the chlorophyll toothpaste Amm-i-dent. In 1950, the company began sponsoring *Danger* on CBS, and within a year the product jumped to second among the hundred versions of toothpaste on the market. Over the next five years, the company poured twenty million dollars into television. Then Leonard Block got a letter from Laurence Johnson, an officer in the National Association of Supermarkets. Johnson noted that some of the cast of *Danger* included actors and actresses who were listed in *Counterattack* as politically unreliable. His letter then made an offer. In his

supermarkets in Syracuse, Johnson would arrange side-by-side displays of Amm-i-dent and its leading rival, Lever Brothers' Chlorodent. A sign in front of Chlorodent would announce that Lever Brothers paid only for "pro-American actors" and eschewed "Stalin's little creatures." The Amm-i-dent sign would attempt to justify why Block was willing to use "communist frontiers"; Block himself would be free to write the copy. Johnson asked, "Would not the results of such a test be of the utmost value to the thousands of supermarkets throughout America?" Block surrendered immediately and checked cast lists thereafter against the personnel standards acceptable to the vigilant grocer. Since 60 percent of broadcast revenues came through supermarket sales, other sponsors yielded as well. Such pressures were so threatening that the advertising agency supervising a Theater Guild series, sponsored by the giant U.S. Steel, omitted all race relations stories. Even *interest* in the topic might be symptomatic of Red leanings.

Political intimidation nearly sandbagged the most wildly successful entertainment series of the era. Gazetteer Walter Winchell hit his readers with a shocker in 1953 when he announced that "America's top comedienne has been confronted with her membership in the Communist Party." The headlines were implausible but true: LUCILLE BALL NAMED RED. For indeed she had told HUAC in 1952 of having registered as a Communist in 1936 "to please my grandfather." The committee cleared the comedienne; and because the ratings of *I Love Lucy* were so phenomenal, her sponsor (Philip Morris) continued its support. Though President and Mrs. Eisenhower were fans of the program, public reaction was uncertain. Before that week's episode started, her husband, Desi Arnaz, made an emotional appeal to the live audience at the Desilu Playhouse: "Lucille Ball is no Communist. Lucy has never been a Communist, not now and never will be. I was kicked out of Cuba because of Communism," the bandleader exclaimed. (When the Arnaz family fled to Miami in 1933, Fidel Castro was all of six years old.) "We both despise the Communists for everything they stand for. Lucille is 100 percent American. She's as American as Barney Baruch and Ike Eisenhower. Please, ladies and gentlemen, don't believe every piece of bunk you read in today's papers." The audience arose and cheered Arnaz, who called for his sobbing spouse to come onstage: "And now I want you to meet my favorite wife—my favorite redhead—in fact, that's the only thing red about her, and even that's not legitimate."

Intimidation and suspicion were claiming the most unlikely victims—the apolitical and the harmless. But somehow the folly of including Lucille Ball did not stanch the flow of maliciousness. A case of mistaken identity—long after careers, reputations, sanity, and the ideal of freedom were damaged—finally broke the system. In 1955, a Texas raconteur named John Henry Faulk brought a damage suit against Johnson and Hartnett for libel and conspiracy to defame, after their *Aware, Inc.*, publicized his "Communist associations" and the radio and television stations that once welcomed Faulk's humorous stories fired him. Murrow gave him \$7,500 to help pay for the defense that ace attorney Louis Nizer mounted, which took seven years before the broadcaster finally won the largest sum that a jury had ever awarded in a libel suit (\$3.5 million, later much reduced). Johnson died during the trial, and Hartnett spent the rest of his life sending small checks to Faulk. Once the blacklist was no longer profitable, it was eliminated.

## 4

A medium consecrated to reducing the friction of politics, to amusing audiences rather than presenting ideas, cannot be analyzed only by an examination of its public affairs programming. The commitment of television to the Cold War consensus can also be found in the popular, apolitical genres of entertainment, which indicated how pervasive were the values that have been charted in earlier chapters. Shows that on the surface had nothing to do with foreign or domestic policy nevertheless reinforced the faith in “the American way of life” that Communism seemed to threaten. Game shows demonstrated that ordinary people could seize the fabulous economic opportunities that capitalism promised; situation comedies and soap operas showed that personal conflicts could be resolved with laughs and love, without any recourse to institutional change; and the stalwart cops and detectives who always captured thugs in twenty-eight minutes subtly fortified confidence in an infallible criminal justice system. Without having to refer to a specific set of beliefs, or to make assumptions explicit, an ideology was thus shaped. Two programming sensations of the 1950s illustrate this special atmosphere.

The Emmy winner as 1952’s “Outstanding Television Personality” was a Roman Catholic monsignor whose show, *Life Is Worth Living* was “sponsored by God” (as well as by the Admiral Corporation). The program enjoyed a spectacular run for half a decade, primarily because its star cut such a striking and confident figure. He wore a black cassock that was streaked with red piping, a scarlet cape that flowed from his shoulders, and a large gold cross that dangled from his chest. With candles as well as a statue of the Virgin and Child glistening behind him, he spoke for twenty-eight minutes without using cue cards, notes, or script. Nor was any musical background necessary to intensify the emotions that *Life Is Worth Living* was designed to convey. His long, elegant fingers sometimes touched the chain of his cross, or soared upward in supplication, or sliced the air to emphasize a point. But perhaps most impressive were his piercing eyes. Wearing light tan powder over his makeup base, he insisted that his eyes be underlit, to make them glow like burning coals.

Fulton J. Sheen had received a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Louvain in 1923, and for the next quarter-century taught at the Catholic University of America. He first appeared on radio with *The Catholic Hour* in 1930 and soon thereafter was warning against the evils of Communism, which he equated with Nazism. Sheen backed Franco’s Falangist rebels during the Spanish Civil War (as did Hitler), reasoning that “we cannot breed rats in abundance without being obliged to use rat poison, and so neither can we breed Communists without being obliged to use the poison of fascism.”

If Spellman was the chief political paladin of Catholic anti-Communism, its major ideologue was his New York assistant and auxiliary bishop. Sheen’s prolific array of sermons, articles, speeches, and fifty books, demonstrating that Communism was the antithesis of Roman Catholicism, appeared decades before Joe McCarthy demanded to know who promoted Peress. In 1937 alone, Sheen published four works on the topic. *Communism and the Conscience of the West* (1948) also presented a case for defining Communism as a sort of secular religion, making it an especially difficult adversary to combat. Sheen argued that, in the paraphrase of one of his interpreters, “modern Christians have truth, but no zeal; the Communists have zeal, but no truth....They have passion but no ideals; we have ideals but no passion.” The director of the

Pontifical Society for the Propagation of the Faith was passionate and zealous enough, however, to lure celebrity converts to the church. The souls that he won included Congresswoman Luce, industrialist Henry Ford II, and journalist Heywood Broun, plus a brace of former Communists who became famous as informers: Louis Budenz, ex-managing editor of the *Daily Worker*, and Elizabeth Bentley, ex-espionage courier. Sheen's importance was not only political, however. Along with the Reverend Peale and Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman, he contributed to the nondenominational postwar literature of reassurance in the age of anxiety: his *Peace of Soul* ranked ninth on the bestseller list in 1947.

In 1952, having presented *The Catholic Hour* on NBC radio for twenty-two years, Monsignor Sheen switched to television, where he was showcased not at some obscure, ungodly hour but in prime time (8-8:30 on Tuesday evenings). Every week Sheen faced a live audience of over a thousand, plus three cameras. But the Dumont network also raised the ante by pitting the bishop against NBC's "Mr. Television" himself, comedian Milton Berle. Within a year, Sheen's fluent combination of biblical tales, moral exhortations, theological musings, and appeals for charity garnered Nielsen ratings that overwhelmed "Uncle Miltie," who gallantly conceded defeat: "If I'm going to be eased off TV by anyone, it's better to lose to the One for Whom Bishop Sheen is speaking." The program became so successful that ABC picked it up from Dumont, and by 1954 Sheen was reaching about twenty-five million Americans a week. Eventually 170 outlets in the United States, plus 17 in Canada, became stations of the Cross when they carried *Life Is Worth Living*. When its star picked up an Emmy on the same evening as Bob Hope, who had paid tribute to his gag writers, Sheen humbly announced, "I want to thank my writers too—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John." Their stuff was not only better than Hope's; it was better than virtually anyone else's on television. For almost two years the monsignor almost beat out Lucille Ball in the ratings—in an era when Americans may have liked Ike, but they loved Lucy.

In 1953 a Sheen spinoff book entitled *Life Is Worth Living* reached the fifth spot on the bestseller lists. Nor did it hurt early that year when Stalin died only two weeks after Sheen delivered on television an anticipatory eulogy for the tyrant. But despite Sheen's importance in arousing ideological hostility to Communism and in embodying the political edge that Catholicism gave America during the Cold War, he himself took no interest in pursuing the domestic adherents and sympathizers of Stalinism. He was never a McCarthyite (and never even met McCarthy); and though Sheen naturally found Communism hateful, he insisted that Christianity required love of the Communists themselves. He also argued that, like secularism itself, Communism perpetrated "the lie that men will never be better until they make society better." Sheen's claim was consistent with the belief in the redemptive possibilities of divine grace. But his plea for political passivity also conformed neatly with the self-satisfaction of the era and undoubtedly contributed to his huge popularity. *Life Is Worth Living* was eventually canceled not because of bad ratings but because of bad relations with the jealous Spellman, who silenced him from television.

The ideological emphasis upon American rectitude that television so smugly promoted faced its biggest threat, however, not from Communism but from within. The source of the trouble was not some external peril that television had either ignored or inflated but rather some of the very forces that were integral to the medium—and, indeed, to a society driven by what Tocqueville had called “the commercial passions.” One of the most riveting dramas of the late 1950s not only broke on television but existed because of television, and it marked something of a caesura in the story of American innocence.

Radio had introduced “the \$64 question” and made it part of the language. Certain forms of knowledge were tested under conditions that required quickness of mind and precision of recall, but the rewards were comparatively modest. This genre was readily transferred to television, which had programmed over twenty quiz shows by the mid-1950s. Their titles often reflected the avaricious frenzy that disturbed right-wing moralists from Billy Graham to John Foster Dulles: *The \$64,000 Question*, *The \$64,000 Challenge*, *The Big Surprise*, *Tic Tac Dough*, *High Finance*, *Treasure Hunt*. Murrow himself was appalled when he first watched one of the shows and realized that his own public affairs program would be a casualty of such hucksterism. For the stakes had gotten higher—a thousand times higher. *The \$64 Question* on radio became *The \$64,000 Question* on television, in which the losers got the “consolation prize” of a Cadillac. The shows sprang from the immediate need of one cosmetics giant, Revlon, to top the lipstick sales of rival Hazel Bishop. The cultural meaning was enormous, however. The ideological commitment to consumption that defined American supremacy over the Soviet system had found its perfect expression on television, where the contestants became recipients of sudden prosperity without having “produced” anything. They were the stars of a consumer society devoted to the marketing of still more lavish goods.

To make the shows more exciting, potential gladiators were required to submit to detailed exams that clued in quizmasters to the contestants’ breadth of knowledge. These screenings were sometimes compared to Ph.D. orals: one show imposed a 363-question exam that lasted four hours. A television producer later explained how simple the technique was: “To keep a contestant winning, all you have to do is figure out how not to hit a question he doesn’t know. That’s the basis of all quiz shows.” *On The \$64,000 Question*, Revlon’s blue-chip bank was shown going through an elaborate weekly ritual, with a pair of armed guards and a pair of bank officials bringing up the questions from a locked vault. The audience was not given credit for wondering who had the key to the locked vault (where the producer had, of course, already deposited that week’s questions, specially designed for the big-money contestants).

As early as 1956, one disgruntled loser complained publicly that a program called *The Big Surprise* had been fixed. No one seemed to listen. The following year, the *New York World-Telegram and Sun* hinted that other quiz shows were faked. Not even the FCC officials who were supposed to be monitoring the air seemed to have read the newspaper’s front-page articles. On April 22, 1957, *Time* asked, “Are the quiz shows rigged?” Its own answer to what the magazine called “The \$60 Million Question” was ambiguous. Even when *Look* ran a similar story, posing the same query, the likelihood of an affirmative answer was ignored. Attention was paid only in the summer of 1959, when a former nightclub comedian named Eddie Hilgesheimer tried to reveal that *Dotto* was fixed. Hilgesheimer sold his account to the *New York Post*, which was so afraid of publishing the scoop that it turned its material over to Frank Hogan, the Manhattan

district attorney. The sponsor of *Dotto* heard what was happening and panicked, canceling the program. The abrogation of *Dotto* was news, which gave the *Post* a rationale for publishing Hilgesheimer's exposé.

Soon the net seemed to be cast as far as the most famous contestant of them all. In the spring of 1957, Charles Van Doren had survived fourteen nerve-wracking weeks on NBC's *Twenty-One* and had earned \$129,000. He had quoted lines of John Milton's poetry that a former college president could not recall and had identified the heavyweight (Bob Fitzsimmons) who had whipped Gentleman Jim Corbett for the championship in 1897. Van Doren could name the three baseball players who were credited with more than thirty-five hundred hits ("Ty Cobb, Cap Anson, and [pause] Tris Speaker"); and he knew the role for the aria "Sempre libera" in Verdi's *La Traviata* ("She sings it right at the end of the party given by...What's her name! Soprano. Her name is [pause] Violetta"), Sometimes the answers were snapped back immediately. With other questions, however, Van Doren would bite his lips, clench his fists, roll his eyes, suffer aloud. The beads of sweat would be visible. Then—an agonizing split-second before time was called—the correct response would be summoned from what an awestruck *Time* magazine, putting him on its cover in 1957, called "his phenomenal mind."

Few young Americans seemed more destined for intellectual distinction than Van Doren, who had studied at St. John's College, Cambridge University, and the Sorbonne and was teaching literature at Columbia when NBC plucked him from the classroom and placed him in its isolation booth. His mother was a novelist and an editor of the *Nation*; his father was a celebrated poet and teacher of literature at Columbia; his uncle was a highly regarded critic and biographer. In 1953, Mark Van Doren and Carl Van Doren—both Pulitzer Prize winners—had appeared on Senator McCarthy's list of authors whose books should not be shelved in the State Department's worldwide libraries, which was further proof of the contribution that his family had made to American civilization. Grayson Kirk, who had replaced Eisenhower as president of Columbia, praised Charles Van Doren as "an able and exciting teacher," for which the university paid him forty-five hundred dollars a year. Perhaps because his salary was so modest, perhaps because he seemed so completely a legatee of the high culture of the nation's intelligentsia, Van Doren did not own a television set.

Other than that odd lapse, he seemed so personable—so engagingly all-American—that twenty-five million viewers would *want* him to triumph, as associate producer Al Freedman immediately realized. He confided to Van Doren that the show's current champ, Herbert Stempel, was so brilliant that he was virtually invincible. But Stempel, a squat ex-G.I. from Queens who was working his way through City College, simply wasn't popular. He wasn't clean-cut. He had to be eliminated. Freedman envisioned a series of nail-biting ties, and then Stempel would—in the contestant's own later phrase—"take a dive." Such fixes were customary on the quiz shows, Freedman assured Van Doren, whose victory "would be doing a great service to teachers."

Thus the bargain was struck. The humiliated but compliant Stempel was instructed to forget the title of *Marty*, one of his favorite movies. That defeat enabled *Twenty-One* to become the hottest quiz show in history, as NBC was inundated with thousands of letters of gratitude and admiration. Soon after Van Doren failed to name the reigning king of Belgium, he signed a five-year exclusive contract with NBC for nearly fifty thousand dollars per year, as a commentator on

the *Today* show. The announcement of the network contract came when he had just finished writing an essay for the U.S. Information Agency, "What Is American Culture?" On August 28, 1958, a couple of New York newspapers broke Stempel's story of how he had been told to walk the plank. Van Doren denied any knowledge of any fraud on *Twenty-One*, and in 1959 he went on to earn his Ph.D. and to become an assistant professor of English at Columbia. He was such a gentleman. It seemed inconceivable that shows like *Twenty-One* could have been as faked as the professional wrestling that was presented outside of prime time.

Frank Hogan persisted, however, as did Congress (which had gotten into the habit of extensive investigations without obvious legislative implications). The district attorney speculated that, of the 150 television figures who had been summoned to give evidence before the grand jury, at least a hundred were lying. In November 1959, Van Doren confessed to the House Subcommittee on Legislative Oversight, "I have deceived my friends, and I had millions of them." He claimed that he had engaged in the deception because "it was having such a good effect on the national attitude to teachers, education, and the intellectual life." Both Columbia and NBC quickly sacked him. Though Van Doren had been involved in the elaborate fraud from the beginning and then had covered up by lying to a New York grand jury (and to his own attorney), many viewers remained sympathetic to the earnest young swindler. Having pleaded guilty to perjury charges, he and nine other contestants received suspended sentences in 1962. Van Doren eventually became a vice-president of the company that published the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Hogan had been right after all: about a hundred producers, contestants, and others had lied to the grand jury. Charles and Martin Revson, the brothers who ran Revlon, often decided which contestants on *The \$64,000 Question* should win or lose.

The scandals exerted an immediate impact on television. With the networks' advertisers in revolt, NBC canceled those shows that were admittedly fraudulent. CBS went even farther, dropping all of its quiz shows and even prohibiting its comedians from using canned laughter. The networks also showed how responsible they were by adding a full hour of public programming per week, which was drastically cut back when the flap died down about a year later. These "public interest" shows were not sponsored, in part because Alcoa's experience with *See It Now* made other companies wary of documentaries that occasionally raised troubling questions about American society. All three networks nevertheless realized the prestige value of documentaries, so *CBS Reports*, *NBC White Paper*, and ABC's *Close-Up* were useful in beefing up the corporations' reputations for gravity. CBS also began conducting annual interviews with Lippmann, not long after the veteran pundit had denounced television as "the creature, the servant, and indeed the prostitute of merchandising."

The most important political effect, however, was that NBC offered free time for a series of presidential debates the following year, an invitation that the Republicans and Democrats accepted. But the Great Debates still smacked of the shows that they were designed to repudiate. A format of quick answers ricocheting between two adversaries under the klieg lights meant "reducing great national issues to trivial dimensions," Professor Daniel Boorstin complained. "With appropriate vulgarity, they might have been called the \$400,000 Question (Prize: a \$100,000-a-year job for four years)." The prize that this "political quiz show" awarded to a smart, handsome young senator from Massachusetts was an unforeseen consequence of TV's self-inflicted wound.

The scandals also provoked considerable soul-searching, a fear that the nation that thought of itself as goodness incarnate had gone astray. The Gallup Poll discovered more widespread awareness of the fraud than of any other subject on which Americans had ever been queried. Not since the Black Sox scandal of 1919—to which Eisenhower compared it—had there been so widespread a sense of violation of public faith. These duplicitous shows, the president added, were “a terrible thing to do to the American people.” Even if the hoax that the networks concocted “breached no law,” the *Washington Post* opined, “it nevertheless robbed people of a kind of faith which it is dangerous to destroy in a democracy.” Innocence itself had been shaken. The complacency of the 1950s, the public trust in the integrity of American institutions, were somewhat undermined by this evidence of what editor Ralph McGill called “our deep psychological lust for material ‘things.’”

John Steinbeck discerned an America that was noteworthy for “our wealth, moral flabbiness, uncertainty and TV scandals,” as his correspondent Adlai Stevenson put it. “On all levels it is rigged, Adlai,” the novelist had written. “A creeping, all pervading, nerve-gas of immorality...starts in the nursery and does not stop before it reaches the highest offices, both corporate and governmental.” Steinbeck feared that Americans were “having too many THINGS. They spend their hours and money on the couch searching for a soul.” The pride of the 1950s was thus very much to blame. “If I wanted to destroy a nation, I would give it too much and I would have it on its knees....Mainly, Adlai, I am troubled by the cynical immorality of my country. I do not think it can survive on this basis....By our very attitudes we are drawing catastrophe to ourselves. What we have beaten in nature, we cannot conquer in ourselves.” Steinbeck’s letter, plus Stevenson’s prefatory note, was published in *Newsday* late in 1959. Political scientist Hans J. Morgenthau was even more disturbed, calling the scandal “a great event in the history of America,” for “the betrayal of truth for the sake of wealth and power” might well signify “the beginning of the end of civilized society.” Another expert in foreign affairs, Senator J. William Fulbright (D-Ark.), told his colleagues that “the question of the moral strength of our people is not just an internal domestic matter. It has grave possibilities in our international relations....What seems to be new about these scandals is the moral blindness or callowness which allows those in responsible positions to accept the practices which the facts reveal.”

Perhaps the quiz show scandals hit so hard because they were so enmeshed in the mania for money, in the pecuniary sensations of the 1950s. Sputnik did not streak across the skies until half a year after Van Doren lost, and therefore the jolt that the Soviet technological feat administered to American assurance cannot directly account for the popularity of shows that seemed to reward mental prowess. But the sense that intellect itself had to be drafted into the Cold War, which was one general consequence of sputnik, may explain why the scandal was so reverberant. “The appeal of the programs, with the rising challenge of Soviet brain power as a backdrop, was ultimately patriotic,” novelist John Updike conjectured in 1959. “The contestants were selected to be a cross-section of our nation just as deliberately as the G.I.s in a war movie are.” Van Doren had come to symbolize the national hope of permanent superiority over the Soviets, and instead he joined the “phonies” who so repelled Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*. The integrity of American life that was supposed to sharpen the contrast with the Soviet Union thus looked dubious. Nor could the sincerity of American motives any longer be taken for

granted as proof of eventual triumph. The buzzer of the tarnished isolation booth tolled the close of an era.