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C-SPAN
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Washington, D.C. 20001

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Newbury, O. 44065
6 Jan. 90

Gentlemen:

The writer practiced law for a few years, then decided to go straight -- teaching U.S. history at the high-school level for 25 years.

Now retired, I am an almost constant viewer of both C-Span and C-Span II. I receive your transmission over Cablevision; one of the reasons I signed up for cable when it was introduced out here in the woody wilds of Geauga county (about 25 miles east of Cleveland) was in order to gain access to C-Span.

My viewing has become almost obsessive: I have stayed up until 3AM to watch late night Senate sessions, or hopped out of bed at 4AM to watch another installment of the Hastings evidentiary hearing. Because of this addiction, I've neglected to exercise, gained unwanted weight, and probably grown harder to live with (you'll have to check with my wife).

Perhaps the bulk of what I intend to say will be critical, but only in an effort to be helpful, to suggest changes that may enhance C-Span's popular appeal. If none of my suggestions is implemented (for reasons beyond your control or even within your control), I will continue to remain a dedicated and loyal viewer, I assure you.

The following little story may be a key to the principal thrust of my criticism. In 1951, I was driving my parents on a vacation trip that stopped in Washington, D.C. for a day or so. As we were walking through some wide passageway in the Capitol, my father seized my arm and hissed urgently in my ear: "Look, look, there's Joe Martin!" Yes, Martin was indeed passing by. My father was someone not easily excited or thrilled; beyond that, he was a Democrat who did not esteem Martin. But he was visibly charged by being so near Martin, who was a political celebrity. Just seeing Martin up-close stirred my father. Later, we visited the Senate chamber. From our remote position, I could not recognize the presiding officer. On the Republican side of the floor, one senator was reading a newspaper. On the Democratic side, Russell Long was speaking. Occasionally he paused when stuck for a word, bent over and got it from Paul Douglas, who was seated beside him. I cannot recall Long's subject-- thirty-nine years have dulled my memory. But the "action" in the Senate chamber was dull and dry, scarcely evoking any response from my father. The difference between these two experiences relates to the difference in C-Span's camera-work today.

C-Span's cameras have the capacity to put viewers up-close to congressional proceedings. At hearings, the camera-work is often imaginative, showing a senator shuffling through his notes for a moment, or a congressman scowling while a witness testifies. But the camera-work in the chambers themselves is prosaic and uninspired. This failure to move the camera imaginatively may come from restrictive rules laid down by the leadership of Congress. C-Span

should seek reasonable revisions of these rules to enhance the notion that the floors of the chambers are places of action, not merely platforms for set speeches.

Specific examples to illustrate my point: whenever a couple of senators have reached some sort of (let's say) impasse, and one suggests the absence of a quorum, the camera instantly switches to the presiding officer and remains dully fixed there until the quorum call is rescinded. How much more interesting for viewers (and how much more satisfying for taxpaying constituents!) to see the senators conferring, perhaps consulting with a staffer, patting one another on the shoulder, possibly shaking hands.

When two senators are engaged in a colloquy, the camera switches from one to another; only rarely (and then, too briefly), does it show the two senators in one frame. In fact, the physical location of the senators relative to one another is usually not clear at all. It often appears, during the colloquy, that neither is actually facing the other (while I know that, actually, they must be, since neither is looking at the camera behind the presiding officer).

I often think of great paintings of the Golden Age of the Senate, showing Webster (usually) holding the floor while his colleagues listen attentively. If C-Span had covered this, it would show Webster alone, and the majesty of history-in-the-making would be lost. Now, I appreciate that a vast percentage of work goes on in offices, hearing rooms, cloakrooms, as well as back home in the districts and states, so that there is only a rare opportunity to see most senators seated while one holds the floor, persuading them to a course of action. The senate today does not operate as it did in the Golden Age. Still, I can recall one or two times, while Robert Byrd was Majority Leader, when, late in the evening, most senators were present while he alternately pleaded, cajoled, and warned (I think a Defense appropriations bill had just been voted down). Over a 20-minute segment of this, the camera spent perhaps a total of 30 seconds in long, overall shots, but at all other times was fixed solely on Senator Byrd. Someone tuning in briefly might have thought that Senator Byrd was virtually alone, perhaps speaking as though in Morning Business. Face it: how could anyone tell? In this situation, why not pan around the chamber, close in on a face here and there, then move back to Senator Byrd, then stay in an overall long shot for some minutes, then move around again. The situation I am describing was not a static one, but the unimaginative camera-work falsely reinforced the notion that it was static!

Occasionally, as a senator speaks in the chamber, one can see other senators (or at least parts of them!) walking by. Yet the camera freezes on the speaker. Static again! (It might be satisfying for a constituent to see --at least once in a while-- his senator coming in or leaving the chamber. He might come to believe he's getting more product for his tax money.)

When the Majority Leader is trying to work up a UC request, another senator ("reserving the right to object") seeks, perhaps, a modification, the camera invariably fixes on Mitchell or on the other senator, as first one and then the other speak. Only rarely does the camera pan back to a somewhat larger frame, which can capture both senators (or perhaps a covey of senators who are interested in the UC request), thus conveying a sense of important action.

If Mitchell and Dole huddle for twenty seconds over a UC request or a quick agreement on the schedule of business (without asking for a quorum call), the camera instantly grinds back to the presiding officer until the huddle is over. Static again! Please show Mitchell and Dole. Something is going on. Why create the impression that the reverse is the case?

The senate has been and remains a place of significant, historical action, a virtual stage-set for conflict and its resolution (the essence of dramatic narrative and of history). It is much more than a room for irrelevant speeches. If C-Span's camera-work fails to present floor work as dramatic action, then it is projecting it as unimportant, insignificant, and dull.

When senators enter the chamber for a roll-call vote, viewers always get a long, overall shot. (For ^{one} ghastly period last year, you squeezed that into a small frame in a split-screen. It reminded me of some mildewed painting hanging in a corridor, too far away to stimulate anyone to walk up to it.) Why not close in on the cluster around the front desk, pan back to show other clusters, pan around (closing up occasionally) to show senators entering and leaving? Since many senators rarely speak at length on the floor and often are not serving on the committees whose proceedings are covered by C-Span, this may be a voter's only opportunity to see his senator doing the work of the senate! If I squint, I can just make out Cranston and Simpson checking their tallies, but why not close in briefly? This is dramatic and important action. It should not be neutralized or sterilized by dull camera-work.

I recall a late night session when a Proxmire bill was being held up. Each time a request was made for UC to dispense with the clerk's reading, D'Amato objected. But we never saw D'Amato! I simply recognized his voice. I could hear Proxmire (and possibly Sanford) asking time and again for the same UC, but D'Amato kept objecting. We saw none of this action, as the camera froze on the presiding officer. I kept waiting for Byrd, then Majority Leader, to come in and attempt to resolve this --which is what finally happened. But the camera never showed Byrd talking to D'Amato or Proxmire (which, I am sure, must have occurred). It picked up Byrd only when he gained the floor to overcome the impasse.

I can understand why the camera fixes on a senator who is speaking in the traditional Morning Business period, for, often, no one else is on the floor. And I can understand why the camera fixes on the presiding officer during a quorum call if only staffers are on the floor. But I cannot understand why we can't see our senators when they are on the floor, conferring with one another during a quorum call. This would be a more valid reflection of senate business than the static view of the presiding officer.

Also, why can't we see the entire chamber at least a few times a day? Yes, even including a sweep of the galleries. Cameras could make dry pans regularly so that guests would not know when they are actually on a live camera. Surely guests cannot bring in banners or signs; surely they are warned against demonstrations. So they could safely be shown from time to time. If this is where the people rule, where are they? I recall the final passage of the Articles of Ratification of the IMF Treaty. The floor was crowded as senators stood and applauded this legislative achievement. I could hear the galleries applauding as well. But we saw only the senators. Compare this with a

presidential address to a joint session covered by commercial TV. We see the galleries while awaiting the president. If a presidential remark draws a standing ovation, the camera shows the galleries responding as well. But the regular proceedings, not a joint session, appear to take place in a vacuum because we are never shown the galleries. Apparently only when the president shows up is it permissible to disclose that people actually attend congressional sessions!

I am asking for no more than an honest representation of the true picture. I think this is what motivated Tip to order the cameras to pan the empty House chamber during Special Orders. Why play games with the people? If I had the power to change things, I would have the House turn off the cameras entirely during Special Orders. The expense of lighting and heating the House, the agony of those who must remain in attendance -- all militate against the televiewing of Special Orders. The House may technically be in session, but its Special Orders time is an egregious anomaly, a charade underwritten by taxpayer dollars, a message to the voters that nonsense, not sense, is a principal business of the House. I assume that C-Span is presently required to show Special Orders; the deal should be renegotiated!

A few remaining items:

(1) Although you often state that a full schedule of telecasts through the evening will be shown on the screen at 8PM, too often this simply is not done. A segment will end, perhaps at 8:20, then the announcer says: "Up next, a hearing of the Senate subcommittee on---." If a segment is on-going at 8PM, a trailer can be run (and, on rare occasions, is run), showing the approximate times of evening programs. I urge consistency in this matter. I rely on the screened schedule updates because I cannot afford to call your phone number as often as I'd like information. Too bad that an 800 number isn't available as well!

(2) I know that your resources are limited and you pride yourself on letting the story speak for itself, without editorial comment. But it is not editorial comment to at least explain what's going on during "dead time," e.g., shots of shuttle launches, waiting for senators or congressmen to show up for a news briefing after leaving the White House, etc.

(3) I enjoy the in-depth interviews of senators and congressmen, as well as authors on "Book Notes." But I become bored or angry with Viewer Call-In shows, as, so often, someone gets on --to ramble on--and often to make stupid accusations or highly partisan charges. I often wonder why these calls don't go to operators who can simply jot down the questions and pass them along. That way, most of the extraneous material and junk could be screened out. Which is more important: that the caller hear his own voice over TV, or that salient, relevant comments and questions are presented? I never watch a Viewer Call-In show if a guest is not present. If I wanted to hear tons of man-in-the-street material, I could listen to radio talk shows. I prefer one interview with a Byrd, Mikulski, McCain, Danforth, Conte or Obey to all the Call-In shows combined.

(4) I enjoy almost all hearings. Naturally, the investigative hearings have particular dramatic appeal, e.g., HUD, S&L, the Hastings inquiry in the House subcommittee and the Senate's evidentiary hearing. I particularly enjoy, as well, a hearing that features the appearance of a distinguished "wise man" like Clifford, Galbraith, or Kennan, all of whom appeared in 1989. (I wish you had rebroadcast Kennan's appearance before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during your retrospectives during these weeks of recess.) The most exquisitely dull meetings are those of conference committees, e.g., Budget (presided over by Sasser) and S&L (Gonzalez presiding). Usually, they are unfocused (I don't mean the cameras), unwieldy, and soporific. They run a close second to Special Orders for the "It's Just Like Being Buried Alive" Award.

I appreciate that this has been lengthy. I hope that it has not been misconstrued as a tirade. As a career teacher of U.S. history, I have some understanding and appreciation of the vital roles of our national legislative bodies. My mission here has been to persuade C-Span to seek from the leadership and from its own staff the green-light to revise rules governing camera-work. I have never thought that what goes on in Washington is dull. If you agree, as you must, then perhaps, some of my suggestions could be implemented.

Quite apart from any of the above, I have a small question: at some hearings, I occasionally see someone (who appears to be reporting or recording the hearing) smothering his face in something that looks like half of a small football. I assume he's talking into the gadget. Question: what's going on?

If you have any questions about my views on other aspects of your schedule, please let me know. But, as is obvious from the above, I rarely wait to be asked for advice and often supply it even when it is not wanted. Thanks for your patience.

