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C-SPAN: AMERICA'S TOWN HALL

This month, for the first time, the U.S. Senate's proceedings become available to cable viewers via C-SPAN, the Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network.

In February, four decades after the emergence of television in America and seven years after the U.S. House of Representatives opened its chamber to the camera's eye, the Senate passed a resolution allowing a Senate television "test period." On July 29, the Senate will vote on whether television should become a permanent part of the institution.

Some senators confidently predict, however, that television in the Senate is here to stay.

For C-SPAN viewers, the addition of the Senate completes the "eye on Washington" C-SPAN began in 1979. That's when C-SPAN, a non-profit cooperative of the cable television industry, began by televising live debates from the floor of the House. Today, C-SPAN provides a full array of public affairs programming from the nation's capital to nearly 25 million cable viewers. In addition to the House and Senate floor debates, the network's schedule includes congressional hearings, major conventions, press conferences, public issue forums, National Press Club speeches, and other events--all uncut in their entirety. C-SPAN's 24-hour schedule gives cable audiences a front-row seat to their political system.

The bulk of C-SPAN's programming is comprised of the constant flow of national events that reflect the dynamic nature of the American democratic process. C-SPAN's program itinerary is always timely, usually live, and covers a myriad of informative conferences, seminars, and debates on national issues. As C-SPAN grows, so does its programming menu.

What makes C-SPAN significant is that for the first time in history, citizens who live outside of the capital, have the opportunity to actually watch their

THE CABLE SATELLITE PUBLIC AFFAIRS NETWORK

(more)

government in action...without interruption...and without editorial comment from others. Characterized by one industry expert as "cable's most unique and in some ways greatest contribution to television," C-SPAN is uniquely American: a private company that strives to put citizens in touch with their government.

One important part of C-SPAN is the viewer call-in program. Three times each weekday, cable subscribers can become active participants in the political process by speaking directly to elected officials, prominent policymakers, and working political journalists. In 1985, over 11,000 viewers voiced their opinions or questioned C-SPAN guests who have included Vice President George Bush, consumer activist Ralph Nader, Education Secretary William Bennett, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, and New York Governor Mario Cuomo.

Although the network is Washington-based, C-SPAN often takes its cameras beyond the nation's capital to bring viewers live, on-location programming from around the country. In 1984, C-SPAN offered the most comprehensive presidential election coverage in history by airing both the Democratic and the Republican National Conventions in their entirety. In 1985, C-SPAN's "States of the Nation" guided viewers on a year-long journey through state capitals to examine the issues facing state and local governments. And in 1986, "Campaign '86" will focus on some of the more hotly contested races for the Senate and the governor's mansions. This special series includes candidate speeches, political rallies, in-depth interviews with political experts, and a look at campaign advertisements. New York will be part of this series, as well as Florida, Oklahoma, Wisconsin, California, Illinois, and elections in 11 other states.

This broad range of C-SPAN programming is produced by a staff described by syndicated columnist Robert Walters as "young men and women in their 20s and 30s, but their work is thoroughly professional -- and it is appreciated by viewers seeking innovative programming." Keeping with C-SPAN's low-key approach to television, many staffers double as on-air moderators: a vice-president, several

producers, and the directors of marketing and public relations host the network's call-in programs. Their job is to moderate a "town meeting of the air" with a balanced and objective inquiry into the issues that can provoke lively debate.

But for C-SPAN, the arrival of cameras in the Senate chamber remains the highwater mark of 1986. At the time of the Senate TV vote, C-SPAN CEO Brian Lamb noted: "For the past seven years, C-SPAN's House coverage has only shown half the legislative process. We are confident the Senate will be happy with the public reaction to this test of televised proceedings."

Whatever the program, C-SPAN's philosophy is unique from that of the other networks. The Los Angeles Times wrote: "On plenty of occasions C-SPAN has bored me, but it has never once insulted my intelligence or treated me like a fool." C-SPAN doesn't stand between the viewer and the event. C-SPAN's goal is to allow viewers to judge for themselves...quite simply to present quality public affairs programming so that the American public can more intelligently assess critical issues confronting our nation.

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