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C-Span
400 N. Capital Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C., 20001

Dear Sirs:

I'd like to congratulate you on your recent coverage. I'm turning into a C-Span junkie! The House of Commons is great, the European Parliament was fascinating, and your Berlin series was gripping. I believe I saw almost all of it, and watched many interviews more than once. I also watch your U.S. coverage and am tuned in to C-Span more than any other TV channel. Not least of your virtues is the fact that you are good "radio," intelligent talk without one's having to be riveted to the screen. There is so little food for the mind on TV that C-Span is a huge blessing and I am deeply grateful for it. That's the good news.

I'd also like to offer a critique of the Berlin coverage, because I think you are serious folks and what was pretty good could have been so much better! You aimed at balance but all too often you succeeded only in being repetitious. It would have helped a lot if your interviewers had been better prepared about the facts of modern German history. It's embarrassing when we Americans come across as so ignorant.

The question, "Could it happen again?" repeated time and again was both insulting and banal. How can anyone answer that? And what is "it"? If World War III is meant, then surely there should have been frank discussion about what a nuclear war on the soil of Europe would entail.

If 'it' is the Holocaust, then you should have presented something about the modern German constitutional and legal safeguards with respect to human rights. West Germany has not only paid billions in reparations to Israel and its former Jewish citizens, but most major German cities have programs to invite former residents back for a week of hospitality--entirely on their civic nickel. These visits are done with extraordinary sensitivity and tact.

I was privileged to accompany a refugee friend on such a week-long visit to Berlin a year ago. Over 30,000 Jews have revisited Berlin alone since this program was started. Our group of 120 included camp survivors and since my friend lost both of his parents and a sister, we hardly had blinders on about the past. Because I am not myself Jewish, I believe I had an objective view of the motives and emotions on both sides of this emotional and intense encounter, in which no attempt was made to gloss over what had happened or to duck unpleasant questions by the Berlin hosts.

Anti-Semitism is an ugly undercurrent in American as well as European life, so some wider reflection on the meaning and roots of this phenomenon was certainly in order. Berlin has an important research institute devoted to the study of European anti-Semitism. Scholars on its staff could have contributed much to your programming and our understanding.

It's bad enough that Americans don't speak foreign languages, but it was it impossible for your staff to learn how to pronounce German? I cringed as I heard "Neues Deutschland" turned into something that sounded like "Noose Deutschland." Such mispronunciations were the rule, rather than the exception. One doesn't have to speak a language to learn its phonetics.

You should surely have pointed out the exceptionally liberal--in the classic sense--politics of Berlin. It is not typical of the rest of Germany in this respect. There is a north/south divide in Germany that is crucial for understanding political reality there. There is also an extraordinary youth counterculture in Berlin, unique in Europe, which does much to give the city its flavor, never mentioned so far as I could tell.

You should have asked the new "socialists," erstwhile Communists, many of whom were surprisingly attractive personalities, about the Stasi. How did they reconcile their apparently humane personal values with the police state activities of their government, which went far beyond mere censorship? You did not mention that West Germany had a systematic and costly program of ransoming--for cash--political prisoners from East German jails. One of your guests alluded to this, but the questioner did not pick up on it and explore further. You did not discuss Willi Brandt's Ostpolitik, nor did you examine why the Social Democrats did so poorly in the East German elections. I don't understand this myself, and would like to have heard several of your guests' speculations on the subject, especially since Czechoslovakia and Poland seem to be going in Social Democratic

directions. Why did East Germany reject the Brandt/Schmidt party which had done so much to foster openings to them?

Nobody seemed to ponder what it means for young people, like the students (who were by far the most thoughtful and candid of your interviewees), to be told again and again that they live in a "bad" country, that Germans are forever to be judged guilty and untrustworthy for something that their parents, or in most cases, grandparents, did. I was terribly moved when one student said, "We have nothing in our history of which to be proud."

Suppose you and I had nothing in our pasts of which to be proud, and others held us accountable all our lives because our parents were criminals or otherwise "evil". How would this affect us? Wouldn't we come to resent terribly the injustice of it? Unearned blame can lead to frustration, alienation and anger. To be treated as a pariah, can lead to pariah-like actions. If this is true for individuals, why not for nations? It seems to me there is a real peril for the world if it keeps heaping coals of fire on Germany and Germans.

Why didn't you ask the students if they planned to go into politics, so as to help shape the future of their country? I was struck by how worried they were, and yet how passive in the face of that worry. In fact, three of the four indicated an interest in leaving Germany instead of staying to fight the good fight. What does this tell us about a tradition of democratic activism?

You missed some marvelous things in Berlin, concrete things done to educate Germans about their country's tragic and terrible past. The memorial to the victims of Hitler at Plötzensee Prison is a must for anyone who cares about what happened and the German reaction to it. The Reichstag also has a terrific exhibit, "Fragen über den Deutsche Geschichte"--a stunningly arranged, no-holds-barred show about modern German history. As I understand it, it is mandatory for all schoolchildren in West Berlin to visit this exhibit. Peter Stastny, who was superb, mentioned it in one of the brief location tape spots. What a shame you didn't send your cameras there and talk to the curators about why this exhibition was mounted and how Germans react to it!

Finally, beyond these cavils, not all of them equally important, your interviewers (and most media interviewers) must learn to listen. It often seems that media types are so frightened of dead air that they are prepared with a set of questions to be pursued regardless of what the

interviewee says. Time and again people said provocative, startling, unexpected things, or were, had they been pushed a little, verging on providing important insights. The interviewers plowed on, instead of hearing that something suggestive had been said. Everybody isn't Bill Moyers, but I still think better homework would have much improved the quality of all of the interviews. Too often, you limited yourselves to asking questions that purported to reflect "what's on America's mind," as if the media are not responsible for framing most of the questions Americans ask in the first place. For most Americans, TV and newspapers are their windows on the world. If the media don't ask the penetrating questions, who is going to?

I'll be in Berlin for an extended visit in early May. In spite of my criticisms, your Berlin coverage will enhance my visit. I'll now see for my self how "the change" is going. Thanks, and here's hoping this has been helpful. It's meant constructively and as a compliment to your good intentions, and frequently good performance.

Sincerely,

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of the sender.