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## FCC veteran doesn't mind the static

By Jim McFarlin  
NEWS RADIO CRITIC

He may be the most powerful man in the Federal Communications Commission, the governmental agency that regulates all of America's television, radio and cable activities. But at the Parkcrest Inn in Harper Woods, the desk clerks know him simply as "Mr. Quello . . . a very nice man."

James H. Quello, native son and big Washington gun, has checked into this unassuming, freeway off-ramp motor lodge for decades, his home away from home whenever travel calls him back to his Michigan roots. It's no Ritz-Carlton, but it serves his modest purposes. And the employees seem genuinely delighted to have their old friend back.

Quello was at the Parkcrest this month, after being honored with the 1991 Pioneer Award from the Michigan Public Broadcasters. "I'm always happy to receive these pre-posthumous awards," he says with a

broad grin.

But Quello, a broadcasting veteran who toiled at Detroit's WJR-AM from 1947-1974 — 12 of those years as its general manager — doesn't need to be regaled for past glories. Though he turned 77 last

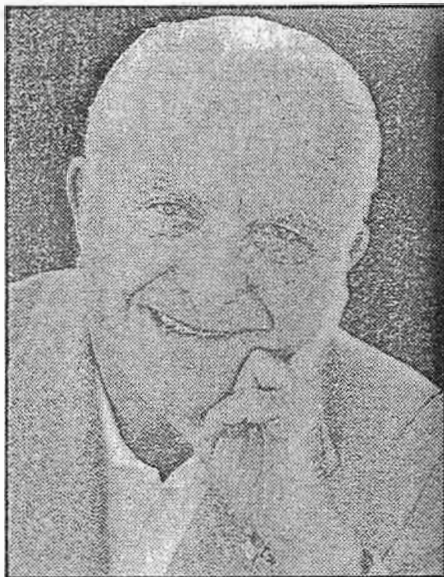
April, his future still lies ahead of him.

He is far and away the senior commissioner on the FCC. And the life-long Democrat was nominated by Republican President George Bush in May for his fourth re-appointment, a five-year term expiring July 1, 1996. He'll be 82 by then.

Relaxing in the motel lobby, he was gearing up for his Senate confirmation hearing to officially regain his post. "The last two were friendly and relatively easy," he says. "I was on the stand 15, 20 minutes. I've been there 17 years. I know how to keep it straight pretty well."

This confirmation, held last Thursday, was a cordial affair as well: Quello was reappointed with ease, almost as a formality. Yet he recalls too vividly his first hearing in

Please see **Quello, 4C**



DAVID COATES/Detroit News

James H. Quello

# Quello: FCC commissioner doesn't mind the static

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1974 (after being appointed by another Republican president, one Richard Nixon), a grueling inquisition which became the longest Senate confirmation on record.

Absurd as it sounds today, there were vehement objections over the logic of having a career broadcaster sit on the federal broadcast board. Quello says he was even offered a guaranteed seat on the Civil Aeronautics Board — about which he knew nothing — as an appeasement. "I know the weaknesses (of broadcasting), I know the strengths," he says, "but there were factions at that time that were convinced, 'We have to stop a broadcaster from getting a job like this.'"

He has gone on to silence nearly all his detractors. He's outlived most of them. At a stage of life where most men are content to dabble with their tennis game (his major love), busy themselves with volunteer work or simply watch TV, Quello shows no hint of slowing down in his second career, much less stopping. Retire? Why?

A man widely respected on both sides of Capitol Hill, the Commish believes there's much to be done in shaping the country's electronic agenda for the 21st century. At the moment, there are ongoing battles over "fin-syn" — the right of major Hollywood studios to own financial interests over their syndicated TV reruns, "the most controversial issue that's ever come down the pike," according to Quello — as well as cable "must-carry" regulations regarding commercial TV stations, and obscenity rulings. But after 17 years on the FCC, why does he still want to be around on the front lines?

"That's a helluva good question," says Quello, a stocky, robust gent who could be mistaken for a latter-day James Cagney. "I have delusions of adequacy. And 70 percent of my marbles, which is a good local norm in Washington."

Age was never a factor in his decision to remain on the FCC. "I play tennis, I'm active," he says. "The government doesn't pay much compared to the private sector. I mean, we're ruling on billion-dollar deals here. But this is by far the most important job I've ever had, and it's very satisfying to me. I have a voice that I hope is one of reason and practicality. I feel useful. We have four commissioners appointed by Bush, and I'm the only one who has knowledge of what's happened before, an institutional memory."

In a relatively inexperienced FCC — chairman Alfred C. Sikes is second in seniority, with less than two years on the commission — Quello's wisdom and perspective are prized assets. Upon Bush's appointment, fellow commissioner Ervin S. Duggan said, "Jim Quello is like every commissioner's affectionate older brother. He is our role model, counselor and peacemaker."

Even so, Quello suspects his renomination "would have been DOA in the White House" without the "very friendly and affirmative intervention" of influential Congressman John Dingell (D-Mich.), chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. "I call Big John Dingell my Congressional godfather," says Quello. "He makes a very good friend, a terrible enemy."

"And we have so many important things to do, with this oncoming rush of technology. And technology arrives faster than government's ability to regulate or assimilate it. We shouldn't have technology for technology's sake. There has to be public acceptability and affordability. What I want to see is an orderly, practical transition from what we have now into advanced technology for the public."

To that end, Quello has remained a staunch advocate of what he calls "the all-important, free, universal, over-the-air broadcast service," at times the commission's lone voice on

behalf of preserving free TV.

"To my way of thinking, watching baseball, football, basketball, everything else is an important part of the American way of life," Quello says. "And it should be available to everyone, whether they can afford cable or not."

Many media experts believe exclusive broadcast of entertainment extravaganzas and such major sporting events as the Super Bowl on a pay-per-view or cable basis is inevitable in the future. "That's possible," says Quello, "but I'm not sure that serves the total public interest."

"Now, I think cable's a very desirable service for those who can afford it. I have it in my home, and I enjoy ESPN, CNN, American Movie Classics. Cable's great, but what if there's no commitment to over-the-air TV? Then people who are accustomed to looking at baseball or football or basketball would have to buy cable. Just imagine if they ever got the Super Bowl or World Series or something like that. There's been enough hell raised on this thing, and I think Congress agrees with me for the most part."

Quello should have no problem being the FCC's lone ranger on such matters: He began his broadcasting career as a publicist for the first Lone Ranger on Detroit radio station WXYZ, after graduating from Michigan State University and completing a 33-month stint overseas in the Army during World War II. "I wanted to be a newspaperman," he says, "but I couldn't get a job. I thought I was a better writer than most of the reporters they had, but the Detroit papers all thought college-educated guys were stiff."

Jokingly lamenting his decision to do PR work for *The Lone Ranger* and *The Green Hornet* rather than write scripts for the shows ("Scriptwriters in Hollywood are making millions today"), he jumped from WXYZ to WJR in 1947. "Everybody asked me, 'Why did you ever leave WXYZ?'" he says. "I was offered \$65 more a week to go to WJR, and \$25 a week to stay at WXYZ. It was as simple as that."

Quello worked his way through the ranks from publicist to general manager of WJR. He says his "claim to fame" as station programmer was picking out a young staff announcer named J.P. McCarthy and promoting him to host the morning show. "He's a wonderful man, a role model," Quello says of McCarthy. "He's been number one for 27 years, and never had to resort to sleaze to do it."

Quello's ties to Michigan remain strong. U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Damon Keith, with whom he served on the Detroit Housing Commission for 22 years, is a close friend who has sworn in Quello for all his previous terms on the FCC, and will again if Quello can find the time to contact him. "Damon Keith is a super guy, a class act," says Quello. "Whenever we are faced with matters on minority preference, I try to think, 'OK, what would Damon do about this?'"

It was Keith's concerned phone call to Quello over WJR's impending move from the Fisher Building to Troy in 1984 that prompted Quello to exercise some gentle persuasion on Capital Cities Broadcasting CEO Thomas Murphy, which may have been a key factor in WJR's eventual decision to stay in the city.

Quello was born in Laurium, Mich., a tiny mining village in the Upper Peninsula. Remarkably, he isn't the town's most famous native. "George Gipp was born there," says Quello. "And when Ronald Reagan found that out, we got along great."

Despite his exalted status on the FCC, Quello is no different than most of us in facing the challenges of advanced technology. Commissioner, can you program a VCR? "No," he says. "We have one in the office, but I don't have one at home. If I want to know what time it is, I don't need to find out how the watch works."