

Press under fire

By Commissioner James H. Quello
Federal Communications Commission

Television news is very much in the public mind these days. There are those who are becoming more and more distrustful of an adversarial press that has been accused of discrediting the government of its own country and undermining national will, and I reluctantly have concluded that the adversary mentality of the press is reaching serious proportions and that this may have serious adverse consequences for the press—particularly the broadcast press.

I want to emphasize at the start that I am not taking on the role as a would-be censor. I am a former broadcaster and newscaster. I register my comments from the vantage point of one who has not only been on the "other side," but would still like to be on the "journalist's side." While I am a government official charged with the licensing of broadcast stations, my record opposing the discriminatory fairness doctrine and supporting full First Amendment rights for broadcasters is second to none. Accordingly, I see no bar to the exercise of some First Amendment rights of my own.

If Jesus Christ had a second coming to Earth to become president of the United States, he would no doubt be manufactured into a stumblebum, or an inept "non-leader" by that segment of the press establishment that views its role in society as that of an "adversary" to any incumbent. I certainly think that Presidents Ford, Carter and Reagan would appreciate my point.

In this adversary posture, were George Washington and his Continental Army preparing to cross the Delaware, the press would be concentrating on the inhumane suffering of underclothed and even barefoot American soldiers in the bitter cold of Valley Forge. I can also imagine the line of questioning to the soldiers: Did you know your leader is a member of the wealthy landed gentry? . . . Did you know General Washington doesn't actually know the number of enemy, and has to resort to distorted estimates of their strength? A few might even editorialize: Isn't British red better than dead?

In my view, several recent events have tended to erode public trust in media, particularly the electronic media.

An honorable field general selected to lead our troops in an unpopular, undeclared war certainly not of his making,



James H. Quello

was unjustly maligned in CBS' "The Uncounted Enemy, a Vietnam Deception." It is now apparent that the battle to clear the general's name would have been better fought in the court of public opinion rather than in a libel court which required clear and convincing evidence of malice. As I see it, General William Westmoreland made a command decision regarding enemy strength which he had the right and obligation to make, right or wrong. The one-sided documentary charging conspiracy represented shoddy journalism.

In another example of journalistic malfeasance, an Israeli general won critical battles for his beleaguered country, a strong ally of the U.S., but was maligned by inaccurate reporting by *Time*, a prestigious national magazine that usually knows better.

Still another example is ABC's unbelievable accusation that the CIA—the U.S. government—actually employed a murder squad to kill a Honolulu financial figure. The CIA vehemently denied the charge, and ABC, without an apology and after a long delay, merely admitted it could not substantiate the charge.

Freedom of the press confers upon reporters the freedom to be wrong so long as it is not done with "malice"—a very subjective, difficult standard—and, in the case of broadcasters, so long as there is no evidence of *deliberate* news distortion. However, editors, publishers and broadcast executives have the responsibility to make sure reporters are not wrong too often or to such an egregious degree that they are an embarrassment to their organization or profession. In my view, broadcast owners,

executives and managers should more and more assume the role of publisher or even editor-in-chief.

It is clear that television is the most pervasive form of the press. In recent years, surveys have consistently shown that more Americans turn to television for news than to any other medium. This must be regarded as a "two-edged sword" by those who have careers in television news. It is obviously flattering to be the press of choice and to exercise the greatest impact on a majority of Americans. That popularity, however, carries with it a public awareness of this role that requires the highest standards of professionalism.

It has been suggested that the proper role of the press is to be an adversary of government. I believe that this is a simplistic and dangerous philosophy. The proper role of the press is to seek the truth and to inform. The press must present facts in a timely manner and in a context that is calculated to educate the populace in the most truthful, complete manner possible.

I urge—just as recent self-criticism by the press suggests—that the media re-examine their attitudes, their manners and, most importantly, their recent tendency to act solely as an "adversary."

It ought to be clear that "adversarial" excesses by the media will destroy their most valuable asset—their *credibility*. I suggest that the media seriously reconsider the time-honored journalistic concepts of "fairness," "objectivity," and yes, a little "humility." It is a presumptuous notion to believe that the media were anointed on high as the nation's resident "adversary."

A free press is vital to a democratic form of government because the policies of such a government are formed ultimately by the people. An uninformed or a misinformed electorate can result in dangerous policies and ill-advised actions. A press that cannot or will not perform its informational role under the highest standards of public trust does not deserve public support.

Perhaps there is a message we should all heed when Congress, the elected representatives of the people, so adamantly refuses to repeal the restrictive fairness doctrine and Section 315. The First Amendment notwithstanding, Congress may be insisting that the electronic press gain full freedom the old fashioned way—they may have to *earn* it! □

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Editorial Office

330 West 58th Street, New York N.Y. 10019
Tel. (212) 757-7214

Bob Bernstein, Publisher
Joel Chadys, Managing Editor

Advertising Office

Ironstone Building B-11, 520 Stokes Rd.
Medford, N.J. 08055
Tel. (609) 654-1830

Ron Gold, Advertising Director

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Paul Woodland, Production Manager
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NATPE INTERNATIONAL

342 Madison Avenue
Suite 933

New York, NY 10173
Tel. (212) 949-9890

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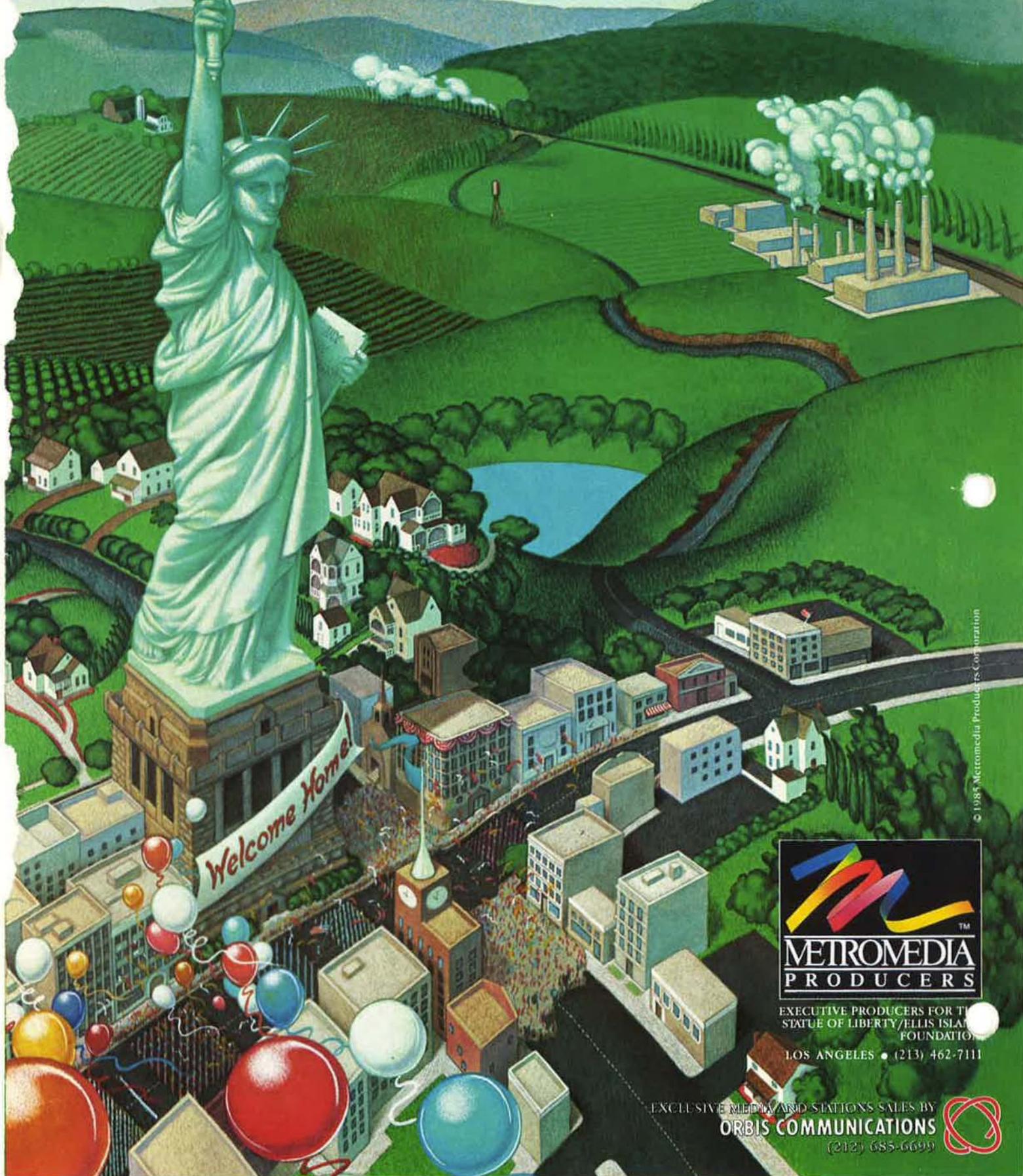
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