

Jim Quello has been a superb FCC chairman

As the clock winds down on Jim Quello's tenure as acting chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, something needs to be said loudly and clearly: He has done an outstanding job.

Yes, outstanding. As in better than we had a right to expect. As in above and beyond the call. As in hip-hip-hooray and all of that.

Mr. Quello has taken the helm of a divided and dispirited FCC and has guided it smoothly through some of its toughest decisions, including fin-syn and cable regulation.

It will be left to history to judge the quality of the Quello-led FCC's decisions, but the effectiveness of Mr. Quello's leadership requires no further deliberation.

On his watch as chairman, which began last February, partisan bickering and blind ideology have taken a back seat to teamwork and common sense.

The emphasis has been on making good decisions, enforcing the law and treating people with dignity and respect.

It has been a spectacularly successful approach to a decidedly difficult job.

In the final analysis, Mr. Quello has done the most that could be asked of an FCC leader, which is to say he has given the commission its best chance to make good decisions under tough conditions.

With no visible exception, he has done so with grace, dignity, honesty and good cheer.

And backbone, too.

When Congress balked at giving the FCC enough money to enforce new congressionally mandated cable rules, Mr. Quello promptly announced that enforcement would be delayed.

A less gutsy FCC leader would have at least gone through the motions of enforcing a law for which teeth had not been purchased.

Jim Quello took a higher road—as in high inside fastball.

At the age of 79, Mr. Quello, who has been a member of the FCC since President Nixon appointed him in 1974, did not aspire to a full term as chairman.

But he was more than willing—eager, in fact—to take over until a new chairman could be appointed.

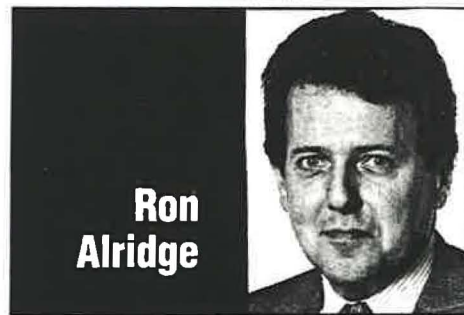
It's almost as if he understood his own limitations, all things considered. It's a rare quality, I think.

Equally—and deceptively—rare are the qualities he has brought to the FCC chair at its time of transition.

There is, for example, the perspective that comes with his many years of service on the FCC. In many ways, Jim Quello is the FCC's memory, its link to the past, its continuity.

The fact that Mr. Quello is a genuinely nice guy helps, too, by making it easier for the commissioners to work together smoothly, unplagued by counterproductive distractions.

Chief among Mr. Quello's many cheerleaders are those who have served under him.



Over lunch recently, one such admiring colleague described the acting chairman as simply a "fair and decent man."

In a separate conversation, another commissioner marveled at Mr. Quello's success in getting everyone to work

together.

It all sounds so very old-fashioned.

In today's rough-and-tumble times, we read and hear a lot more about the need for leaders to be "tough" and "decisive" than we do about decency, fairness and cooperation.

Fortunately, Jim Quello is an old-fashioned kind of guy.

So where in the world did he come from? An important part of the answer is that he came up through the ranks.

During World War II, he rose to lieutenant colonel, winning a chestful of combat decorations along the way.

In civilian life, he worked his way from promotion manager at Detroit's WJR-AM to general manager and on to a Cap Cities vice presidency.

It's the kind of multilevel background that tends to put life in perspective, that teaches the difference between using and abusing power, that provides healthy balance.

The frosting on the cake is that Jim Quello says what he thinks. If he is anything, he is candid. Call it a benefit of being less than a year away from 80 with three years remaining on a presidentially appointed term.

I'd like to think that Jim Quello came to the FCC's acting chairmanship through some deliberate stroke of intelligence at the highest level of government.

But in my heart, I know he got there almost by accident. President Clinton simply needed a warm body to run things until he could select a new chairman.

We were lucky that Commissioner Jim Quello was ready, willing and able to assume command. He was exactly what the FCC needed.

Jim Quello deserves formal commendation from President Clinton himself. On behalf of a grateful nation. #

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