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FCC Commissioner To Retire

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- "All in the Family" was the country's top-rated TV show. CNN, MTV and Fox TV network didn't exist. And there was only one telephone company, AT&T.

That was the world of telecommunications in 1974 when former Detroit broadcaster James Quello became one of its top regulators, a post he's held for 23 years.

This summer, the 82-year-old commissioner, who still plays tennis each weekend, will depart the Federal Communications Commission. "It's been the most fascinating job I ever had," he says.

In that job, Quello has helped to shape some of the biggest changes American consumers have experienced on their telephones, TVs and radios.

But to broadcasters, meeting here this week, Quello's legacy will be that he was their biggest champion. "Broadcasting. That's been his passion through the years," says communications attorney Dick Wiley, a former FCC chairman who served with Quello in the mid 1970s.

To the public interest community, which tried to torpedo his nomination two decades ago, contending that he would be a pawn of broadcasters, Quello's legacy will be putting "the interests of the industry ahead of TV viewers," declares Jeff Chester, executive director of the Center for Media Education, an advocacy group.

For his own part, Quello wants to be remembered as a plain-talking, pragmatic regulator. A paperweight on his desk sums it up: "Lead, follow or get out of the way."

Quello's seat, combined with one open Republican seat and possibly one more, gives the Clinton administration and Republican leaders in Congress a chance to reshape the five-member commission.

While he is an unabashed supporter of broadcast TV and radio, Quello has gone after shock jock Howard Stern for overstepping the bounds of the FCC's anti-indecency rules and has supported efforts to keep a closer watch on TV violence.

A Nixon-appointed Democrat, Quello miffed the Clinton administration last year when he opposed a rule requiring TV stations to air at least three hours of educational shows for children each week as a condition of getting their licenses renewed. Under intense political and public

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pressure, Quello reversed his position, allowing the Clinton-Gore campaign to claim the ruling as a first-term accomplishment.

The dispute effectively ended any hope Quello had to be renominated.

Quello ran the FCC for 11 months until Nov. 29, 1993, when Reed Hundt became chairman. The two often were at odds.

As interim chairman, Quello issued several historic decisions:

--Implementing a 1992 cable television law that regulated cable rates and service for the first time.

--Lifting longstanding restrictions that barred the TV networks from entering the \$5 billion market for reruns and syndication.

--Clearing the way for new wireless phone and two-way data and paging services called personal communications services.

--Proposing ground rules for the first auction of the nation's airwaves.

Before joining the FCC, Quello was vice president and general manager of Detroit radio station WJR and had been vice president of Capital Cities Broadcasting Corp. Ralph Nader and other consumer advocates sought to derail his 1974 nomination because of his broadcasting background.

Quello's life at the FCC has spanned some of the biggest changes in telecommunications.

After the breakup of AT&T in 1984, Quello participated in decisions that helped MCI, Sprint and other long-distance companies flourish. He voted for a licensing plan that created cellular telephone service in the United States. He helped paved the way for Americans to receive cinema-quality digital TV -- the biggest industry change since color TV of the 1950s. And, he pushed for regulations, upheld by the Supreme Court last Monday, that require cable systems to carry local TV signals.

For the last year, he's been working to implement Congress' biggest overhaul of telecommunications laws in over 60 years. The 1996 law frees local, long-distance and cable companies to get into each other businesses, makes it easier for companies to own more TV and radio stations and deregulates cable TV rates.

"I never thought it would take so long," he says.