

Jimmy Hoffa, A Red In The House, and McCarthy Era TV

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I just returned from watching a little under an hour and a half of truly gripping old TV shows at the Museum of Television and Radio in NYC as background research for an article I am writing on TV and the McCarthy era. I got the idea around the time I received a review copy of Stephen Fleischman's "A Red in the House". Fleischman went to work for CBS in the 1950s when he was in the CPUSA. I wanted to review his book in conjunction with "Goodnight and Good Luck," George Clooney's excellent 2005 movie about Edward R. Murrow taking on Joe McCarthy. Although I initially wanted to deal with Fleischman's book and the film, other materials will eventually enter the mix from Walter Bernstein's "The Front" to books by and about Fred Friendly and Murrow respectively.

When I was reading Fleischman's book, I was intrigued by references (http://www.marxmail.org/hoffa_dobbs.htm) to a show he produced about Jimmy Hoffa that featured an interview with Trotskyist leader Farrell Dobbs. I had never seen the show, nor could I remember the SWP making a big deal out of it at the time. I wanted to see that show as well as the March 9, 1954 "See It Now" show that confronted McCarthy and that was kind of a centerpiece of Clooney's film.

"Hoffa" appeared on ABC News Closeup in 1974. The difference between it and the typical night time "news" show nowadays is dramatic. To begin with, minus commercials, it runs at 51 minutes and 12 seconds. On primetime television today, you can expect 12 minutes of commercials--a 3 minute increase. That might not sound like much, but try sitting through 3 minutes of laxative ads sometime and you'll get the idea. (The Murrow show was 26 minutes without commercials.)

To give you an idea of what ABC news shows are about today, here are some recent offerings from Primetime News gleaned from their website:

--Man Accused of Illegally Harvesting Dead Bodies

--Woman Who Escaped Polygamous Sect Revisits Past

--Hollywood Elites Shudder as 'Fixer' Charged With Wiretapping

--The Music Industry's Dirty Little Secret

But the really striking thing was the complexity of the analysis, which was obviously a function of Fleischman's political acumen. This was not just a documentary on "Hoffa" but the quintessential study of the corruption of the American labor movement. It was also a powerful attack on the shady methods that the government used against Hoffa as well as a defense of his place in the labor movement as a determined defender of the basic economic demands of the workers he led.

The interview with Dobbs took place when he was 67 and still in full command of his powers. It was a pleasure to see him hold forth with an interviewer who obviously knew how to ask the right questions. The interview was preceded by Hoffa's fond recollections of Dobbs and his comrades Vincent and Ray Dunn as mentors. He freely admitted that without the precedent of Dobbs organizing regionally across state lines, he never would have enjoyed the success that he did.

The interviewer asks Dobbs to comment on Hoffa's version of a bit of Teamster history, when Tobin sent him in to clean out the Trotskyists in the Minneapolis union local. With a shark-like grin on his face, Dobbs says that Hoffa could only succeed with a little outside help--namely the Republican Governor of Minnesota, the Democratic President of the USA, the FBI, the local cops and the Department of Justice who were all determined to throw the antiwar socialists out of the union on the eve of WWII.

Even though Fleischman's background was in the CP, he seems to have shifted to the left after leaving the party and focusing on a career in television. This was manifested in this particular show by his willingness to attack sacred cows like FDR and Bobby Kennedy, whose hounding of Hoffa comes across as a personal vendetta.

Even more outrageous are the legal subterfuges that landed Hoffa in prison, which involved illegal surveillance of the sort now associated with the "war on terror." The most outrageous bit of federal behavior was associated with the provisions of his commutation in 1968. After leaving prison, he discovered that he would be prevented from engaging in union affairs until 1980. But the release papers he signed made no reference to that provision. If he knew that at the time, he never would have signed them. He would have been eligible for parole in 1971 and able to get back into union affairs without the commutation.

Charles Colson, the man who cooked up the commutation dirty trick would himself be in prison within the year.

Watching the famous "See it Now" broadcast is really illuminating, especially in light of the challenges to academic freedom being mounted by David Horowitz and the now daily revelations of a White House using the constitution as toilet paper.

Although I will have much more to say about this when I sit down to write my review of "Goodnight and Good Luck," Murrow and Friendly seem mainly interested in defending the innocent victims of McCarthyism rather than actual Communists who were being thrown in prison or fired from their jobs.

For example, Murrow demolishes McCarthy's amalgam between Alger Hiss and Adlai Stevenson, who were connected somehow through their prior association with the Institute of Pacific Relations. Murrow tells the audience that the IPR also included Herbert Hoover. What does not enter the equation is Alger Hiss's guilt or innocence. It is assumed that he is a bad guy, but not somebody with genuine ties to good guys like Adlai Stevenson or Herbert Hoover.

The same thing happens with Reed Harris, who is shown being grilled by McCarthy. It seems that Harris wrote a book in 1932 defending the right of Commies to teach at places like Columbia, where he was a student. Now, before McCarthy, Harris says that he no longer holds that view:

"Mr. Chairman, two weeks ago, Senator Taft took the position that I took twenty-one years ago, that Communists and Socialists should be allowed to teach in the schools. It so happens that, nowadays I don't agree with Senator Taft, as far as Communist teaching in the schools is concerned, because I think Communists are, in effect, a plainclothes auxiliary of the Red Army, the Soviet Red Army. And I don't want to see them in any of our schools, teaching."

Full: <http://www.honors.umd.edu/HONR269J/archive/Murrow540309.html>

Despite both the flaws in both the original "See it Now" production and Clooney's representation of it, I will maintain that Murrow acted in a principled and courageous fashion. More to come.

See Stephen Fleishman, at www.ARedInTheHouse.com.

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