

Political ads and Big Bird too

Once upon a time there was something called “educational television,” which harnessed the technological marvel of a new medium to provide children and adults with edifying programming uncorrupted by advertising. Today, public radio and television continue to devote more attention to educational programs than commercial broadcasters do, but they also seek to entertain viewers of all ages with features – such as British sitcoms, quiz shows, animal adventures and rock ‘n’ roll retrospectives – that duplicate those on commercial stations. And the programming is punctuated by corporate “sponsorship statements” that are advertisements by another name.

Given these changes, a federal appeals court decision last week allowing public stations to air political and campaign advertisements is not that dramatic a development. Last week the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, by a 2-1 vote, struck down on First Amendment grounds a congressional ban on such advertising, while upholding a prohibition on ads by profit-making companies.

Under Supreme Court precedents, restrictions on free speech by federally licensed broadcasters must be “narrowly tailored to further a substantial governmental interest.” In this case, the asserted interest was Congress’ desire to preserve educational programming on public stations.

In the court’s main opinion, Judge Carlos T. Bea concluded that Congress had good reason to worry that the lure of revenue from ads for commercial products might induce public broadcasters to replace educational programming with fare more likely to garner higher ratings. But Bea said there wasn’t “substantial evidence in the record before Congress” to suggest that children’s and other educational programming would be similarly endangered by a station’s acceptance of political ads. (He ridiculed the notion that a station eager for political ads might air a cartoon in which Mitt Romney or Barack Obama fought crime alongside Superman or Batman.)

One can accuse the court of not giving proper deference to Congress’ desire to keep public broadcasting ad free. But even if this case had been resolved differently, the notion of public television as a safe harbor from advertising would be a quaint one.

In his concurring opinion, Judge John T. Noonan Jr. wrote: “As a viewer of ‘Jim Lehrer NewsHour’ and its successor, I have seen announcements that to my mind are ads. For example, I have viewed Charles Schwab’s message, ‘Talk to Chuck’ – it is not about Chuck’s golf game.”

From “Talk to Chuck” to “Vote for Barack” isn’t that big a leap. In both cases, one would hope that the proceeds from such advertising would be used to defray the cost of the educational programming that is still more common on public stations than on their commercial counterparts.

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ARTIST'S VIEW



COMMENTARY | SEN. TOM O'MARA

A rural N.Y. blueprint

It’s an old idea that’s been expressed in many different ways. Winston Churchill said it this way, “The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you can see.”

Beginning in December 2005 and continuing throughout the following spring, the state’s Legislative Commission on the Development of Rural Resources – a 10-member, bipartisan commission on which I currently serve as a member – in partnership with rural affairs experts from Cornell University, undertook a series of 11 “rural listening sessions” with rural leaders and concerned citizens in communities across rural New York.

Those sessions, unique at the time, were a key part of what was known as the Rural Vision Project. Testimony from the listening sessions ultimately helped produce an important and still-useful report, “A Vision for Rural New York,” identifying and highlighting many of the key short- and long-term challenges facing rural regions. You can still find that report on Cornell’s website, www.cornell.edu (search “rural vision project”) and I’ll also be providing a link to it on my Senate website, omara.ny.senate.gov.

Why recall “A Vision for Rural New York” now? Because it produced worthwhile ideas. It still offers a blueprint of key rural challenges in critical areas, including: agricul-

ture and food systems; community capacity and social networks; economic development; energy; environment, land use and natural resources; health care; housing and transportation; local and regional governance; poverty; schools and youth; and workforce development.

In short, it shouldn’t be forgotten. It remains good reading. And, yes, it’s a way to look back in order to help keep us moving forward.

Summarizing the Rural Vision Project, one Cornell University leader at the time said, “The rural vision that is emerging from this project represents the diverse opportunities and challenges of our state’s unique regions. Rural development in New York must build on strong networks and partnerships, pride of place, solid citizen support, engaged local governments and enhanced regional coordination.”

Government’s well known for producing reports. But too often, as legislative bodies and bureaucracies change from year to year, this work ends up collecting dust on a shelf somewhere at the Capitol. It doesn’t have to be that way. There’s not always a need to reinvent the wheel, as it’s said. Sometimes it’s worthwhile to reinflate the tires to keep driving actions and change.

It’s been a long struggle to raise the state Legislature’s awareness of tra-

ditionally upstate, small city, rural issues, and the challenges for rural legislators just keep getting more acute. We’ve witnessed it time after time in the ongoing battles over the state’s tax policies, economic development priorities, infrastructure allocations and in so many other ways. It remains ongoing surrounding many of the issues being highlighted today by the Rural Resources Commission – issues like farm preservation, telemedicine, broadband access, volunteer recruitment and retention, water quality, education and transportation, to name just a few items on a much more comprehensive Rural New York Agenda.

A bipartisan approach to rural affairs remains paramount and that’s always been the Commission’s greatest power over the past three decades it’s worked to raise awareness, promote action and, in many ways, stand as a voice and a last bastion of concern for rural New York.

In the end, the only meaningful Rural New York Agenda will be one that’s undertaken on a cooperative basis at every level of government.

Hopefully, the effort will be ongoing to keep building public-private partnerships and enacting meaningful initiatives.

■ **Tom O’Mara is a Republican state senator from Big Flats.**

COMMENTARY | TEO BALLVE

Obama’s failed relationship

President Obama left the summit in Latin America with Washington more isolated than ever before. The reason: The stubborn positions the United States takes on the drug war and on Cuba.

When Obama first met with regional leaders in 2009, he recognized the mistakes Washington had made in the past. “We have at times been disengaged, and at times we sought to dictate our terms,” he said. “But I pledge to you that we seek an equal partnership.” In Cartagena, Colombia, Obama failed to live up to this promise.

A genuine partnership of equals would mean heeding the overwhelming consensus by Latin American leaders against the U.S.-sponsored drug war and the isolation of Cuba. Instead, Obama dismissed Latin American criticism of his administration’s policies as caught in “a time warp, going back to the 1950s and gunboat diplomacy and Yankees and the Cold War.” But it is Washington that is in a time warp.

Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos pointed out that Washington’s insistence on keeping the embargo against Cuba and excluding the island from diplomatic meetings was itself a Cold War “anachronism.”

Obama categorically ruled out any changes to his Cuba policy, putting him in an uninterrupted line of U.S. presidents following the same general approach with almost nothing to show for it. The island’s Communist government has withstood 50 years of U.S. sanctions, producing little more than grave hardships for Cubans on both sides of the Florida Straits.

Latin American leaders also singled out the drug war as a problem, noting that their countries bear the brunt of misguided U.S. policies.

The strongest critique of the drug war did not come from the region’s leftist firebrands, but from the conservative presidents of Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala and Mexico. Despite being Washington’s closest allies in the region, they are also the countries facing the highest rates of drug-related violence.

The drug war in Mexico alone has claimed more than 35,000 lives since 2006.

Three years ago on a trip across the Rio Grande, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton flatly admitted, “Clearly, what we’ve been doing has not worked.”

Obama’s recognition of the need for an honest debate about the drug war is a step in the right direction, but by the time he left Cartagena he only offered more of the same, including \$130 million in further military aid to Central America.

This is a far cry from Obama’s position during his Senate campaign in 2004 when he declared, “The war on drugs has been an utter failure.” With the drug issue unresolved and opposition from the U.S. and Canadian representatives over inclusion of Cuba at future meetings, the summit fell apart on the last day without a final declaration. The Argentine and Bolivian delegations left early in protest.

The United States risks further ruptures with Latin America due to its recalcitrant stances.

■ **Teo Ballve wrote this for Progressive Media Project.**

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Contact your representatives



State Sen. Tom O’Mara, R-Big Flats
105 E. Steuben St.,
Bath, N.Y. 14810
Phone: (607) 776-3201
Fax: (607) 776-5185



Assemblyman Phil Palmesano, R-Corning
105 E. Steuben St.,
Bath, N.Y. 14810
Phone: 607-776-9691
Fax: (607) 776-5185



Assemblyman Chris Friend, R-Big Flats
476 Maple St.
P.O. Box 441
Big Flats, N.Y. 14814
(607) 562-3602

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ADVERTISING
Classifieds (607) 936-4651, Ext. 651
Retail (607) 936-4651, Ext. 653
Adv fax (607) 962-0782

Kurt Bartenstein | Ad director,
936-4651, Ext. 388

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| Six months | \$171.60 | Six months | \$221.10 |
| One year | \$308.88 | One year | \$397.98 |