

SOCIETY

One Cheer for Censorship

A Survey of Recent Articles

Censorship rears its putatively ugly head in the pages of the *Weekly Standard* (Aug. 23, 1999)—only to be ritually dispatched by commentators in that conservative publication.

Conservatives complain about “the sexual immorality the media purvey,” while liberals object to the media’s encouragement of violence. Both are right, says David Lowenthal, an emeritus professor of political science at Boston College, but the ill effects go even deeper. “Never before in the history of mankind have the moral restraints and aspirations necessary to the fullness of our nature, and to civilization itself, been subjected to so ubiquitous and persistent an assault.” The more immediate impact and immensely greater emotional power of modern media—movies, television, and recordings—greatly magnify the problem. Only government, he declares, might be able to check “this descent into decadence.”

Lowenthal proposes that “distinguished citizens,” such as William Bennett, Jimmy Carter, Mario Cuomo, Elie Wiesel, and James Q. Wilson, be appointed censors, with their decisions “guided by law, open to inspection, and subject to review by higher courts.” To people who say they don’t want anyone telling them what they can and can’t see, Lowenthal says: “That is exactly our situation now, where a few hidden figures in movie studios and television networks, motivated primarily by profit, decide what will be available for our viewing.”

None of the four conservative commentators—Bennett, Terry Eastland, Irving Kristol, and Jeremy Rabkin—think Lowenthal’s proposal is now practical.

Bennett, author of *The Book of Virtues* (1993), agrees that the popular culture has become “deeply harmful,” but contends that most Americans today do not want Lowenthal’s remedy. “We need not rigorous censorship,” he says, “but pointed debate. And we need to name names. The goal is to

turn the people who are polluting our moral environment into social pariahs.”

While Eastland, publisher of the *American Spectator*, “in theory” favors censoring the mass media, he says that the old popular consensus against obscenity, which lasted for at least 150 years, is no more, and he doubts that a new one will emerge. “To those demanding data, as many will who never lived in the older America, the danger from obscenity and violence may seem distant and unreal. That is why it makes sense, for the moment, to employ methods other than regulation—especially methods targeting particular populations. Sponsor boycotts, for example. And journalism that shames Hollywood.”

Kristol, editor of the *Public Interest*, observes that he and others made the intellectual case for censorship decades ago, and while many agree “in principle,” they won’t do anything about it. People “are too busy working, worrying, drinking, and watching television. Or they are simply intimidated by the learned academics who advise them to ‘go with the flow.’ Or they really don’t mind a dash of pornography in their lives. (Topless bars are full of people who vote Republican.) Or they are God-fearing folk who are so busy insulating the lives of their families—and with a fair amount of success—against this decadent culture that they have no time and energy left to fight it.”

Rabkin, a political scientist at Cornell University, is “sympathetic to efforts to limit the most graphic depictions of sex and violence in the mass media—where there is still some public consensus to build on,” but maintains that Lowenthal, in his preoccupation with the mass media, misses the more serious problem. “The ‘mass’ of Americans is less corrupt than the most highly educated,” Rabkin asserts. “I don’t know what to do about the grotesque confusions of, for example, half the law faculties and two-thirds of the humanities faculties in this country. But I am sure that encouraging their own yen for censorship is not the answer.”