

## Ten Commandments vs. Springer?

Not long ago, Laura Schlessinger made a deal that turned her into a certified Hollywood player.

In September, the popular 53-year-old radio therapist known to an estimated weekly audience of 20 million as “Dr. Laura” will join the club of syndicated TV talk, whose membership includes Jerry Springer, Queen Latifah, Ricki Lake, Jenny Jones, Leeza, Montel, Maury, and Sally Jessie.

Why would Schlessinger—who brought the Ten Commandments into talk radio and claims to have “probably sent more people back to Catholicism than the Pope”—want to join such an, um, enlightened bunch?

Certainly part of it is the approximately \$3 million she will reap from Paramount and the more than 125 stations planning to broadcast her daily hour. Schlessinger’s other motivation is her desire to see whose side the national TV audience will come down on once she puts her brand of “preaching, teaching, and nagging” up against the TV peep shows.

Schlessinger and Paramount executives are trying to tap into the same enthusiasm that caused her national radio show, which debuted in 1994, to grow from 20 stations to more than 200 in under three years.

Dr. Laura’s phenomenal success, coupled with a public that, according to a recent Gallup poll, now cares more about the moral standards of the country and the character and integrity of the President than it does about foreign affairs, the environment, gun control, or campaign finance reform, would seem to spell ratings.

There is a risk that Dr. Laura fans will be divided between her radio and TV broadcasts, thus diluting both audiences. To avoid this, local TV programmers are

being encouraged to schedule the new show so it doesn’t compete with the radio program.

Moreover, although the precise format is still being decided, it’s certain the TV show won’t be a televised version of what’s on the AM dial. Producers are well aware that TV versions of the radio gigs of Rush Limbaugh and Howard Stern weren’t compelling. So efforts are being made to create a unique forum that incorporates the themes of Dr. Laura’s bestselling books—like *Ten Stupid Things Women Do to Mess Up Their Lives* and *How Could You DO That?: The Abdication of Character, Courage, and Conscience*—with audience participation.

Orchestrating much of this is Velma Cato, an alumna of NBC News. During the 1980s, she headed the network’s bureaus in New York and the Southeast. More recently, Cato directed a documentary about blacks in TV and film.

Even though the series is six months away from its premiere, it’s already succeeded in generating attention—the kind that often makes Hollywood quail. Homosexual activists have targeted Schlessinger because they’re afraid she’ll use her TV broadcast to amplify on her traditional Judeo-Christian views about homosexuality.

Schlessinger, an Orthodox Jew, describes homosexuality as a “deviant sexual orientation,” advocates counseling for gays who wish to become normal, and is opposed to gay marriage. In February, Paramount executives invited officials of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation to the studio to hear their concerns. The result was a joint statement saying that the show will have “many points of view.” Dr. Laura herself didn’t attend, and her spokesman says that Schlessinger hasn’t ceded any ground.



Dr. Laura Schlessinger

The undercurrent here seems to stem from Schlessinger’s invitation to GLAAD executive director Joan Garry last summer that they meet. During their conversation, Schlessinger remained stalwart that homosexuality flies in the face of biology and morality, and a transcript of the meeting was later reprinted in the Dr. Laura listener magazine. Garry’s effectiveness at arguing the GLAAD position was reportedly a disappointment to many gay leaders, and efforts now to influence Paramount are seen as an attempt to seize the upper hand.

In the current climate, Schlessinger is in a tricky place. Several years ago, CBS News suspended Andy Rooney for a commentary in which he innocently referred to the health risks of homosexuality.

This January, Laura Schlessinger responded to the flap with a short commentary in the *Los Angeles Times* stating, “My beliefs make me a threat to the radical goals of homosexual activists, who send me hate mail and death threats. Their well-organized campaign against my freedom of speech is rhetorical thugery at best and religious persecution at worst.” For now, Dr. Laura isn’t talking to reporters. But one general manager at a Fox affiliate told me Paramount secretly loves the buzz about the show.

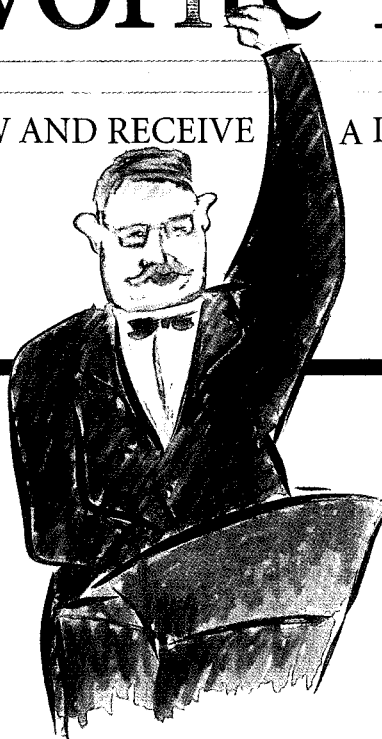
In the meantime, one wonders whether Jerry Falwell or the American Family Association’s Don Wildmon will be invited onto the Paramount lot for orange juice and Evian the next time they have concerns about TV and movies.

—John Meroney

AP Photo/Susan Sterner

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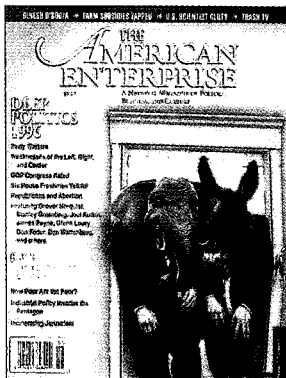
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# The Digest

SUMMARIES OF IMPORTANT NEW RESEARCH FROM THE NATION'S UNIVERSITIES, THINK TANKS, AND INVESTIGATIVE PUBLICATIONS

## POLITICS

### Little Government, Not Big

George W. Liebmann, *Solving Problems Without Large Government*. Praeger Publishers, P.O. Box 5007, Westport, Connecticut 06881.

Liebmann, a contributing writer to *TAE*, argues that many of today's social problems are best solved by small, local organizations, not large, impersonal bureaucracies. He cites many organizations in Europe and Japan that America can emulate. Among them:

**Community associations.** About 30 percent of American homeowners are part of a residential community association (RCA). These organizations could be given more power than they now have. RCAs could purchase local streets and maintain them, as well as control some local zoning. They might also contract with other organizations to provide regular deliveries of food and other essentials.

**Parent councils.** In most European nations parent councils have some control over public school budgets. In France, all secondary schools have a committee of parents, teachers, staff members, and concerned citizens which controls 10 percent of a school's budget. England has gone further: Reforms enacted in 1988 ensure that parental councils oversee 87 percent of the budget of all public schools, and, under certain conditions, 100 percent.

**Old-age clubs.** In Japan, an old-age club (*roojinkai*) is a nonprofit organiza-

tion of senior citizens. About 60 percent of the funds for these clubs come from voluntary dues, with an additional 20 percent coming from neighborhood associations and another 20 percent from the state. Club members look after and help one another. They also work with the *mensei-iin*, a corps of volunteers dedicated to regularly calling on seniors who require assistance. The clubs also provide relief for people caring for aging parents.

Both nonprofit groups and the state could help ensure that American local associations become more successful. Liebmann suggests national nonprofits might be more useful if they worked to strengthen local organizations rather than reflexively lobbying for bigger federal government. The American Association of Retired Persons, for example, has stressed "the defense of national government benefits rather than the creation of local institutions to take up some of the slack as demographic pressure causes those benefits to contract."

Washington can play its part by allowing contributions to local associations to be tax-deductible. It can also produce pamphlets explaining how to set up local community associations. Such government publicity campaigns, Liebmann contends, have been done before. In the 1920s, Department of Commerce pamphlets spread the notion of zoning across America, and a 1960s campaign from the Federal Housing Administration transformed condominiums from a Puerto Rican curiosity into a national norm.



Liebmann's goal is to devolve as much power as possible from a large national government to thousands of tiny local units. "For some functions at least, sub-local government is not only efficacious but indispensable."

### Empty Budgets

Eric M. Patashnik, "Budgeting More, Deciding Less," in *The Public Interest* (Winter 2000), 1112 16th Street N.W. #530, Washington, D.C. 20036.

Yale political scientist Patashnik believes the federal budget debate is noisier—and less important—than it used to be. "While the budget involves high political stakes, the policy importance of budget-making has declined over time."

Until 1974, Congress did not formally debate the budget, but instead focused on the 13 appropriations bills which determined how much money the government would spend. But President Richard Nixon, in an effort to check congressional spending, tried to "impound" or block some congressionally mandated spending. Congress not only outlawed "impoundment," but also created the Congressional Budget Office and the House and Senate Budget Committees to create "budget resolutions," which for the first time placed guidelines on the overall size of the budget.

In the 1980s and '90s, Congress placed some subsidies (Social Security, Medicare) outside of the budget process and declared that other government payments would