



TV's DEBAUCH

As the dirty-necked primitives of the Holy Man Khomeini were hauling Jimmy Carter across the last agonies of his hostage ordeal, National Public Radio (NPR) was off interviewing American flagellants still walloping themselves and us for Vietnam and the furbish lousewort. NPR was, as usual, idiotic, but TV news coverage of the hostages' release was idiotic too. There, the stars of TV news went into deep consultation with psychiatrists. What is more, they had placed camera crews in the homes of many of the hostages' relatives, thus allowing devoured TV audiences to savor every gush of emotion. It would be a moment of stupendous authenticity. It would also be stupendously irrelevant to our understanding of the hostages' release. All that the shrinks and the camera crews provided was gossip and excitement, which is, of course, the heart of broadcast journalism.

National Public Radio is our government-supported organ for 1960s youth culture, and as year begets year it will provide a fascinating view of the continuing juvenescence of a singular American subculture that was full of arrested adolescents to begin with. Its news shows always echo with voices—sometimes supercilious, sometimes oh so precious—reminding Americans of their brutal past and reproaching them for any lapse into national seriousness.

With Ronald Reagan's inauguration but a few hours off, and the idiot Iranians ravening for their last glories before Reagan and Alexander Haig wiped the prissy smile from Uncle Sam's face, the voices of NPR were full of loony mission. There was an overstrung lady voice that stammered along about how improved America is now that it has suffered its

recent indignities. Apparently, no one had spit in her food recently or forced her to play Russian roulette. In the personal confessional mode that is still so popular she told us all about her latest geopolitical feelings and about how America has been made stronger by resigning itself to its weakness—a familiar piece of 1970s ratiocination, that.

Then there was a learned prof who lectured against harboring any uncharitable thoughts toward our tor-

mentors lest we encourage fresh outbreaks of Manifest Destiny. Here too is a familiar line of reasoning, namely: that the American people are more dangerous than their enemies. It is this fear that prompted the Carter administration to deny early reports of Iranian atrocities against our diplomats, though the Wonder-boy now professes to be shocked by these stories.

Finally, NPR interviewed a young man who simply bawled. I tried like a

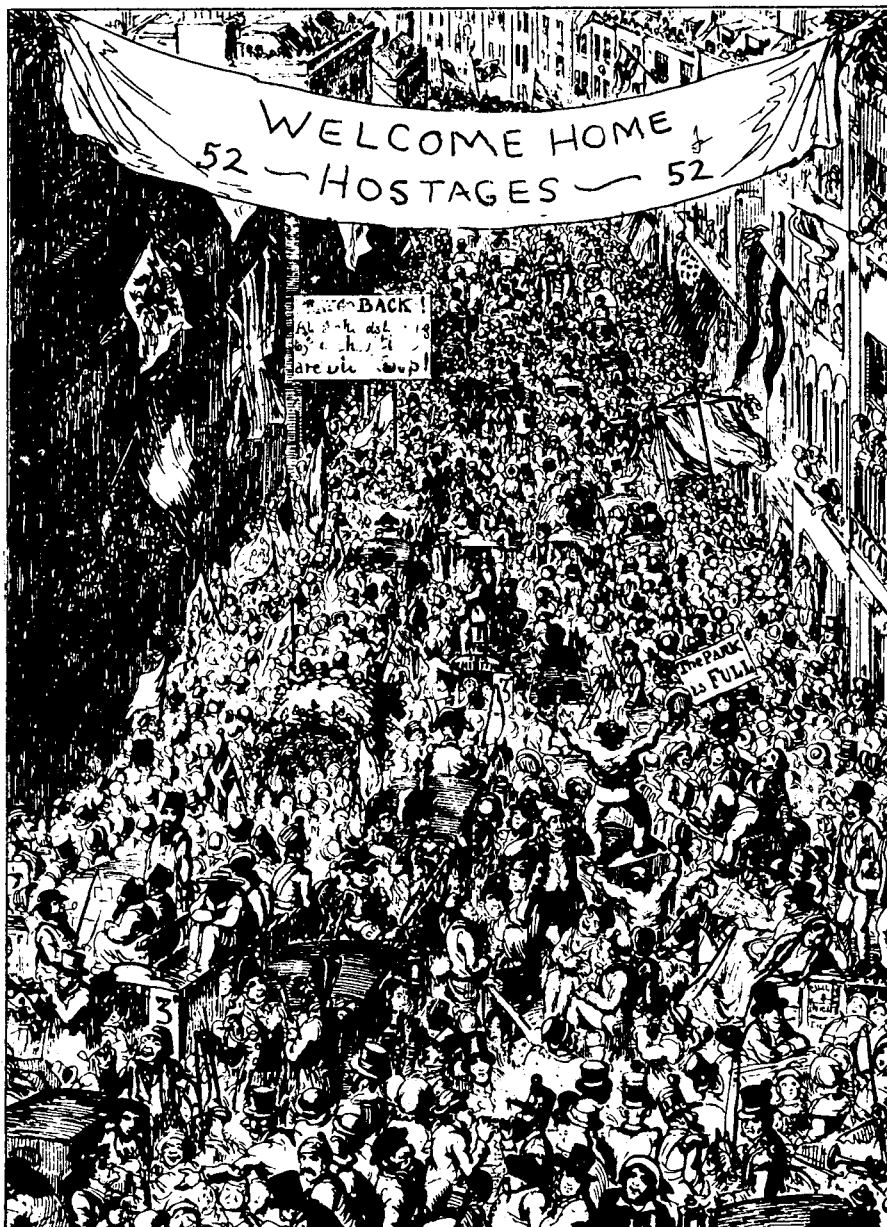
by R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.

good Christian to ascertain the cause of his sadness, but got nowhere. Possibly he had been asked to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. Possibly someone had stolen his rubber duck. The thing remains a mystery. When NPR president Frank Mankiewicz frantically leaps to the defense of NPR as he always does, I hope his letter to us will explain these ludicrous utterances.

The trivializing influence of the broadcast media is one of the salient characteristics of our age. Whom the gods would destroy they first present with a microphone. When they are in a particularly mischievous humor they bring in a TV crew. NPR is egregious because it is so pretentious and ideological. Network television is egregious because it is so pretentious and inane. Apparently it is incapable of treating any event, no matter how tragic, with dignity and intelligence. Its treatment of the hostages' release reached a new low in tastelessness and triviality.

The ordeal over the hostages has been a unique national tragedy, brought on by a series of incomparable diplomatic blunders by the Carter administration. After the first takeover of the Embassy the administration ignored the brutal nature of the Iranian regime, acting as though Andy Young's depiction of Khomeini as a saint was the inside dope necessary for understanding Iran. After the decision to admit the Shah the administration still made no adjustment to reality. Following the second takeover the administration merely emboldened the Iranians by immediately eschewing force and taking the appeaser's path. Now the entire Middle East is a more dangerous place.

TV News never critically examined the implications of this diplomatic disaster. Instead it allowed itself to



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be manipulated by the administration with melodramatic symbols: darkened Christmas trees, yellow ribbons, those avalanches of Christmas cards supposedly flowing into our diplomats' cells.

This is the kind of soap opera that TV relishes. For over a year the winsome commentators scowled and intoned ironies and sweet sentiments. Never very quick to convey the disturbing side of life, the commentators seemed utterly oblivious to

the brutality of the Holy Man's mobs. Imagine, they reported the Iranians' outrages every night and never seemed to anticipate the import of their barbarism. Their audience was left feeling that these things just happen. TV land is not a medium congenial to realism or even reality.

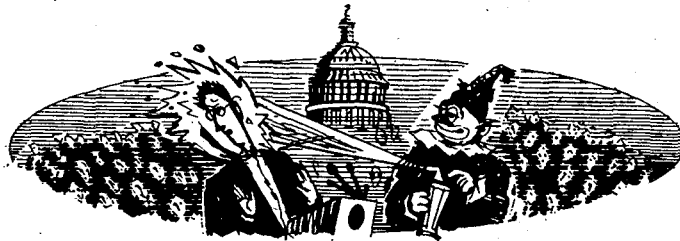
As our imprisoned diplomats departed Iran the stars of TV news were all anticipating a happy ending. The

shrinks were called in to give us a neat understanding of the mysteries of hostages, and, I might add, to allow the busybodies access to someone else's misery. The cameras were focused on the hostages' relatives to give us a taste of the happy moment, and, I might add, to allow the busybodies to eavesdrop and to satisfy other base impulses. It was going to be another great moment in the saga of TV journalism. Hours and hours were lavished upon the spec-

tacle. Then the news seeped out about torture, and the affair soured. Will the media journalists be sobered up by these revelations?

I doubt it. During the last weeks of the hostage ordeal the testimony in the trial of Pvt. Robert Garwood revealed the bestial treatment of our POWs, and only the newspaper stories conveyed any sense of the horror. Such stories do not fit into the ideological scheme of NPR or the razzle-dazzle format of TV news. □

C A P I T O L I D E A S



LOST CONTINENCE

Somewhere around the National Archives building on Pennsylvania Avenue I joined the March for Life, now in its eighth year. I was happy to be with them, too. Among the forest of placards carried by the long line of marchers (50-60,000 according to the published estimates, 100,000 according to march organizers) I noticed one that Herrick might have written:

Some Babies Die By Chance
But None Should Die By Choice

The good weather that arrived on schedule for President Reagan's inauguration had stayed on for a day or two, although Reagan himself did not come out of the White House to speak to the crowd of abortion-protestors gathered on the Ellipse.

The one part of Nellie Gray's speech the television producers seemed to like was the moment when she said that Reagan had been invited but had not shown up. It may have been a mistake on the part of Mrs. Gray, the march organizer, to mention this because it was predictable that the media would amplify it into one more conflict, carrying the subliminal message to viewers "... the anti-abortion people persist in being unrealistic ..." "Reagan

sobers up, confronts reality. . . ."

On the other hand I hesitate to second-guess Nellie Gray's tactics. She seems to know what she is doing. But in her position I would have simply said that Reagan had invited the anti-abortion leaders to see him inside the White House after the march. This of course was more than the little weasel Jimmy Carter had ever been able to bring himself to do, despite his much advertised religiosity. Carter, quite despicably in my view, confined himself throughout his presidency to the observation that he was "personally opposed" to abortion. In which case he should have done something to stop it. But he was afraid doing so would lose him

votes. How does he feel about it now, I wonder? He lost anyway, and yet several million unborn infants were aborted during his appalling presidency. Someone should have told Carter that a number of the presidents before Lincoln were "personally opposed" to slavery. And, as with abortion, one of the reasons they didn't do anything about it was the oft-heard doubt whether slaves were "fully human."

It is hardly necessary to say that abortion is one of the great issues of our time, perhaps in truth dwarfing all others. It is estimated that ten million abortions have been carried

out in the United States since the Supreme Court's 1973 decision. If you believe that each one of these abortions was *murder*, then it follows that abortion is by far the most serious public policy issue of our time. Most people in the right-to-life movement, of course, do indeed regard abortion as murder.

It is worth considering the political implications of this, which I had the opportunity to do as the march ended and I made my way inside the Russell Office Building, where hordes of marchers were hammering on the doors and patrolling the corridors in search of their senators, some of whom I suppose had gone into hiding for the day. The guards at the doors, for reasons having to do with "fire hazards," were only admitting 50 marchers at a time. One of the guards told me that there were far more marchers coming to lobby this year than ever before.

What is the balance of outrage over abortion? How do the rival sentiments match up? To what conflicting pressure is the impartial legislator exposed? On the one hand, the anti-abortionist believes that abortion is murder. On the other hand, the pro-abortionist believes—what? Since pregnancy is not compulsory, and can be avoided by continence, it follows that the pro-abortionist merely believes that those who are



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