

Senate Democratic Leader Robert C. Byrd

Remarks to

C-SPAN Board of Directors

May 12, 1986

National Press Club

Thank you, Brian. This audience knows the immense contribution you and C-SPAN have made to the American people's understanding of their government. They may not know how much I admire you for your efforts. Your advice and counsel during the long fight for TV in the Senate were much appreciated. I welcome the opportunity to thank you publicly.

Some of you know that I am fond of history...and that I like to share history with my colleagues in lessons from the Senate floor. Tonight I would like to look at how Congress and the communications industry share many historic moments and also look to some history yet to be made -- on June 2 when Senate proceedings are opened to television coverage for a 6 week test period.

Over a year ago, on the first day of the first session of the 99th Congress, I introduced legislation to allow Senate proceedings to be broadcast. I wanted to move the Senate out of the communications dark ages and into the twentieth century before we reach the twenty-first.

Woodrow Wilson said "the informing function of Congress should be even preferred to its legislative function." We in the Senate have been missing an important opportunity to inform. Polls consistently show over seventy percent of the American public prefer to get their news from television and most of them find TV the most believable news source. In order to carry out our charge to inform, we must acknowledge the best ways in 1986 of reaching the public.

We have a President in the White House who understands the need for visuals and who also understands the power of television's direct impact. We claim to be the foremost deliberative body in the world; certainly that image is handicapped when television audiences in 1986 see only artists' renderings of a reporter's version of our debates rather than the live debates themselves. We have given print reporters the tools of their trade, but until now, we have not given television and radio the visuals and audio they need.

The Senate's perspective tends toward the longer view and is enshrined in the Constitution's grant of a six-year term. We have often gotten lost in the tumult as Presidents and House Members, whose horizons are bounded by shorter terms, dominated public debate through TV coverage in recent years. The Senate plays a unique role confirming executive appointments and ratifying treaties. In our system of checks and balances, a Senate diminished by lack of exposure does not serve the interests of the people.

To remain a visible policy-making part of our national government the Senate had to find a way to accommodate television and radio broadcasts of Senate proceedings. I am convinced we can do this without violating the unique role of the Senate.

There is nothing that benefits our country like an informed public. The will of the people is best derived from an educated electorate. I am glad the Senate has decided, at least on a trial basis, not to hide behind tradition, but rather take every advantage available to prove our best-known tradition -- that we are the greatest deliberative body in the world.

The Senate has responded to the changing environment of information.

Now, I hope you will consider carrying the Senate's deliberations. I am aware that cable channels are limited and that competition is often intense. Nonetheless, if our trial period is to be a true test, we need your enthusiastic cooperation. In June, you should have a topic sure to be of interest to your viewers -- the tax reform legislation will be before the Senate. By dedicating a channel to the C-SPAN transmission of Senate proceedings, you can help make the experiment a true test.

When you do, you will join communications innovators who have brought us important moments in our country's history.

The U.S. Capitol has been the location of numerous events recognizing and tapping the benefits of communications advancements. On the first

floor of the Capitol, down by the old Supreme Court Chamber, on May 24, 1844, Samuel F. B. Morse conducted the first long-distance demonstration of the telegraph. In 1923, just three years after the beginning of commercial radio, the American people heard the opening of Congress and President Calvin Coolidge's State of the Union message. As early as 1947, when television was still in its infancy, President Harry Truman's State of the Union address was televised.

Proceedings in the Senate chamber have been televised only once before, when Nelson Rockefeller was sworn in as Vice President of the United States on December 19, 1974. I was acting Majority Leader at the time and authorized that broadcast. Later, when I was Majority Leader I allowed the radio broadcast of the debate on the Panama Canal treaties.

Television has already left a monumental mark in the history of the Senate and in the history of the United States. The first telecasts of committee hearings came in 1947 with the telecasts of the testimony of General George C. Marshall on his highly successful plan to reconstruct postwar Europe.

In 1951 came the famous and enormously popular telecasts of the hearings of the special Senate Committee to investigate organized crime in Interstate Commerce, better known as the Kefauver Committee's crime investigations. These televised hearings attracted such a large audience that Ronald Garay, in his book, Congressional Television: A Legislative History, points out that motion picture theaters "cancelled regularly

scheduled movies in difference to their loss of customers to the Kefauver Committee hearings."

The Academy of Television Arts and Sciences awarded Senator Estes Kefauver an Emmy for Special "Achievement" for the Committee's part in "bringing the working of ... government into the homes of the American public."

From April to June 1954, television covered the controversial Army-McCarthy hearings. Perhaps it was the importance of these telecasts and the audience's response to them that prompted Senator Andrew Schoepple, in that year, to declare that television "has shown itself to be a valuable tool of the Democratic process itself."

In February 1966, came the telecasts of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's education hearings on the Vietnam War. In his book, The Powers That Be, David Halberstam discussed the importance of these hearings, which he labeled a "landmark event." They were, he wrote, "A constitutional confrontation of the first order" that "ended more than a generation of assumed executive branch omniscience in foreign policy, and congressional acquiescence to that omniscience."

And, of course, those who watched them will always remember the dramatic and important telecasts of the Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign activities -- also known as the Ervin Committee's Watergate investigation. In its final report, the Committee noted:

"The facts which the committee produced dealt with the very integrity of the electoral process; they were the facts, the committee believed, the public had the right to know. Most citizens are not able to personally attend the working sessions of their government it was desirable that every citizen be able to view the hearings, if not in the Caucus Room, then in his home or place of business."

We have already seen the positive results of television coverage of Senate committee hearings. Now, I am confident that we shall see positive results from television coverage of Senate floor proceedings.

On June 2, for 6 weeks, millions of American homes will be brought closer to their government, and consequently, we shall have a better and more fully informed public opinion -- the basis on which democracy rests. And I believe later this year the Senate will vote for permanent TV coverage. We've crossed the bridge and burned it behind us.

It will be a privilege and honor to welcome America to the Senate on a permanent basis. I look forward to working with you this year toward that goal.

Thank you.