

Public Television's Struggle to Survive:

An Interview with Bill Baker

By Morton Silverstein

CUNY-TV



From the left: Steve Scheuer, Mort Silverstein and Bill Baker, president emeritus of New York City's Educational Broadcasting Corporation.

Last fall William F. Baker “retired” from his position— held for more than 20 years— as president and CEO of the Educational Broadcasting Corporation, licensee of Thirteen/WNET and WLIW New York. Now President Emeritus, Bill Baker spoke with Steve Scheuer and Mort Silverstein for the public-television series *Television in America: An Autobiography* when he was part-way through his tenure and again at its recent “conclusion.”

Excerpts from these interviews follow as a two-part article. In this issue of *Television Quarterly* the focus is on Baker's diagnosis of— and profound belief in— public television, which was in dire straits in New York when he arrived in 1987. Part two will recall his 10-year career at Westinghouse Broadcasting, where, among other

achievements, he introduced Oprah Winfrey as a talk-show host.

In response to a question about the future of public television:

Bill Baker: Public television is an interesting animal. It is always struggling. In some ways, that struggle may be a healthy one, because we're always trying to define ourselves. It is a genuine struggle and it is really difficult. One of the reasons why I've stayed in this job so long—because I thought when I took it over in 1987, I'll come in and do that for a couple of years. It seemed like a pretty simple thing to me. Turn it around. Move on. Go back to the business of making money. Two things happened. One, I got so involved with the mission of what public television is that it became a religion. I couldn't just go back to making money. The second

thing is that it also turned out to be much more difficult. I was used to running a very large broadcasting and cable business [at Westinghouse where he was president and chairman of Group W Satellite Communications]. I thought this should be a cream-puff relative size. But it turned out to be a much more complicated and difficult business. It's still taking every piece of whatever ability I have. I still feel like I'm barely up to it, if at all. So the struggle goes on.

Steve Scheuer: For the more than thirty years I've been tracking the welfare of public television, starting with Lyndon Johnson and his effort to find a way to fund public television properly, initiated by a White House aide, S. Douglass Cater, among many other people. For a variety of reasons, it has never come to pass. Carnegie Commission I and II came and sank. The commercial broadcasting lobby is so immensely powerful, they have seen to it that one of the proposed remedies for public television of a tax on their gross profits and income has never [happened]... Are you now optimistic, as we move along in the 21st century, that there'll be a serious, long-term answer to public television?

BB: No. The TV business is a mature business. The reason public television in this country—unlike, say, England and others which have a government funding basis—is that we are, in fact, an afterthought. By the time public television was thought of in this country, the commercial interests, the economic interests, were so big and so powerful, there was no way they were going to let this entity really take off. Frankly, I don't blame them. I understand. The TV set-manufacturing business was

big enough that they weren't about to have taxes slapped on their sets, the use taxes that the British have. The commercial broadcasting interests were so powerful, they weren't about to have any additional taxes slapped

**“We can't let
this die.”**

onto them for their profits. So we were left hanging out there in a great idea, but totally and completely underfunded. The interesting thing is that we are able to exist at all. The fact is that we somehow still keep existing, despite the fact that any economic theoretician, any business school graduate, would say, this is impossible, there is no way you can raise that.

During the darkest days of public television's attacks—and I happen, unfortunately, to have been here during the second wave of the darkest days, which was during the time of Newt Gingrich attacking the system, it looked like literally we were going out of business. As a matter of fact, we were having secret meetings with our board, looking at shutdown scenarios. If the government funding would have gone away, we figured we would have to shut down the TV station.

SS: Who saved the day?

BB: That's the beauty of it. Those who saved the day were not us, were not our richest friends, but the regular people of America who said, 'We can't let this die.' They went out and basically flattened the attackers of public television. The Senator from North Dakota who was a major attacker lost his seat. Newt Gingrich ultimately lost his power. It was really the American people who saved us... Now, all of that said, I'm not sure we can withstand another quick attack, because I think

the American people say, Okay, been there, done that. I don't think they're up to saving us every year or so. We're one of the biggest operating charities in New York, outside of the hospitals and universities, and among the biggest membership organizations in the tri-state area. So it's really quite something. It's almost a miracle.

I was at a dinner party last night and a friend of mine who is a big supporter of public television was saying, "Can't you do this, can't you sell more tapes, do this or do that?"

I said, "I define the business we're in as an economic business; that is, almost negative economics. The fact is, if we did the kind of television that could be profitable, that could make money, then we shouldn't be doing it. Some commercial entity will do it. There is good television being done by commercial entities. But there is the kind of television that needs to be done that is simply not commercially viable, but yet needs to be done for the betterment of our broad society.

Take *Religion and Ethics News Weekly*— there is no way that any sponsor is going to pay for that. It's never going to get a big enough audience to be supported by some commercial interest. So the only way it's going to happen is philanthropy. The *NewsHour* and *Great Performances* are other examples. So there are many of those kinds of programs that just would never exist.

Morton Silverstein: How did you define your mission in '87, when you were first talking to the board, and then ultimately to your audience? Was it to fulfill the vision of E. B. White's celebrated "Here is New York" – particularly, his letter

to the first Carnegie Commission ("Non-commercial TV... should be our Lyceum, our Chautauqua, our Minsky's and our Camelot. It should restate and clarify the social dilemma and the political pickle. Once in a while it does, and you get a quick glimpse of its potential.")

BB: Those are beautiful words. Of course, E. B. White is one of my literary heroes in the sense of articulating the highest-minded words for public television. Those were, in fact, the quotes and the words that I used when I first started in this business. A friend of mine said, "I remember when you first started in public television how you'd go on the air and do these long and convoluted, intellectual explanations of why people should support television. Now you just look into the camera and say, 'We need money! Here's the number.'

And that's the end of it. It's kind of like me, when I started being a headmaster. I would go and explain to the parents the necessity of supporting the school. Finally, in effect, I just grabbed them by the ears and just shook them and said, 'These are your kids! Pay up!' That's kind of where I am.

The documentaries you see on commercial cable are often infotainment.

I'm kind of simplifying my message, figuring that what we do either speaks for itself or it doesn't. If it speaks for itself, the folks know what to do. If it doesn't speak for itself, then they're not using us anyway.

SS: Ten or fifteen years ago, public television was, for all practical purposes, the only game in town for

really good shows about the arts and dance and archaeology... Now, in a much-fragmented telecommunications world, there are places across the dial, the cable dial particularly, where on occasion there are interesting things on Bravo, on A&E, on the History Channel, and so on. There was just one ballgame fifteen years ago. Now there are other options. Has that been detrimental to public television?

BB: I think it's a bit detrimental in the sense that it's a little harder to explain our mission. That has been a problem. Articulating our mission is difficult. That's why I wind up saying, "Those guys do nice stuff. They do excellent things, but there is still so much that needs to be done that they will never do, simply because it is not economical." I point again to a *Great Performances* and say, "Here's a show that costs a million dollars an episode to do. It gets maybe a 1- or 2- rating. Those are not economically viable." If you want to see American opera on television, we're the only ones that will do that. None of the other arts-type channels on commercial cable will do that. If you want to see a show as distinctive as the *NewsHour*, even though there is a CNN, a CNBC, an MSNBC, nobody will put those kinds of economic resources into that kind

of content. Certainly, there will be no *Washington Week in Review*. The subtleties are important, but in fact they have become more and more subtle. For example, the documentaries we do—the Ric Burns documentaries on the history of New York were a ten-hour



The big networks said: "Your job is to be our Tiffany."



CUNY-TV

series, a million dollars an episode, a ten-million-dollar series. All of the documentaries we wind up doing—the difference between us and what you might see on cable is: the technology of television is so advanced, you can do a nice little documentary fairly inexpensively, but it may not be right. While you can do all of the TV tricks, the secret still is the vetting, the research, the scholarship that goes into those. Every documentary we do is like a doctoral dissertation. The documentaries that you see on commercial cable are often infotainment. They are in the form of documentary, but they're infotainment. That's a hard thing to explain, because you'll often see one and say, "Gee, that was really interesting. I didn't know such-and-such..." Well, sometimes you didn't know it because it wasn't true. I think also

there needs to be some entity that holds the high-water mark, whose goal it is to do one thing, which is to stay at the high-water mark, because there is no pressure anywhere else.

Even in the bigger television organizations, like the big networks, where they had these loss-leader news organizations, they said, your job is to be our Tiffany, your job is to make us be the very best there is. We're prepared to lose money because we're making so much over on this other side. So you just do God's work over there. Well, there's not that pressure any more on them either; it's just the pressure to make money. So somebody still has to be in the business of holding the high-water mark. I think that's a valid position in a business as powerful as television and telecommunications in general—arguably more powerful than religion in this country. So that's what I like to think is our goal and our mission.

SS: It seems to me we are now in a very parlous state because of the immense power of the broadcasting, and now the cable, lobby. I would argue that it's the most powerful lobby in America. Part of what has happened is that the networks and the cable stations are so important. The single most important man in the life of an upstate New York Congressman is his local television station. If he wants them on the air, there are a million ways to do it; if he doesn't want them on the air, it's very simple. So there is now, and has been for almost half a century, a deep antipathy among the people involved with commercial television to doing anything that they view as antithetical to the financial well-being of the commercial television industry.

BB: I think you summarize it fairly well. I would make one potential correction. I don't know that I'd use the word "lobby," because while commercial, cable and broadcasting interests do certainly have strong lobbying positions and are very powerful, I think there is

an even more subtle power. That is the power you talked about: They are the gatekeepers. Especially as the industry consolidates even more, the gatekeepers become more and more powerful. I talk to senators and congressmen all the time and they are privately sympathetic to my views. I've sent them copies of my book about the regulatory environment, and they all say, "We agree with you, but we don't have the courage to take on, in effect, the hand that feeds us." They don't mean economically; they mean that the only way they can get their message out is through media. They don't want to get those gatekeepers mad at them, so they do everything they can to avoid that. If you're a major gatekeeper and you say, "I'd like to talk to you about something," whether there is money involved or not, it's almost irrelevant. It doesn't make any difference. You're such a powerful force in your community.

The point is, if you can't count on the government because of whatever pressures there may be to come up with a regulatory environment to solve these problems, where is it going to come from? That, of course, is the dilemma. We don't know where it's going to come from. My view is that we have to keep waving the flag, because in this country sometimes all it takes is one incredible champion. I think that everybody is feeling more and more that something is wrong, that the system is broken. Witness the outcry we had when public television was being threatened. I think there is a chance that something will happen. We just have to be ready to see the hole and go through it. That's my general feeling. I wish I had a stronger position than that. The only secondary and tertiary positions I might have are as follows. I think we can demand of the industry to go

back to some kind of self-regulation of broadcasting and cable. There used to be a TV code of the National Association of Broadcasters. George Dessart, [formerly of CBS and co-author of *Down the Tube: An Insider's Account of the Failure of American Television*] and I have been pushing for some kind of self-regulatory environment. The industry has even avoided that. You would think that would be the easiest thing of all, to be self-regulating. That's certainly one possibility. There was an opportunity, I think, when Gore established the Gore Commission, which was the last big wave of regulatory environment, for there to be something really serious done. I think we would have had a major change in telecommunications policy, had not the presidential Lewinsky thing happened all at that time, because suddenly the President, and indirectly the Vice President, lost credibility and power. They were fighting another battle over here and couldn't really stand up to the most important issue.

SS: The Gore Commission reminds us that one of the many differences between the English and American television system is that one thing English television has done is that, every ten years, they take a hard and long and serious look at the status of commercial television, and whether or not it is serving the public weal. It was started by John Reith.

BB: You're right, there is that kind of Reithian thing that happens in England, where they look at it, but they do it with teeth, knowing that they could pull the plug on the BBC. On a couple of occasions, they have threatened to do that, and almost did that. So it's not one of those academic exercises; it's a serious one. Recently, in Canada, they have done that, where the

CRTC looked at telecommunications in Canada and looked at their policies of Canadian content, etc., and made some very hard decisions, ones with teeth. One of the things that is possible in this country... You think about the entities that have a great deal of power—and that means those that have money. Right now, because of the way the stock market has gone, these foundations in America are incredibly wealthy and powerful. If a number of them got together the way Carnegie did thirty years ago, or a combination of the biggest foundations—I'm talking about foundations like Ford, Lilly, Pew,

I look at Bill Moyers, who is one of my heroes, and I say "Gosh! Why Can't We Do More?"

Gates—and said, We're going to really delve into telecommunications policy, they could have a massive influence.

MS: On the national public-affairs front, beyond an occasional *Frontline* and an all-too-infrequent Bill Moyers program and the ongoing Lehrer *NewsHour* (co-produced with Washington's WETA), some observers—journalists, activists, audience members—say that the flame no longer burns as consistently or as brightly in public television as it did in the Jack White and Jim Day eras of N.E.T., in which documentaries flourished and *The Great American Dream Machine* was born.

BB: I would agree with that. I would give anything to start a program like my predecessors did, *The Fifty-First State*. I look at Bill Moyers, who is one of my heroes, and I say, Gosh! Why

can't we do more? Every time he puts something on the air, it is magnificent and important. Why are there so few of those? A couple of things. First, let's talk about the positives. The positives are that we were able to start Charlie Rose. That was one of those things that was done on a shoestring. Charlie came to me and we talked. I wanted to do a local program of significance, but had almost no money. He was one of the few significant stars with talent who was willing to say, I'll work for a little bit, because I believe in what this is. He has continued and become a terrific success. So I think that's one for the good guys. But, the fact that we have not been able to build—and this is something Bill Moyers himself says—a kind of Bill Moyers, Jr.—somebody coming behind Bill Moyers—is indicative of the economic problems we're facing, which are worse than they were during the heyday of public television, when the Ford Foundation was throwing a lot of money, in relative scale, at this industry. So I am troubled and embarrassed by that. One thing is that Bill, because he is such a substantive and substantial figure himself, has been able to go out and raise money for his own projects. We are talking seriously with Bill now about doing a weekly public-affairs program, which would be wonderful. [Editor's Note: It became *Now*.]

Now let's start getting into the negative side of this. I think the record speaks for itself. We are not doing as much as we should or could, but we can't, because we don't have the money. It's that simple. The other is that our public television community is not as pure as we would all like to be, not that we're all that pure either. You talk to them about doing a high-

minded public-affairs series, or a serious performance program. A lot of the stations around the system say, "It won't get enough ratings." You hear ratings discussions that I think should not plague a mission-driven institution like ours. Nevertheless, we are a bunch of three hundred public TV stations, all separately controlled. Everybody with a slightly different agenda. So we have to listen to the rest of the system. Some are incredibly high-minded. Obviously, we know who those stations are. But some just talk like commercial broadcasters. That hurts us, too. So I think all of those things coming together have made it a very hard haul for us.

Morton Silverstein is an eight-time Emmy Award documentary filmmaker whose television career began with Nightbeat with Mike Wallace and continued at all the networks, with a stint as Public Affairs Director for the CBS Flagship station WCBS-TV in New York. At National Educational Television (1963-72) he produced Banks and the Poor, What Harvest for the Reaper, The Poor Pay More and Justice and the Poor, among many other investigative reports. He is today Senior Writer/Producer at the Independent Production Fund, where with Executive Producer Alvin H. Perlmutter and CUNY TV's Executive Director, Robert Isaacson, he continues to produce the Steven H. Scheuer series Television in America: An Autobiography, which appears on many public television stations.