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CBS AND THE "NO PASS, NO PLAY" RULE

CBS Sunday morning television has discovered the controversy called the "no pass, no play rule," the new Texas law which decrees that any public high school student who fails one course must be excluded from all extra-curricular activities for the next six weeks. Face the Nation provided us with a public affairs program on this controversy.

It turned out to be a typical liberal television network format which pretended to be a "debate" giving both sides, but which actually was loaded three-to-one in favor of the "no pass, no play" rule. This was not the fault of the moderator, Leslie Stahl, who was fair in her questioning, but the fault of CBS which scheduled the program with three advocates of "no pass, no play" but only one opponent, a 3-to-1 time disparity.

It is very difficult for one side to win a debate when it has only one-fourth of the time while the other side has three-fourths.

CBS is usually less obvious in lacing an issue with bias. It is interesting to speculate on why the CBS network public affairs division was willing to show such obvious unfairness on an issue that concerns only Texas and which, on the surface, does not appear to impact on the national liberal agenda.

Analyzing the program, we find that it promoted two current goals of the liberal action agenda: (1) Reelect Mark White, a liberal Democrat, as Governor of Texas, and (2) pin the blame for illiteracy on anything other than the real reason, which is the failure of the schools to teach children to read using intensive phonics in the first grade.

Governor White, who appeared personally on the program as the chief advocate of the "no pass, no play" rule, was shown as a stalwart leader trying to restore academic excellence in Texas schools. He was allowed to ride into battle defending "no pass, no play" as though he were St. George slaying the dragon of those who want to undermine or ignore academic excellence by allowing illiterates to play football. The "dragons" were personified by football coaches and White's Republican gubernatorial opponents who have made "no pass, no play" a campaign issue.

White was supported on the program by Notre Dame University's basketball coach, and both were allowed to bask in the prestige glow of a clip from the movie Knute Rockne showing Rockne telling his team that academics are more important than football. This message was reinforced by a movie clip of the Gipper (Ronald Reagan) himself.

The second liberal objective was served by the program's repeated references to illiteracy. The public was subliminally saddled with the choice between supporting the "no pass, no play" rule or supporting illiteracy, poor academic standards, and the graduating of high school students who can't read.

Illiteracy was repeatedly mentioned on the half-hour program as justification for the "no pass, no play" rule. The shocking figure of "23 million illiterates," which originated in the 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, was mentioned twice, and so was the now widely admitted fact that high schools have been granting diplomas to students who can't even read.

Thus, the debater's tactic called the "false alternative" conveyed the false notion that somehow illiteracy and poor academic achievement can be blamed on football and other extra curricular activities (cheerleading, drama, band, newspaper, etc.). There isn't a shred of evidence for that.

Learning to read is a function of the first grade in elementary school, and first-graders are not playing football at school. If illiteracy is the problem we are addressing, then Mark White-type logic should lead us to pass a law for first-graders that says, "no read, no recess."

That would be wrong, of course, because eliminating recess or playtime in the first grade would do nothing to promote reading skills. The first-grader's span of attention is short, and playtime is essential to efficiency in the learning process.

Likewise, the principal problem with the "no pass, no play" rule is that sports and extra-curricular activities should not be viewed as a "reward" for academic achievement. They are another kind of education. Students differ widely in their abilities to achieve in different subjects, and the one should not be made contingent on another.

But these points were never made in the Face the Nation debate because the program gave three-fourths of the time to those who agreed with Mark White's controversial law.