PS1 for 7/14/88#MIGHTY MOUSE SENDS MIGHTY DUBIOUS MESSAGES

Is CBS peddling drug use in its Saturday morning cartoons? In an episode of CBS's children's cartoon (BF)Mighty Mouse(end BF), the hero (not to be confused with Mighty Mouse of the 1960s) was stretched out by a campfire when he pulled an unidentified substance out of his cape and inhaled it up through his nostrils until it was all gone.

Some viewers of this program think the substance was cocaine and that, therefore, the cartoon gave a very bad message to children. In contradictory letters, CBS indignantly responded first that Mighty Mouse was just smelling ""his lucky chunk of cheese,'' and secondly that the substance was not cocaine but a ""mass of crushed stems, tomatoes and flowers.''

It is clear that the substances is not cheese, but it isn't clear what the substance is; certainly no tomatoes or flowers are visible. When you sniff cocaine, you breathe the substance into your nose. CBS will have a hard time explaining how you can do that with tomatoes or flowers.

The producer of the controversial program, Ralph Bakshi, blasted his critics with an ad hominem attack. He said that the criticism ""smacks of burning books and the Third Reich. It smacks of McCarthyism. I'm not going to get into who sniffs what.''

CBS may or may not be guilty of urging kids to sniff coke. But CBS certainly has a public relations problem because it has shown such extraordinary insensitivity to the legitimate concerns of parents.

Instead of attacking its critics, suppose CBS had written something like this: ""CBS certainly didn't intend for the unidentified substance to represent cocaine; but since some viewers have received that impression, we will delete those three seconds from all future showings. In view of the seriousness of the drug problem in America today, CBS is instituting an immediate policy to prohibit

programming that shows any hero sniffing cocaine, and we are so notifying our producers and script writers.''

Such a reply would have shown appropriate concern about the drug problem. Instead, CBS is defending its staff and attacking its critics.

Let's suppose, for a moment, that the controversial three seconds had been a racial slur instead of coke sniffing. More pertinent still, let's suppose that the disputed three seconds had been only (BF)arguably(end BF) a racial slur -- not (BF)intended(end BF) by CBS, but only so (BF)construed(end BF) by some viewers.

What do you think CBS's response would have been? My guess is that CBS would have issued a fast apology for the perhaps unintended slur, a regret that it had been misconstrued by some viewers, a stern memo putting producers and script writers on notice to avoid a repeat occurrence, and a blipping out of the alleged slur for any future airings of the program.

CBS should be just as eager to avoid presenting any program that could be construed as presenting hard drugs in a favorable light. But the offending episode of Mighty Mouse, called ""The Littlest Tramp,'' was aired three times by CBS, and no apology has been forthcoming.

This same Mighty Mouse episode contains several other adult messages. The general theme is that society is basically depraved and that capitalism is evil; the bad guys drive expensive limousines with gaudy $ signs on the side.

The story teaches the lesson that people are not responsible for their actions. There is nothing subtle about this message. When Mighty Mouse starts spanking the villain, the flower-seller he has abused, Polly, defends the bad guy, saying, ""He's just making up for the terrible things that have happened in his own life.''

The ""voice over'' promises at the start of the program that

Mighty Mouse ""will prove that crime will never pay.'' In fact, the cartoon proves that the villain (who never admitted guilt or expressed any remorse) gets the girl. Is that a kids' Saturday morning morality lesson?

At the end of the ten-minute cartoon when the newlyweds are driving off into the sunset and the announcer is predicting their ""new beginning,'' their car blows up in a nuclear mushroom cloud. That ending is totally irrelevant to the story line, so you can draw your own conclusions about its symbolism.

Ralph Bakshi, who created this disjointed, unfunny cartoon with its depressing and destructive messages, was the producer of the first X-rated cartoon strip, ""Fritz the Cat'' in 1972, financed in part by (BF)Playboy(end BF) magazine. CBS's chief of children's programming, Judy Price, boasted to a reporter last year that she has ""broken a lot of ground where people would not have dared to go in prime time.''

Spending more taxpayers' money is not the answer to winning the war against drugs. Let's start by demanding that television clean up its act.