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WHO ARE THE CENSORS?

Well, well. The "right wing fundamentalists" and the "Bible-thumping parents" who have been pilloried for the last year with the charge that they are "censors" must be howling with laughter. Funny thing, though, we haven't heard a chirp from Norman Lear's People for the American Way (PAW), that self-appointed guardian of the First Amendment which undertakes to hang the ugly label "censor" on anyone who criticizes the spending of taxpayers' money for pornographic books or offensive classroom materials.

Where are you, Norman Lear, when we need you? Where are those full-page ads, those 30-second TV spots, and those tear-jerking fund-raising letters crying about the danger to society from anyone who wants to keep people from reading a book or seeing a film?

A deafening silence is coming from PAW about the most blatant example of real censorship that has occurred in decades -- the ABC-TV network's spiking of its 20/20 segment on the death of Marilyn Monroe. It was all ready for network airing and, as one staffer described it, "Sylvia Chase was in the studio getting her hair and makeup done when it was canceled."

This segment was a 26-minute investigative news report on the mysterious circumstances surrounding the death of Marilyn Monroe. Originally scheduled to air September 26, it was reduced in length to 17 and then to 13 minutes, postponed to October 3, and then spiked. (To spike means to kill or censor a news story in order to accommodate the politics of the powers that be.)

What could possibly be "political" about the death of Marilyn Monroe? Her romantic liaisons with both President John F. and Senator Robert Kennedy have been known for years. The new evidence is that Bobby Kennedy visited her the day she died, and that Kennedy's brother-in-law Peter Lawford helped to "sanitize" her home after her alleged suicide by removing notes, papers and diaries.

The 20/20 segment wasn't produced by "bad" right-wing Republicans trying to destroy the Kennedy image, but by ABC's top team of reporters. Host Hugh Downs called the segment

"solid journalism," and Sylvia Chase "double-checked the segment." Barbara Walters joined with those two in protesting ABC's eleventh-hour decision to cancel the story.

Why haven't we heard a torrent of outrage from People for the American Way about ABC's interference with our "right to know?" Why haven't we heard the same kind of denunciations we hear when sincere parents object to fourth-graders being given books with explicit sex and foul language?

Why hasn't PAW issued an indignant press release attacking the "increase in incidents of censorship?" Why don't we see ads and posters calling public attention to "BANNED TV PROGRAMS WEEK" (like "BANNED BOOKS WEEK")? Is PAW suddenly struck dumb?

PAW could invent a new national game called "Censorship Trivial Pursuit." Here is a sample question. Which of the following caused the spiking of the Marilyn Monroe story? (a) The friendship of ABC-TV News chief Roone Arledge with Mrs. Robert Kennedy. (b) ABC news man Jeff Ruhe's marriage to Courtney Kennedy, daughter of Robert Kennedy.

(c) ABC News vice president David Burke's former employment with Senator Ted Kennedy. (d) The fear of 20/20 producers that they would get the ax for embarrassing the Kennedy family, just as Roger Mudd was sidetracked from CBS because he dared to ask Teddy Kennedy about Chappaquiddick.

Several months ago, when the British Broadcasting Company spiked a program, it made international news, the British media were in an uproar, and British television went on strike in protest. The United States must be more accustomed to TV network censorship; ABC's cancelling of the Marilyn Monroe story caused scarcely a ripple.

A few weeks ago, People for the American Way received enormous television and press coverage for its news release on "Attacks on the Freedom to Learn." PAW particularly singled out for criticism "the national Far Right censorship network" (a "network" that exists only in PAW's paranoid imagination).

ABC is a real, not an imaginary, network. Its censorship of the Marilyn Monroe story kept that report from millions of Americans (in contrast to the sum total of the "censorship incidents" detailed by PAW, which, at most, affect only a few hundred persons). But don't hold your breath waiting for PAW to issue a report on "Attacks on the Freedom to Know About our Political Leaders" by "the National Far Left censorship network." Will the real censors please stand up?