“America’s Town Meeting of the Air: Should Our Ships Convoy Materials to England?” (May 8, 1941)

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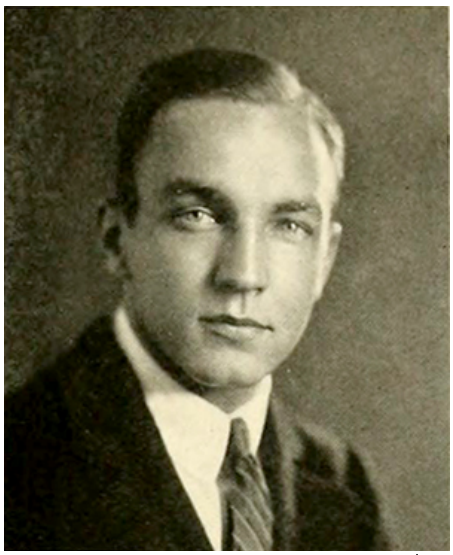
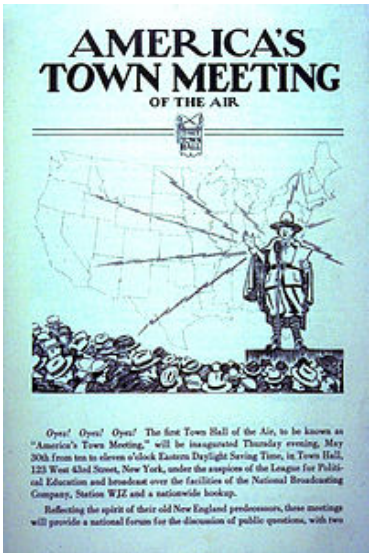
Essay by Cary O’Dell



A young George V. Denny



One of “Town Meeting’s” many publications

“America’s Town Meeting of the Air” was a long-running radio show, on the air from 1935 until 1956. It was created and hosted by George V. Denny, Jr., a former New York stage actor and the then current head of a New York City speaker’s bureau. The weekly program, aired over NBC and later ABC, had lofty ideals and aims. In the words of its host, its goal was “To consider the ways that freedom of speech and freedom of discussion can serve the purposes of American democracy.”

To achieve this goal, the format of “America’s Town Meeting” was pretty simple. True to its name, it attempted to hearken back to the local town meetings of Colonial times. Each episode even began with the ringing of a crier’s bell. Every week a contemporary political or social issue (handpicked by Denny) was selected and two experts with opposing viewers were brought in to debate the topic live on the air.

“Town Meeting” was not radio’s first debate program but it was innovative in that it opened its weekly discussion to live audience questions. “Town Meeting” broadcasts were always held in front of a live audience, often with up to 1,000 people in attendance. Once each of that week’s experts had their say, host Denny took to the audience to field their inquiries. This host-and-mike approach—truly democratic in its intent—was a precursor to such later TV talkers as “Donahue” and “Oprah.”

The particular installment of “Town Meeting” was aired May 8, 1941 and was one of several that year devoted to the escalating war in Europe. The specific issue at hand: should US ships be used to take items to the war-ravaged UK? Reinhold Niebuhr, chairman of the Union for Democratic Action, and John Flynn, New York chairman and a founder of the America First Committee, were the featured speakers. Niebuhr was pro; Flynn was con.

Reinhold Niebuhr (b. 1892) was an American theologian and is acknowledged as the author of the Serenity Prayer (“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change….”). After being ordained in 1915, Niebuhr headed his first church, Bethel Evangelical, in Detroit. During the 1920’s and ‘30’s both his congregation and his influence grew due his writing and speaking activities. During the 1930’s, Niebuhr attracted attention for taking on both John Dewey and Henry Ford (Niebuhr questioned the humanity of Ford’s assembly lines). In 1941, he co-

founded the Union for Democratic Action, an organization that was a precursor to the group Americans for Democratic Action. Throughout his life, Niebuhr often advocated for US involvement in foreign wars and conflicts, believing that US intervention could lead to a speedier resolution and, therefore, the end of suffering. He died in 1971.

In contrast, John Flynn (b. 1882) was a well-known and outspoken pacifist. A lawyer turned journalist, Flynn was one of the founders of the America First Committee. Founded in 1940, the organization was originally devoted to opposing FDR's foreign policies. Later, it was the US's leading voice against entering WWII. At its height, the organization had over 800,000 members. Flynn died in 1964.

At the outset of this "Town Meeting," each speaker was given 12 minutes to state his case. Used as we are now to short sound bytes and 140-characters or less communication, these lengthy, literate and prepared written statements, read aloud rather flatly and formally, come across as old-fashioned and often demanding to the listener's ear and attention. At times, they even seem quaint. Except for some murmurings from the audience and even the occasional applause break, each speaker's speech is uninterrupted.

Even after the hall is opened to questions, civility prevailed. Denny had strict rules about audience interaction: there was to be no name-calling, no obviously intoxicated questioners, and if someone asked a question that was too slanted or spoke out of turn (as happens in this broadcast) they were quickly ejected from the room. In this broadcast, Denny does even more than that with one unruly woman—he stops the broadcast in its tracks. "We won't go on with the meeting until you leave the hall," he says at one point before continuing, "Officer? This is a place for orderly discussion." Such sentiments and decorum of course are seldom the case today, examine any episode of "Jerry Springer" or "Maury Povich," or even most political debates, which have long since devolved to an anything-goes mentality.

However, this is not to say that exchanges could not get heated. If audience members weren't asking pointed questions, then speakers could be challenging each other. At one point in this installment, Mr. Flynn intones, "Once again, I say you are not interested in facts!"

During this broadcast, both participants do a good deal of flag-waving and both bring up Hitler and the Nazis with great frequency. While the two men agree in their alarm over the rising German threat, they differ on which approach is, in the end, the best for America at that point and time. Flynn, during his preamble, cites some statistics including a recent Gallup survey that states 80% of the country is against US involvement. The collective "boo's" and shouts in the hall from the audience however calls into question the accuracy of his report, at least among the New Yorkers in attendance at this particular broadcast.

US foreign policy was just one of the myriad of topics that "Town Meeting" addressed during its long lifespan. Other discussions asked: "Has the New Deal Promoted or Retarded Business Recovery?"; "Will the Machine Dominate Man?"; "Do We Have a Free Press?"; and "Should We Ignore Racial Differences?" Meanwhile, just a partial list of "Town Hall's" participants over the years reads like a Who's Who of the 20th century. They included: Langston Hughes, Dorothy Thompson, Eleanor Roosevelt, Carl Sandburg, Joseph McCarthy and Pearl Buck, among others.

Despite the verbal fireworks often apparent in his weekly broadcasts, creator/host/producer Denny took his role within this democratic experiment extremely seriously. He supported the formation of special "listener clubs" throughout the country, where local groups could gather, listen to the show and then have a live debate themselves. He annually published transcripts of programs in book form. And the beginning and ending of each broadcast always reminded listeners that they could send away for that week's transcript for $.10 (or, for $2.75, transcripts of the entire 26-episode season).

Today, such high-brow aspirations in the media are all too rare, if present at all. The majority of radio talk has become shock and TV talk has yielded to schlock. The legacy of "America's Town Meeting of the Air" is that it existed and existed when it did, at a time when the need for such intelligent, reserved discourse was so necessary. Its long-running success on the air then is both a testament and tribute to radio, present and ready to broadcast it out, and to a listening populace, there and willing to take it all in. Today, the survival of these programs are a unique view into the issues and opinions of the era.

Cary O'Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books "June Cleaver Was a Feminist!" (2014) and "Women Pioneers in Television" (1997). He also served as assistant editor of "The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2009) and "The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2010).