

# *The Open Mind:* Open for 50 Years...and Counting!

Richard Heffner's uninterrupted half-century  
of conversations with history makers.

By Frederick A. Jacobi

**F**ifty years ago last May a college history teacher named Richard D. Heffner launched a television discussion program, *The Open Mind*, on NBC's New York City flagship station. The topic was the American presidency and the guests included historians William Leuchtenburg and Allan Nevins and political scientists Richard Neustadt and Lawrence Chamberlain. *The Open Mind* is still on the air—now on public TV stations across the country—an extraordinary record for the generally shifting sands of television. Leuchtenburg, professor of history emeritus at the University of North Carolina, returned to the program in May 2006 and the topic was...The American presidency.

In the past half-century there have been over 1,500 *Open Mind* programs. In addition Heffner helped to establish and then ran New York City's first

educational television station; served for 20 years as chairman of the ratings board of the Motion Picture Association of America; produced three books; and since 1964 has been University Professor of Communications and Public Policy at Rutgers, the state university of New Jersey.

Asked who his favorite *Open Mind* guests were, he unhesitatingly identifies Martin Luther King, who appeared on the program in 1957. When this episode was rebroadcast recently, Virginia Heffernan wrote in *The New York Times* that "everything about the show is fascinating. First are the conventions of early television. The participants don't interrupt one another. They don't sloganeer. They don't thank the host, using his first name. They don't smile, joke or face the camera. Instead, *The Open Mind* puts on display a phenomenon now almost extinct on political shows: consensus."



Heffner (right) with New York Governor Averill Harriman (left) and Postmaster General James A. Farley (1954).

But Heffner also cherishes other memories. “I still *kvell* when I see Mario Cuomo,” he said recently. “Allan Bloom of the University of Chicago was so wonderfully articulate, even if I didn’t agree with him. I have the same feeling about Robert Bork. I did two programs with him after he was rejected for the Supreme Court; they were both intellectual feasts. I did a program with [former New York City mayor] Ed Koch after he had a heart attack; I asked him what his epitaph should be. He’d already been thinking about that. He replied: ‘He was fiercely proud of his Jewish faith. He fiercely defended the City of New York. And he fiercely loved the people of the City of New York. That’s my epitaph.’ I reminded him that when I asked the same question years before, when he was first elected mayor, he said that his epitaph should read ‘He was as good as Fiorello LaGuardia,’ because LaGuardia had set the standard.

“Every so often I have another favorite: Max Lerner and Malcolm X were brilliant,” Heffner added. He also cites the writer Marya Mannes, who talked about dysfunctional people in America; Norman Mailer, who had just come from a PEN meeting where he said outrageous things about women (“but he was civilized on *The Open Mind*, an excellent guest”); Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel and First Amendment Attorney Floyd Abrams, each of whom has been on the program more than a score of times; eminent medical scientists Jonas Salk and Lewis Thomas; Betty Friedan and her book, *The Fountain of Age* (“She tapped into the two mightiest veins of the 20th Century: feminism and ageism.”)

One recent guest was Supreme Court Associate Justice Stephen Breyer. Heffner asked him what high-school students should learn about the Constitution. “The Constitution is about creating institutions of government that are

democratic,” Breyer replied. “It is the way of translating the will of the people into statutes, into rules for their living together that are democratic. It’s a democracy that protects peoples’ basic liberties. We want to protect certain fundamental human rights and the Constitution does that.” In Heffner’s view, Breyer sees the Supreme Court’s job as being the greatest reflection of democracy.

### **Bill Moyers turns the tables on Dick Heffner.**

On May 13, 2006—the program’s 50th anniversary—the tables were turned when Bill Moyers traded seats with Heffner and asked him “What do you think is the key to listening?”

“Being a teacher,” Heffner replies. “It’s wanting to teach, meaning wanting to teach the audience, whatever audience that is.” And speaking of teachers, he recalls that “a great teacher by the name of ‘Doc’ Guernsey gave me a sense of the glory of American history” at DeWitt Clinton, then one of New York City’s few elite, competitive high schools.

“The airwaves belong to the American people,” Moyers said, “yet they’re in the control of large mega-media corporations that have no interest whatever in this democratic discourse you’re talking about. Why do we stand for it? Why are we so complacent, so passive?”

“I think we’re too fat and sassy,” Heffner replied. “We’re too satisfied, too busy with material things.”

In a recent interview he elaborated on his answer to Moyers’ question. “Why do we stand for the attempt—which is succeeding—to change our tax structure to favor the very, very, very wealthy?” he asked. “Why do we accept such outrageous things as blacks as second-class citizens? That flummoxes me. Thurgood Marshall

was a wonderful guest on *The Open Mind* and he always spoke frankly. But why have we for the most part had so little racial rebelliousness? Only during a few hot summers, and when the kids were fearful of being drafted, was there any extended civil disobedience.”

### **Giving New York City its first noncommercial TV station.**

Not long after Heffner launched *The Open Mind* on NBC’s New York City station, he became program director for the Metropolitan Educational Television Association, composed of leading educational and civic groups that built their own studio but begged, borrowed and bought air time for their educational programs from commercial stations. Later, leading New York citizens negotiated to buy Channel 13, then being operated by the commercial station WNTA-TV in Newark, New Jersey. At the time, New York was the largest American city without an educational station.

At the end of a two-year struggle—exacerbated in part by Governor Robert B. Meyner’s reluctance to have the outlet leave New Jersey—the transaction was completed at a cost of \$6,200,000. Dick Heffner was named vice-president and general manager of the Educational Broadcasting Corporation, new owner of Channel 13. After its inaugural broadcast, featuring Edward R. Murrow as master of ceremonies and FCC Commissioner Newton R. Minow as chief speaker, Jack Gould wrote in *The New York Times*: “Heffner has done superbly well in starting a new station at one fell swoop.” The arrangement lasted only a little more than a year, however, as policy differences with the station’s leadership led to his forced departure in 1963.

## What about those movie ratings? And how did he get that job?

When Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association of America, asked Heffner to chair the MPA's Classification and Ratings Administration (CARA), Heffner first turned him down, saying, "My mother didn't raise me to count nipples....I eventually took the job because I thought I could make a difference, that certain reforms could be effected. I took the job because I was a strong believer in voluntarism. I came away from my Hollywood years, however, no longer a strong believer in voluntarism. I am now pro-regulation, but decidedly *not* pro-censorship. There's a big difference."

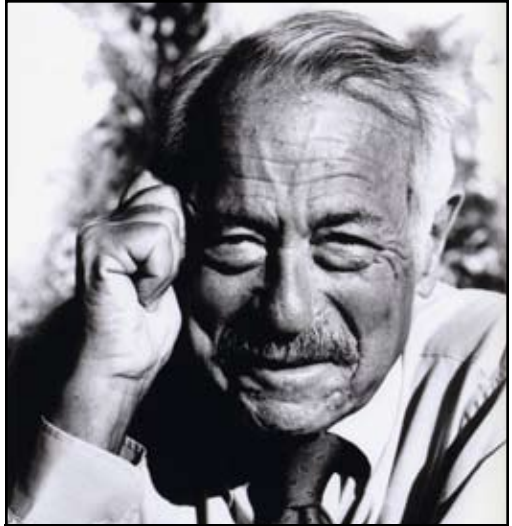
Heffner spent 20 years commuting nearly every week to the West Coast and when he left he said, "There are a lot of people in Hollywood who must be happy that I'm going. When you have people with money and power, selfishly backing films with scenes of imitable violence, how are parents around the country going to fight for truth? I believe there is a public interest and I don't think you can leave everything to the selfishness of the powerful and their spin doctors." He also believes that there has always been a greater sense of public service in broadcasting than in the Hollywood he discovered in the mid-1970s.

## And all those books...

Heffner is the author of *A Documentary History of the United States*, first published in 1952 and now in its expanded and updated seventh edition, and the editor of an abridged paperback edition of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America. As They Saw It* is a book derived from his broadcast conversations over the past half-century.



Eleanor Roosevelt presented Richard Heffner with a check for the Robert E. Sherwood Award to *The Open Mind* in 1957.



Richard Heffner now.

Contents of the *Documentary History* range from Tom Paine's "Common Sense," the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States to pronouncements by former Vice-President Spiro Agnew and former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. Asked about some of the later additions, Heffner said: "You can dislike the individuals involved but you have to recognize what truths there are in what they say and write. Agnew expressed anger at the media for their instant, negative analyses of major Administration talks. It's the curse of our time: there is no more public conversation. There is only public controversy."

When Bill Moyers asked if there is one

document that most eloquently expresses the American mind Heffner replied “I don’t think there’s any question but that it is the Declaration of Independence. But I have to tie it to the Constitution. Those two seminal documents cause us to go back and be proud. I don’t say that if you take those words literally then you will fully understand the American mind and the American spirit. But they are magnificent distillations of what the American mind was at that time.”

### **Backstage at *The Open Mind***

For the past 25 years Daphne Doelger has served as associate producer of *The Open Mind*. She invites each week’s guest—“someone who has piqued Mr. Heffner’s interest,” she says, “someone with a national reputation or expertise in their field.”

The program is underwritten by the Bluestein Family Foundation, the Rosalind P. Walter Foundation, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the Rudin Family Foundation, the Malkin Fund, the Carnegie Corporation and, from the corporate community, Mutual of America, which provides office space and facilities, “a wonderful boon,” Heffner says.

Another underwriter is Teachers College, Columbia University, which is assembling an online digital archive of *Open Mind* programs from the past 50 years ([www.theopenmind.tv](http://www.theopenmind.tv)). “As a form of ‘living history,’ *The Open Mind* Online Digital Archive brings hundreds of important conversations right into the classroom,” says former T.C. President Arthur Levine. Heffner notes that this project requires \$460,000 for completion, and in addition to his other duties he is hard at work raising this sum.

Heffner and his wife, Elaine, a

psychotherapist in private practice, have two sons: Daniel, a movie maker in Hollywood, and Andrew, an assistant district attorney, chief of the official corruption bureau in the office of New York City DA Robert Morgenthau. There are four grandchildren. The Heffners’ weekend retreat is a house on a lake which they can reach in 55 minutes (“without getting arrested”) from their New York City apartment.

As University Professor of Communications and Public Policy at Rutgers, Heffner is not a member of any specific faculty but rather says his academic interests hark back to the days when we had a real FCC, with the Fairness Doctrine and Equal Time in full force. Each fall he teaches a freshman honors seminar on Communications and Human Values and a lecture course on Mass Communications and the American Image. “We are increasingly what we see and hear,” he adds. “America’s mass media of communications make us what we are.”

The new season of *The Open Mind* has just been inaugurated by another table-turning show: Bill Baker, president of New York public-TV stations Channel 13 and 21, hosted an hour-long special with Dick Heffner as his guest.

“We’re privileged to have *The Open Mind* on Channel 13,” Baker said. “You might think that this 50-year-old program is an anachronism. But that’s what makes it great. It’s a treasure. There’s just nothing like this kind of television show. There’s not that privilege in this compressed, massive media world to reflect and be peaceful and calm.”

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