



THE TEDIUM TWINS

by Alexander Cockburn

Tonight: are there two sides to every question? Back to you, Robin.

(Tease)

ROBERT MACNEIL (voice over): *A Galilean preacher claims he is the Redeemer and says the poor are blessed. Should he be crucified?*

(Titles)

MACNEIL: *Good evening. The Roman procurator in Jerusalem is trying to decide whether a man regarded by many as a saint should be put to death. Pontius Pilate is*

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being urged by civil libertarians to intervene in what is seen here in Rome as being basically a local dispute. Tonight, the crucifixion debate. Jim?

JIM LEHRER: *Robin, the provinces of Judaea and Galilee have always been trouble spots, and this year is no exception. The problem is part religious, part political, and in many ways a mixture of both. The Jews believe in one god. Discontent in the province has been growing, with many local businessmen complain-*

ing about the tax burden. Terrorism, particularly in Galilee, has been on the increase. In recent months, a carpenter's son from the town of Nazareth has been attracting a large following with novel doctrines and faith healing. He recently entered Jerusalem amid popular acclaim, but influential Jewish leaders fear his power. Here in Alexandria the situation is seen as dangerous. Robin?

MACNEIL: *Recently in Jerusalem on a fact-finding mission for the Emperor's Emergency Task Force on Provincial Disorders was Quintilius Maximus. Mr. Maximus, how do you see the situation?*

MAXIMUS: *Robin, I had occasion to hear one of this preacher's sermons a few months ago and talk with his aides. There is no doubt in my mind that he is a threat to peace and should be crucified.*

MACNEIL: *Pontius Pilate should wash his hands of the problem?*

MAXIMUS: *Absolutely.*

MACNEIL: *I see. Thank you. Jim?*
LEHRER: *Now for a view from Mr. Simon, otherwise known as Peter. He is a supporter of Christ and has been standing by in a Jerusalem studio. Robin?*

MACNEIL: *Mr. Simon Peter, why do you support Christ?*

SIMON PETER: *He is the Son of God and presages the Second Coming. If I may, I would like to read some relevant passages from the prophet Isaiah.*

MACNEIL: *Thank you, but I'm afraid we'll have to break in there. We've run out of time. Good night, Jim.*

LEHRER: *Good night, Robin.*

MACNEIL: *Sleep well, Jim.*

LEHRER: *I hope you sleep well, too, Robin.*

MACNEIL: *I think I will. Well, good night again, Jim.*

LEHRER: *Good night, Robin.*

MACNEIL: *We'll be back again tomorrow night. I'm Robert MacNeil. Good night.*

ADMIRERS of the "MacNeil/Lehrer Report"—and there are many of them—often talk about it in terms normally reserved for unpalatable but nutritious breakfast foods: unallur-

ing, perhaps, to the frivolous news consumer, but packed full of fiber. It is commended as the sort of news analysis a serious citizen, duly weighing the pros and cons of world history, would wish to masticate before a thoughtful browse through the *Federalist Papers*, a chat with spouse about civic duties incumbent on them on the morrow, and final blameless repose.

The promotional material for the "Report" has a tone of reverence of the sort usually employed by people reading guidebooks to each other in a French cathedral: "The week-nightly newscast's unique mix of information, expert opinion, and debate has foreshadowed an industry trend toward longer and more detailed coverage, while at the same time helping to reveal a growing public appetite for informational television. Nearly 4.5 million viewers watch the 'MacNeil/Lehrer Report' each night during the prime viewing season. . . ."

"A program with meat on its bones," said the Association for Continuing Higher Education, in presenting its 1981 Leadership Award. "The 'MacNeil/Lehrer Report' goes beyond the commercial networks' rushed recital of news to bring us in-depth coverage of single issues. . . . There is a concern for ideas rather than video images. . . . and they accord us the unusual media compliment of not telling us what to think, but allowing us to draw our own conclusions after we weigh conflicting views."

And the handout concludes in triumph with some findings from a 1980 Roper poll: "Three quarters of those polled said they had discovered pros and cons on issues on which they had not had opinions beforehand."

ROBERT MACNEIL (voice over):
Should one man own another?

(Titles)

MACNEIL: *Good evening. The problem is as old as man himself. Do property rights extend to the absolute ownership of one man by another? Tonight, the slavery problem. Jim?*

LEHRER: *Robin, advocates of the continuing system of slavery argue that the practice has brought unparalleled benefits to the economy. They fear that new regulations being urged by reformers would undercut America's economic effectiveness abroad. Reformers, on the other hand, call for legally binding standards and even for a phased reduction in the slave force to something like 75 percent of its present size. Charlayne Hunter-Gault is in Charleston. Charlayne?*

HUNTER-GAULT: *Robin and Jim, I have here in Charleston Mr. Ginn, head of the Cottongrowers Association. Robin?*

MACNEIL: *Mr. Ginn, what are the arguments for unregulated slavery?*

GINN: *Robin, our economic data show that attempts at regulation of working hours, slave quarters, and so forth would reduce productivity and indeed would be widely resented by the slaves themselves.*

MACNEIL: *You mean, the slaves would not like new regulations? They would resent them?*

GINN: *Exactly. Any curbing of the slave trade would offer the Tsar dangerous political opportunities in western Africa, and menace the strategic slave-ship routes.*

LEHRER: *Thank you, Mr. Ginn. Robin?*

MACNEIL: *Thank you, Mr. Ginn and Jim. The secretary of the Committee for Regulatory Reform in Slavery is Eric Halfmeasure. Mr. Halfmeasure, give us the other side of the story.*

HALFMEASURE: *Robin, I would like to make one thing perfectly clear. We are wholeheartedly in favor of slavery. We just see abuses that diminish productivity and reduce incentives for free men and women to compete in the marketplace. Lynching, tarring and feathering, rape, lack of holidays, and that sort of thing. One recent study suggests that regulation could raise productivity by 15 percent.*

MACNEIL: *I see. Thank you, Mr. Halfmeasure. Mr. Ginn?*

GINN: *Our studies show the opposite.*

MACNEIL: *Jim?*

LEHRER: *Charlayne?*

HUNTER-GAULT: *A few critics of slavery argue that it should be abolished outright. One of them is Mr. Wilberforce. Mr. Wilberforce, why abolish slavery?*

WILBERFORCE: *It is immoral for one man . . .*

MACNEIL: *Mr. Wilberforce, we're running out of time, I'm afraid. Let me very quickly get some other points of view. Mr. Ginn, you think slavery is good?*

GINN: *Yes.*

MACNEIL: *And you, Mr. Halfmeasure, think it should be regulated.*

HALFMEASURE: *Yes.*

MACNEIL: *Well, I've got you to disagree, haven't I? (Laughter) That's all we've got time for tonight. Good night, Jim.*

LEHRER: *Good night, Robin.*

MACNEIL: *Did you sleep well last night?*

LEHRER: *I did, thank you.*

MACNEIL: *That's good. So did I. We'll be back again tomorrow night. I'm Robert MacNeil. Good night.*

THE "MacNeil/Lehrer Report" started in October 1975, in the aftermath of Watergate. It was a show dedicated to the proposition that there are two sides to every question, a valuable corrective in a period when the American people had finally decided that there were absolutely and definitely *not* two sides to every question. Nixon was a crook who had rightly been driven from office; corporations were often headed by crooks who carried hot money around in suitcases; federal officials were crooks who broke the law on the say-so of the president.

It was a dangerous moment, for a citizenry suddenly imbued with the notion that there is not only a thesis and antithesis, but also a synthesis, is a citizenry capable of all manner of harm to the harmonious motions of the status quo.

Thus came the "MacNeil/Lehrer Report," sponsored by public-television funds and by the most powerful corporate forces in America, in the form of Exxon, "AT&T and the Bell System," and other upstanding bodies. Back to Sunday school

went the excited viewers, to be instructed that reality, as conveyed to them by television, is not an exciting affair of crooked businessmen and lying politicians but a serious continuum in which parties may disagree but in which all involved are struggling manfully and disinterestedly for the public weal.

The narcotizing, humorless properties of the "MacNeil/Lehrer Report," familiar to anyone who has felt fatigue creep over him at 7:40 Eastern time, are crucial to the show. Tedium is of the essence, since the all-but-conscious design of the program is to project vacuous dithering ("And now, for another view of Hitler . . .") into the mind of the viewer, until he is properly convinced that there is not one answer to "the problem," but two or even three, and that since two answers are no better than none, he might as well not bother with the problem at all.

The techniques employed by the show enhance this distancing and anesthetizing. The recipe is unvarying. MacNeil and Lehrer exchange modest goblets of information with each other about the topic under discussion. Then, with MacNeil crouching—rather like Kermit the Frog in old age—down to the left and peering up, a huge face appears on the screen and discussion is under way. The slightest discommoding exchange, some in-temperate observation on the part of the interviewee, causes MacNeil to bat the ball hastily down to Washington, where Lehrer sedately sits with his interviewee. By fits and starts, with Jim batting back to Robin and Robin batting across to Charlayne, the program lurches along. The antagonists are rarely permitted to joust with one another and ideally are sequestered on their large screens. Sometimes, near the end of the show, the camera will reveal that these supposed antagonists are in fact sitting chummily, shoulder to shoulder, around the same table as Lehrer—thus indicating to the viewer that, while opinions may differ, all are united in general decency of purpose. Toward the very end, MacNeil's true role becomes increasingly exposed as he

desperately tries to suppress debate and substantive argument, with volley after volley of "We're nearly out of time," "Congressman, in ten seconds could you . . .," and the final, relieved "That's all for tonight."

It's even important that MacNeil and Lehrer say good night to each other so politely every evening. In that final, sedate nocturnal exchange everything is finally resolved, even though nothing has been resolved. We can all go to bed now.

And so to bed we go. The pretense is that viewers, duly presented with both sides of the case, will spend the next segment of the evening weighing the pro against the con and coming up with the answer. It is, in fact, enormously difficult to recall anything that anyone has ever said on a "MacNeil/Lehrer Report," because the point has been to demonstrate that since everything can be contradicted, nothing may be worth remembering. The show praised above all others for content derives its attraction entirely from form: the unvarying illustration that if one man can be found to argue that cannibalism is bad, another can be found to argue that it is not.

Actually, this is an overstatement. "MacNeil/Lehrer" hates such violent extremes, and, by careful selection of the show's participants, the show tries to make sure that the viewer will not be perturbed by any views overly critical of the political and business establishment.

ROBERT MACNEIL (voice over):
Should one man eat another?

(Titles)

MACNEIL: *Good evening. Reports from the Donner Pass indicate that survivors fed upon their companions. Tonight, should cannibalism be regulated? Jim?*

LEHRER: *Robin, the debate pits two diametrically opposed sides against each other: the Human Meat-eaters Association, who favor a free market in human flesh, and their regulatory opponents in Congress and the consumer movement. Robin?*

MACNEIL: *Mr. Tooth, why eat human flesh?*

TOOTH: *Robin, it is full of protein*

and delicious too. Without human meat, our pioneers would be unable to explore the West properly. This would present an inviting opportunity to the French, who menace our pioneer routes from the north.

MACNEIL: *Thank you. Jim?*

LEHRER: *Now for another view of cannibalism. Bertram Brussell Sprout is leading the fight to control the eating of animal fats and meats. Mr. Sprout, would you include human flesh in this proposed regulation?*

SPROUT: *Most certainly, Jim. Our studies show that some human flesh available for sale to the public is maggot-ridden, improperly cut, and often incorrectly graded. We think the public should be protected from such abuses.*

MACNEIL: *Some say it is wrong to eat human flesh at all. Mr. Prodnose, give us this point of view.*

PRODNOSE: *Robin, eating people is wrong. We say . . .*

MACNEIL: *I'm afraid we're out of time. Good night, Jim, etc., etc.*

TRUDGING back through the "MacNeil/Lehrer" scripts, the hardy reader will soon observe how extraordinarily narrow is the range of opinion canvassed by a show dedicated to dispassionate examination of the issues of the day. The favored blend is usually a couple of congressmen or senators, barking at each other from either side of the fence, corporate chieftains, government executives, ranking lobbyists, and the odd foreign statesman. The mix is ludicrously respectable, almost always heavily establishment in tone. Official spokesmen of trade and interest groups are preferred over people who only have something interesting to say.

This constriction of viewpoint is particularly conspicuous in the case of energy, an issue dear to the "MacNeil/Lehrer Report." "Economics of Nuclear Power," for example, was screened on November 25, 1980, and purported to examine why a large number of nuclear utilities were teetering on the edge of bankruptcy. Mustered to ponder the issue we had the following rich and

varied banquet: the president of the Virginia Electric and Power Company; the vice president (for nuclear operations) of Commonwealth Edison of Chicago; a vice president (responsible for scrutinizing utility investments) at Paine Webber; and the president of the Atomic Industrial Forum. The viewers of "MacNeil/Lehrer" did not, you may correctly surmise, hear much critical opinion about nuclear power on that particular evening.

On May 1, 1981, the "Report" examined "the problems and prospects of getting even more oil out of our ground." Participants in the discussion about oil glut included some independent oil drillers, and "experts" from Merrill Lynch, Phillips Petroleum Company, and the Rand Corporation.

At least on May 1 the viewers had more than one person saying the same thing ("regulation is bad"). On March 27 they were invited to consider the plans of the Reagan administration for a rebuilt navy. The inquiring citizen was offered a trip around the battleship *Iowa* in the company of MacNeil, and an extremely meek interview, conducted by both MacNeil and Lehrer, of the Secretary of the Navy, John Lehman. No dissenting views were allowed to intrude, beyond the deferential inquiries of MacNeil and Lehrer, both of whom, it should be said, are very bad interviewers, usually ignorant and always timid. By contrast, Ted Koppel of ABC's "Nightline"—a far better show, covering the same sort of turf—is a veritable tiger in interrogatory technique.

The spectrum of opinion thus offered is one that ranges from the corporate right to cautious center-liberal. One should not be misled, by the theatrical diversity of views deployed on the program, into thinking that a genuinely wide spectrum of opinion is permitted. Moldering piles of "MacNeil/Lehrer" transcripts before me on my desk attest to the fact.

The show would be nothing without Robert ("Robin") MacNeil. Canadian, of course, with a layer of high seriousness so thick it sticks to the screen, MacNeil anchors the

show to tedium and yanks at the hawser every time the craft shows any sign of floating off into uncharted waters. He seems to have learned—on the evidence of his recent memoir, *The Right Place at the Right Time**—the elements of his deadly craft in London, watching the BBC and writing for Reuters.

MacNeil is a man so self-righteously boring that he apparently had no qualms in setting down the truth about his disgraceful conduct in Dallas on November 22, 1963. MacNeil was there covering Kennedy's visit for NBC. The shots rang out and he sprinted to the nearest telephone he could find. It so happens that he dashed, without knowing its significance, into the Texas Book Depository: "As I ran up the steps and through the door, a young man in shirt sleeves was coming out. In great agitation I asked him where there was a phone. He pointed inside to an open space where another man was talking on a phone situated next to a pillar and said, 'Better ask him.' I ran inside. . . ."

Later, MacNeil writes, "I heard on television that a young man called Oswald, arrested for the shooting, worked at the Texas Book Depository and had left by the front door immediately afterward. Isn't that strange, I told myself. He must have been leaving just about the time I was running in. . . ."

Later still, William Manchester demonstrated that there was a 95 percent certainty that MacNeil had met Oswald. Any reporter, any human, with anything other than treacle in his veins, would naturally make much of the coincidence and divert children, acquaintances, and indeed a wider public, with interesting accounts of Oswald's demeanor at this significant moment. Not MacNeil. With Pecksniffian virtuousness, he insists that the encounter was merely "possible," and that "it is titillating, but it doesn't matter very much."

Such is the aversion to storytelling, the sodden addiction to the mundane, that produced "MacNeil/

Lehrer." Like an Exocet missile, MacNeil can spot a cliché, a patch of ennui, and home in on it with dreadful speed. Witness his proclamation of political belief:

Instinctively, I find it more satisfying to belong with those people in all countries who put their trust in Man's best quality, his rational intellect and its ability to recognize and solve problems. It is distressing that the recent course of American politics has caused that trust to be ridiculed or dismissed as some sort of soft-headedness, inappropriate to a virile nation confronting the dangerous world. It will be unfortunate if being a "liberal" remains an embarrassment, if young Americans should begin to believe that conservatives are the only realists.

Each has its absurd extreme: liberalism tending to inspire foolish altruism and unwarranted optimism; conservatism leading to unbridled selfishness and paranoia. Taken in moderation, I prefer the liberal impulse: it is the impulse behind the great forces that have advanced mankind, like Christianity. I find it hard to believe that Jesus Christ was a political conservative, whatever views are espoused in his name today.

For all my instinctive liberalism, my experience of politics in many countries has not left me wedded to any particular political parties. Rather, I have found myself politically dining à la carte, on particular issues.

This is the mind-set behind "MacNeil/Lehrer." "I have my own instinctive aversion to being snowed," he writes at another point. "The more I hear everyone telling me that some public person is wonderful, the more I ask myself, Can he really be all that wonderful? Conversely [for MacNeil there is always a "conversely" poking its head round the door], I never believe anyone can be quite as consistently terrible as his reputation."

Hitler? Attila the Hun? Pol Pot? Nixon? John D. Rockefeller? I'm afraid that's all we have time for tonight. We've run out of time. Good night. ■

* Little, Brown, \$13.95.