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ABC "THIS WEEK WITH DAVID BRINKLEY"
WITH HOST, DAVID BRINKLEY
JOINED BY SAM DONALDSON AND GEORGE WILL
AND TOM WICKER

POLITICAL DISCUSSION

SUNDAY, JULY 30, 1989

MR. BRINKLEY: Back in Lyndon Johnson's day, the US Government set up an agency to give a little bit of money, it turned out in the beginning, and now it's more, to various aspects of the arts -- music, dance, painting, so on. It has grown substantially now, and this week Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, rather a conservative fellow, was offended by an art show, done by Robert Mapplethorpe or Maplethorpe? Does anyone? Huh?

MR. WILL: Mapplethorpe.

MR. BRINKLEY: Mapplethorpe, which he thought was vulgar, indecent, so on and so on. So he has a bill in the Senate to disallow federal money for art that is, as he puts it, what was his term? What were his adjectives?

MR. WICKER: Well, he used "indecent" and "obscene."

MR. BRINKLEY: Cover all bases.

MR. WILL: And, I think, "offensive" to other groups --

MR. DONALDSON: Or that offends any group, ethnic --

MR. WICKER: Religious or non-religious.

MR. DONALDSON: What have you.

MR. BRINKLEY: So, what's this going to do?

MR. DONALDSON: Well, here's the problem. In 1965, I think it was, when the national endowment was created, it was opposed by some Republicans in Congress. But do you know why? Those Republicans opposed it because they didn't want government to try to

tell artists what to write or to paint, or what sort of poem to compose. And they worried that if there was a national endowment dispensing money, government would get its big hand in there on content.
Now, these to me, were the true conservatives. That's the true conservative position. A Jesse Helms, who wants to censor, who wants to prevent artists from any sort of free expression, which we can look at and say, "Ah, I don't want to watch that, that's vulgar." That's our privilege. But to try to prevent them from being exhibited, I think, is not the conservative position, that's simply censorship.

MR. WICKER: But Sam, that overlooks the question of government financing. I mean, of course your position is right in terms of the freedom of expression, but I think there is a problem here when the taxpayers are paying. And I think it's bound to be that at some point, if you are financing expressions, whether it's painting, or writing, or whatever, that anger and baffle the people who are paying for it, then you're going to get into trouble. And my own view is, while I yield to no one in my low regard for Senator Helms, or for this amendment that he's put in --

MR. DONALDSON: Do you want to arm wrestle over it?

MR. WICKER: -- nonetheless it seems to me that this kind of controversy was bound to arise out of this sooner or later. And I think what you'll find is that the federal government ultimately, no matter what procedure for awarding grants is adopted, the federal government will support art that is somewhere within the broadest boundaries. And what I believe is sometimes referred to as "cutting edge art," is going to have to be financed privately. I don't believe the taxpayers will do that ultimately.

MR. BRINKLEY: So what you're saying is government never will give money to art that is -- what's the term -- avant-garde?

MR. WICKER: No, I wouldn't want to say that because avant-garde art is itself not necessarily --

MR. BRINKLEY: Well, you can say that if you want.

MR. WICKER: -- couldn't necessarily be accused of being obscene or indecent. But the kind of art that is going to be, in terms of not one's perceptions so much, but in terms of one's beliefs -- offensive to great numbers of people, I think the federal government will always have difficulty financing that.

MR. WILL: I would disagree with you. Sam, in this particular

-- and I think I'm on your side in this -- but, to refuse to subsidize an activity, does not amount to censoring the activity. And the National Endowment for the Arts has a pretty good reputation in the 24 years they've given 80,000 grants -- about 20 of them have caused some kind of turmoil.

Senator Helm's amendment may pass, because who wants, in this age of negative advertising, to be hit with a campaign commercial later on that you're for sado-masochistic photography and that sort of thing. But, if this little episode has not let say, a chilling effect, but calls the endowment back to a kind of prudence, that's a good thing. The problem is not just offensive art. It's art -- I think you used the word baffles the public. It's nonsense art -- what's called post-minimalist art.

I mean the examples are wonderful. There was an exhibit in the Tate Gallery in London a few years ago that was a pile of bricks. Only no one told the janitor, and he cleaned it up, took away this priceless piece of art. There was another one in the Tate Gallery, it was a child's
bathtub and no one told him it was an exhibit and they cooled beer in it. So, I mean art gets to be very difficult --

MR. BRINKLEY: Does any -- let me ask one question. Does anyone here feel qualified to say what art is now?

MR. DONALDSON: Art is what you think it is. It's what -- it's like that great Potter Stewart (?) thing about pornography, "I know it when I see it." You know I may come in your home and look at a painting that you just think is wonderful and think to myself, "Why, I wouldn't put that in the doghouse." That -- we may have some common ground if both of you are saying that government money does carry with it the strings of censorship whether it is expressed directly or whether it is that great numbers of voters who provide this money through their taxes are not going to stand for it. Yes, I understand and that may be an argument, but the original Republicans were correct on we might not have government funding.

MR. WICKER: I think that's so and I think we ought not to overlook here in this controversy while we're focusing on art that the real substance of it may be politics because this amendment, at least by the assessments that I've read, is probably not going to pass. But if anybody can be shown to have defeated it then that's an issue that can be used against him as you said.

MR. WILL: Well, --

MR. WICKER: I think not unlike the flag burning issue, this is

an effort to create an issue that could be used later on.

MR. DONALDSON: But you know -- go ahead, George.

MR. WILL: But to give Jesse Helms his due, I mean he did say, "Look, if someone wants to write dirty words on the men's room wall, there's no reason why the taxpayers ought to buy the crayons." There's some rough truth in that.

MR. BRINKLEY: Well, does that settle that?

MR. WILL: Yes.

MR. BRINKLEY: Okay. (Laughter) Fine, but --

MR. WICKER: So long as it's not a good word for Jesse Helms. (Laughter)

MR. BRINKLEY: He's from your homestate and mine.

MR. DONALDSON: And yours, David.

MR. BRINKLEY: And mine, right. Now, we've seen a bit of a turnaround in the Senate on the subject, George, that you've written a column about today, the capital gains tax. That is a tax on something you sell that has increased in value, I think that's what capital gains is. Some countries don't tax capital gains at all. We used to tax it at a much lower rate than income. We now tax it at the same rate as income and President Bush has pushed since day one, even in his campaign to lower the tax on capital gains. Is this a good idea? I --

MR. WILL: Well, in the first place --

MR. BRINKLEY: If so, what's good about it?

MR. WILL: -- it's a good idea for the President to try and fulfill one of the very few substantive commitments made during the last campaign which is to try and cut this. I think it's worth the try. I mean the theory is that if you cut that people will, A, first of all there'll be a rush to liquidate some capital and move it into other areas, perhaps more productive areas in the economy. And that will bring an immediate gusher of revenues to the government and that's one of the prime motivations here. It's a way to help dodge the Gramm-Rudman guillotine yet again. But the theory is --

MR. WICKER: For only a year or two really, I guess.

MR. WILL: -- that -- for only a year or two, that's right. Well, but some people think it will institutionalize a higher velocity of capital and make growth more rapid anyway, but be that as it may, this is -- it's hard to argue this now because it is trickle down economics. They're saying basically now, obviously it helps the normal walking around American who sells farm or house or a nest egg of securities, but also basically this is saying, "We are going to cut this to energize the investing capital-holding elite" -- in a word of one syllable, the rich.

MR. DONALDSON: Yes, it is a terrific idea if you're wealthy, I mean, because you just get wealthier. But it's not a good idea if you're kind of the average to lower-average taxpayer.

MR. WILL: Well, what --

MR. DONALDSON: Now, the argument is made that these people sell homes. You know why they sell homes? Usually to buy another home. And of course the tax law already takes care of that, because when they roll over their investment they don't have to pay taxes on it. The average middle class person doesn't sell a home because they want to take the $100,000 or $300,000 and go out and buy a yacht.

MR. BRINKLEY: It's all very nice to say this is a benefit to the rich, but essentially --

MR. DONALDSON: Well, it is --

MR. BRINKLEY: Well now, wait a minute.

MR. DONALDSON: -- a benefit to the rich.

MR. BRINKLEY: When your Aunt Minnie sells a house and makes a little money on it, that's a capital gain.

MR. DONALDSON: What does she do with the money?

MR. BRINKLEY: She doesn't have to be rich.

MR. DONALDSON: What does -- what does that have to do --

MR. BRINKLEY: It's up to her. She can buy another house, or she can --

MR. DONALDSON: Well, she'd better buy another house, or old Aunt Minnie's not going to have anyplace to live.

MR. WILL: Well, or go into an apartment --

MR. DONALDSON: Unless, of course, she's wealthy, in which case she's got to --

MR. WICKER: Can I make a couple of points here?

MR. BRINKLEY: Now hold on, hold on. Capital gain essentially is inflation. Inflation.

MR. DONALDSON: That's right.

MR. BRINKLEY: Government helps to create inflation, and then taxes it. Is that fair?

MR. DONALDSON: Well, if government has to buy things that have had an inflationary rise, who's going to pay for it?

MR. BRINKLEY: Well, the same people who've always paid for it --

(Cross talk.)

MR. WICKER: But you have just suggested that --

MR. DONALDSON: No, no -- no, no. You've just suggested that the people that have had inflation, taxpayers, come up on them, they shouldn't have to pay accordingly. But if the government has to buy a new B-2, or a new battleship with inflation --

MR. WICKER: No, no --

MR. DONALDSON: We're not going to pay for it.

MR. WICKER: I disagree --

MR. BRINKLEY: Tom, what?

MR. WICKER: -- that capital gain is necessarily inflation. There is some --

MR. BRINKLEY: Well, a lot of it is.

MR. WICKER: -- real gain, on occasion, but beyond that point, in the first place it seems to me this is a bad idea, because it was part of the arrangement made when we had the big tax reform a few years ago, this was one of the so-called loopholes given up in order to justify the decline in the overall tax rate. That's the first

point.

The second point is that I don't really believe that on the broader scale, this will stimulate investment. That was the argument made for the big tax cut of 1981, and even if it did stimulate investment then, why should we now have to have another break for people in order to stimulate investment?

And the third thing is, and I think this is the question that really concerns me most, and that is that there's a very widespread feeling in this country anyway that the rich get the breaks. And even if this is not, strictly speaking, a break for the rich -- although I believe it is -- I don't think we need to create an impression now on people on a very broad scale that the Congress and the President are advocating and providing another tax break for the rich when the poor people aren't getting anything like that -- the middle class --

MR. WILL: Well this, again, let's -- the argument is that this will energize the rich, that the rich are, maybe vulgar, maybe the source of --

MR. WICKER: Well, that was the argument in 1981. Why do we have to energize them all over again?

MR. WILL: Well the question is, is it working and will it work? This -- I mean, I'd just like to have it discussed more as from an empirical economic question, rather than sort of a priori moral position, that we don't want the rich to get --

(Cross talk.)

MR. DONALDSON: The interesting political thing, Tom --

MR. WICKER: Well, I don't think that's an a priori question, if you're not rich. Listen --

MR. WILL: One way you get rich is economic bounty.

MR. WICKER: -- I could sell some stock, but I'm not going to go and invest in a corporation --

MR. DONALDSON: The political -- the interesting political --

MR. WICKER: I just play the game.

MR. DONALDSON: -- equation here is whether the Democrats are going to get anything for this. Danny Rostenkowski, Chairman of the

Ways and Means Committee, a few weeks back sort of suggested he might go for this, but the tradeoff was that Bush would go for some real taxation.

MR. WICKER: Well, that's right.

MR. DONALDSON: Now, we don't know whether Bush is going to have to produce the real taxation --

(Crosstalk.)

MR. BRINKLEY: Don't even know yet if this is going to become law.

MR. DONALDSON: That's right.

MR. BRINKLEY: So, while we wait breathlessly the outcome -- (laughs) -- of this dispute, what --

MR. DONALDSON: And Aunt Tillie.

MR. BRINKLEY: -- this week there were votes in Congress on the Secretary of -- on the budget the Secretary of Defense made up and they cut it to ribbons. George, what's going on?

MR. WILL: Well, one thing that's going on, they put back in two weapon systems the Secretary wants to kill. It's an interesting reversal of roles. The Republicans are supposing wanting to overrun the country but as the Washington Post says in an editorial this morning, the Democrats don't like the weapons but they like the jobs, so they'll take the weapons because they're made by American laborers. With regard to other weapon systems they trimmed money from the B-2. In other words, they're going to do it, but do it in the worst possible way, which is to say make every unit cost more expensive by stretching it out; then, they'll come back next year and say, "Good God, the costs have gone up." They voted against a lot of money to make the MX mobile and voted to kill the Midgetman, which suggests that they think that our missiles are deployed adequately now. And no one thinks that.

MR. DONALDSON: Well, I think Congress is applying the Willie Sutton rule to the Defense Department. Wilie Sutton, the bank robber, asked why he robbed banks, said that's where the money is. Congress has discovered that this defense budget that Casper Weinberger just kept as high as he could, and Ronald Reagan, I don't want to forget him --now it's where the money is and they're going to fund their own projects --

MR. BRINKLEY: There's no danger of your forgetting Ronald Reagan.

MR. DONALDSON: No one can forget Ronald Reagan and properly so. And so they're going to slash it to get the money for other --

MR. BRINKLEY (?): Some of us would like to.

MR. DONALDSON: -- oh please -- before other, other departments. As far as the B-2 is concerned, I don't know why we need a manned bomber. By the time the manned bomber gets to the Soviet Union, whether it's the B-2 or the B-1, if we haven't blown them to you-know-what with our missiles, what have we spent all these billions of dollars on the missiles for?

MR. WILL: To prevent war.

MR. BRINKLEY: Anyone care to answer that question in the remaining ten seconds?

MR. WILL: Yes.

MR. BRINKLEY: George?

MR. WILL: We have the missiles and the bombers so that they won't have to be used to prevent war -- it's called deterrence and it has worked.

MR. DONALDSON: And we have to have ten times enough?

MR. BRINKLEY: All right. Well, Sam, we'll have to put it up another time. Time is up.

MR. DONALDSON: Thank you for your views, Tom.

MR. BRINKLEY: Thank you all very much. Thank you.

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