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The Philosopher King and the Creation of NPR.

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Citation	Oney, Steve. 2014. "The Philosopher King and the Creation of NPR." Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy Discussion Paper Series #D-87 (July 2014).
Published Version	http://shorensteincenter.org/d87-oney/
Accessed	February 16, 2015 9:39:01 PM EST
Citable Link	http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:12872089
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Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy

Discussion Paper Series

#D-87, July 2014

The Philosopher King and the Creation of NPR

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HARVARD Kennedy School

SHORENSTEIN CENTER

on Media, Politics and Public Policy

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This is an excerpt from Steve Oney's forthcoming book about NPR, to be published by Simon & Schuster.

Hulking and unkempt, typically clad in denim and shit-kickers, Jeff Kamen was referred to around the offices of National Public Radio as El Lobo. He came from the world of big-market rock 'n roll news. During the late sixties at Chicago's WCFL, a 50,000-watter that blasted music across the Midwest, he'd race to crime scenes and press conferences in an Olds Cutlass, the doors bearing the station call letters in green, purple, red, and gold. His idea was to be out among them, and his aim was to produce pieces that emerged seamlessly from WCFL's play list. To him, stories weren't all that different from Buffalo Springfield or Rolling Stones songs. Everything he did was antic and driven by a beat, and while he numbered both cops and Black Panthers among his friends, he'd take on anyone. "He would talk back to Mayor Richard J. Daley," said Jeff Rosenberg, a fellow member of NPR's original staff who as a Northwestern student had been a fan of the reporter. "Most of us thought he would end up dead in an alley." Instead, WCFL fired Kamen. He did not leave quietly, telling *The Chicago American* that the station's manager accused him of putting too many "spics and niggers" on the air. Liberal Illinois congressman Abner Mikva quoted Kamen to this effect in *The Congressional Record*, declaring, "Last week a bright young radio newscaster lost his job in Chicago—not because he was faithless to the traditions of integrity, rather because he took them seriously." On the morning of May 3, 1971, Kamen, the most improbable participant in an improbable new enterprise in American broadcasting, stood at the intersection of the Southwest Freeway and Maine Avenue near Washington, D.C.'s Tidal Basin, ready to go to work. Weeks earlier, NPR executives had picked this Monday to introduce their firstborn, *All Things Considered*. "I felt sorry for the poor bastards," Kamen would say later. "They put a pin in a calendar, not having any idea." But there was no turning back. The ad in *The New York Times* was unambiguous: "The radio revolution starts at 5: NPR."

What the men and women behind the fledgling organization could not have foreseen was that a group calling itself the Mayday Tribe would choose May 3 to stage a protest intended to shut down the American government. Their objective was to bring an end to the Vietnam War. As the sun rose 20,000 of them took to Washington's streets. Most were peaceful, a few carried Vietcong flags, and a fringe wielded stones, bottles, and bricks. They were met not only by 5,100 D.C. police officers and 1,400 National Guardsmen, but

also some 8,000 Army regulars who'd come in by transport plane and truck convoy from as far away as Ft. Bragg, North Carolina. The show of force was at the direction of the president. No one, Richard Nixon vowed, would be allowed to disrupt business in the nation's capital.

By 9 a.m. Washington resembled a battlefield. The protesters' intention was to control the bridges and primary roads over which government employees needed to travel to reach their offices. In response, the police and the military—cops in white helmets with visors down, National Guardsmen carrying rifles with fixed bayonets, Army troops swooping in by helicopter—sought to keep these pulse points open. They did so by moving on foot or by motorcycle through the demonstrators, spraying tear gas and making mass arrests. Soon 7,000 people were in custody. The number was so overwhelming that lawmen transformed practice fields at Robert F. Kennedy Stadium into gigantic, outdoor holding pens. Enormous clouds of acrid haze hung over the city.

Misfits, castoffs, and dreamers, the National Public Radio reporters who joined Kamen in covering the demonstration were almost as unlikely as he was. Jim Russell, a rotund 23-year-old who'd done a tour in Vietnam for United Press International (UPI) and possessed a gruff evenhandedness, took up a position at a traffic circle opposite the Lincoln Memorial. Stephen Banker, an older freelancer (Harvard, 1955) who contributed sporadically to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), was at the Pentagon. Mike Waters, a veteran of both commercial and college radio best known for his melodious voice, staked out the mall. The sole advice that Bill Siemering, NPR's programming director, gave his charges was "that they filter what they saw through who they were." In truth, however, nothing could have prepared them. Almost immediately, Kamen was detained by the police, but he wasn't held long. As he would tell it, an official from Chicago's Daley administration interceded, bearing credentials from President Nixon. At some point, Waters handed over his press pass to a young demonstrator to keep the kid from being arrested. Meanwhile, a cop gassed Russell. Protesters urged him to urinate into a handkerchief then hold it over his nose. The ammonia, they said, would neutralize the poison. Russell replied, "I'd rather die."

It was chaos, but no matter how unguided and overmatched, the NPR reporters retained the presence of mind to keep their lightweight Sony TC-100 cassette tape recorders rolling. They interviewed protestors, police, and office workers. They calmly described the mayhem unfurling around them. Most telling, they employed their

equipment to collect huge gouts of ambient sound, the discordant melodies of Washington's largest demonstration against the Vietnam War.

National Public Radio was headquartered at the Cafritz Building, a non-descript structure dating from the late 1940s at 1625 Eye Street, about a block from the White House. Although this was a temporary home, the network had invested in a sleek Master Control room, superb Scully reel-to-reel recording machines, and high-end Neumann microphones. Presiding over everything was NPR president Don Quayle, a good-hearted but shrewd Utah Mormon with roots in both Midwestern college radio (he'd managed the station at Ohio State) and public broadcasting (WGBH in Boston). The engineering staff, a buttoned-down bunch, reported to the authoritarian operations chief, George Geesey, a veteran of WAMU in Washington. The programming staff included a few experienced journalists (Cleve Mathews, the news director, was a former editor at *The New York Times*), but it consisted mostly of scruffy young men in jeans and attractive young women in mini-skirts. They answered to the person who more than any other invented NPR.

Bill Siemering looked as if he were a sociology professor at a second-rate junior college. Tall and stoop-shouldered with pale blue eyes, a shock of thinning blond hair, and a reddish beard, he owned a tie but rarely wore it. In his view, a yellow corduroy sports jacket, a plain shirt, and khakis were dressy enough, even in the nation's capital. Yet, as unimpressive as the 36-year-old programming director appeared, he was a charismatic figure, known for cheerfully fervid pronouncements. "Let's hold hands and run a race" was a favorite. Siemering meant that the communal and the competitive could coexist. This intoxicated those staffers who heard in it what they wanted to believe.

Siemering envisioned something audacious for the premiere of *All Things Considered*. He would lead the show with a 21-minute documentary on the day's events in Washington pieced together from the audio his people collected in the field. At ABC or NBC, such a production would take a week. He was going to turn it around in a few hours. Kamen, Waters, and Russell returned to the newsroom about noon and began dubbing from cassettes onto tape reels. It was insanity, but it was also inspired. We can do this, Siemering insisted. Primary sources, multiple perspectives, a narrative not just

enhanced by but at times solely advanced by sound—it was what NPR would stand for. Waters, in addition to his vocal skills, was an accomplished editor. As he cut and spliced the material, a band of engineers, researchers, reporters, and wannabe reporters—among them Rosenberg, Linda Wertheimer, Susan Stamberg, Carolyn Jensen, Rich Firestone, Barbara Newman, and Kati Marton—fussed over feature stories that would fill out the broadcast. Meantime, Jack Mitchell, a Ph.D. who had strayed into radio, polished the news summary he would deliver at some point in the program.

In the midst of all this, yet somehow removed, sat *All Things Considered's* first host, Robert Conley. Forty-two and graying, Conley was a former foreign correspondent for NBC and *The New York Times*, but like so many newsmen of his generation, he seemed as sheepish about his background as he was proud. He loved to talk about world leaders he'd met in Cairo and other exotic spots, but at the same time he disparaged straight journalism. His generation of reporters was uptight and out of it. What mattered in the new world was to be loose and in the moment, to be spontaneous. That meant dispensing with notes and scripts. Conley took his place in NPR's glassed-in studio for the debut of its flagship show with only a few basic facts in his head about the day's events. He would wing it.

At 5 p.m. sharp, Conley intoned, "From National Public Radio in Washington, I'm Robert Conley with *All Things Considered*." The program's first theme song—a piping melody composed by Don Voegeli and played on a Moog synthesizer—wafted from radios in 90 cities that boasted NPR stations. Not surprisingly, the demonstration documentary was not ready. So Conley extemporized. He had a professional style, and he was sufficiently informed to be able to report the real news from the protest: Despite the madness, government functions had not come to a halt. Yet, as the minutes passed, he ran out of material and began to stumble and pad. (Robert F. Kennedy Stadium, he told listeners, was "named for Senator Robert F. Kennedy.") The best you could say, recalled Mitchell, who watched things unfold, was that Conley "was not horrible." Finally, at 4 minutes and 52 seconds into the broadcast—an eternity in live radio—the documentary was ready, and Conley could announce, "Rather than pull in reports, we thought we might take you to the event."

Like an overture, the lilting voice of folk singer and anti-war sympathizer Phil Ochs, performing *The Power and the Glory*, led listeners in: "Come on and take a walk with me in this green and glowing land. Walk through the meadows, the mountains and the

sand...Her power will rest on the strength of her freedom.” Demonstrators shouted, “Come on people. Stop the war now.” Army helicopters thundered. Police motorcycles roared. Ambulance sirens screamed. A voiceover eventually proclaimed, “Thousands of young people came to Washington. It was their freedom ride, their Selma march.” Whereupon the outlaw journalist who would become the iconic figure of NPR’s early days began to speak. “A line of young people has just come across the highway,” said Jeff Kamen, the redoubtable El Lobo. “Traffic is stopped. Here come the police. One demonstrator knocked down by a motor-scooter policeman...Anger now...anger of the young people.”

After soliciting onlookers’ descriptions of what happened, El Lobo approached an officer and asked: “Sergeant, excuse me. Jeff Kamen, National Public Radio. Is that a technique where the men actually try to drive their bikes right into the demonstrators?” At most other news outlets, the question would have been deleted as editorializing. But for all his moxie, Kamen kept a respectful tone and elicited a revealing reply. “No, it’s no technique,” said the sergeant. “We’re trying to go down the road, and the people get in front. What are you going to do? You don’t stop on a dime.”

From Kamen, the story jumped to Banker at the Pentagon; then back to Kamen, by this point at the Department of Agriculture; then to Russell at the Lincoln Memorial, who reported that he’d been tear-gassed; back again to Kamen, now on Independence Avenue, where an interviewee whooped, “We’re gonna shut the fucking city”; and finally to George Washington University Hospital, where a priest, speaking to Kamen (the journalist maintains that his Daley administration contact stuck with him all day, giving him safe passage throughout the convulsing capital) ticked off the injuries of arriving patients.

If Act One of the documentary was told from the demonstrators’ point of view, Act Two belonged to an unidentified police officer, who asserted that the protesters were using tear gas, too. “The Weathermen Organization,” he said, is “here to do as much bodily damage as they possibly can.” Act Three was given over to business people who criticized both the demonstrators and the police. Act Four offered a snippet from a news conference by organizers of the Mayday Tribe, among them convicted Chicago Seven member Rennie Davis. The protest leaders conceded that despite the havoc they’d wreaked, they had failed. “It is true,” said one, “we didn’t paralyze the city.” The production ran to 25 minutes (four minutes longer than scheduled), and while there was

a token effort at evenhandedness, there was no doubt where *All Things Considered* stood. El Lobo uttered the defining line: “Today in the nation’s capital, it is a crime to be young and have long hair.”

What was this? The new network billed itself as *National* Public Radio, but thirty minutes into its inaugural broadcast its programming felt as if it was being produced by peaceniks. As its demonstration coverage proceeded, the disposition of *All Things Considered* stayed to the left—and it added some loopy countercultural elements. Following a roundtable featuring several reporters, Siemering cued a CBC story about World War I poetry. The actors who gave the readings all but stated that Flanders Fields were a stand in for Vietnam. Conley then introduced a piece from the Midwest: “In this day of demonstrations, people don’t get their hair cut as often.” He gave way to a correspondent from the Ames, Iowa, affiliate who reported that the Welch Hills Barber Shop was making up for lost revenue by shaving women’s legs so they could wear hot pants. Jack Mitchell’s news insert didn’t air until 6 p.m., meaning that the day’s Supreme Court decisions, front-page stuff in the traditional press, became an afterthought. But that’s how Siemering wanted it. NPR was freeform. As the debut of *All Things Considered* drew to a close, the programming director offered a story about a heroin-addicted nurse. In mid-piece, he went to a Roy Buchanan guitar riff that lasted so long the segment stopped being journalism and became a blues club. It all reached an appropriately weird end in an interview by Fred Calland, NPR’s classical music producer, with ‘60s avatar Allen Ginsberg and his father about their opposing views of the changing times. Among the subjects was LSD.

“Drugs are a source of peace and enlightenment,” Allen Ginsburg said.

“Drugs embezzle the personality of youth,” countered Louis Ginsberg, a high school teacher and, like his son, a poet.

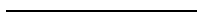
“Allen, I’ll give you the last response,” said Calland.

“Flower power. Ohm. Body. Speech. Mind. Diamond. Teacher. Flower Power. Ohm. Flower power.”

So concluded the first airing of *All Things Considered*: with Allen Ginsberg chanting. The show, however, wasn’t over. Although Siemering had prepared a log, the time it took to get the documentary ready played hell with his calculations. To make everything fit, he threw out a planned story on the 1971 Pulitzer Prizes, which had been awarded that day. But now the broadcast was too short, and once again the programming director

needed Conley to ad lib. The host, however, missed the instruction. “He was off in dream land,” Mitchell would recall. Six and one-half minutes short of a scheduled 90 minutes the broadcast just stopped, and up came NPR’s jaunty theme song. Like a computerized nightmare, the Moog-generated tune—sprightly for a few seconds, torture in constant rotation—played over and over and over until 6:30 p.m. when stations, at last, returned to their regular schedules.

At 1625 Eye, as the staff referred to its first digs, the reactions varied from relief (“We’d at least gotten through it,” said Mitchell), to chagrin (“I winced when I heard Kamen ask if the motorcycle stuff was a technique,” said Russell) to pride (“It was a happy day,” said Siemering. “We had the occasion to show what radio can do. It was a textbook illustration of what we were talking about.”) If Siemering meant that the premiere of *All Things Considered* defied every norm of American news broadcasting as it was practiced in 1971, then it truly was an illustration of what radio could do differently. Never before had anything like this coursed over the nation’s airwaves. The program was a contraption hammered together from disparate ingredients, a vibration from a realm where youthful earnestness commingled with merry-prankster lunacy, land-grant university idealism, New England pragmatism, and a native instinct for storytelling. The war-protest documentary, its biases aside, would stand as a time-capsule account of a historic day. (That same night, Walter Cronkite gave the story only three minutes on *The CBS Evening News*.) Somehow a new network had emerged. Now it was up there—and it was out there.



As important as what Bill Siemering did to establish NPR’s sensibilities was, what he did not do was more so. In early 1971, several months before *All Things Considered* premiered, network president Don Quayle learned that Edward P. Morgan, one of the best-known names in American broadcasting, was available to host its inaugural creation. During the 1950s and ‘60s, Morgan had been regarded as the Edward R. Murrow of ABC. In 1960, he was a panelist at the second presidential debate between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy. In 1963, in tandem with Howard K. Smith, he anchored coverage of Kennedy’s assassination. More recently he hosted what champions of quality television regarded as one of the medium’s greatest achievements, *Public Broadcast Laboratory (PBL)*, a two-hour Sunday evening experiment in high-

mindedness conceived by former CBS News President Fred Friendly and produced by his protégé, Av Westin. From 1967 to 1969, the show—airing on ETV, a precursor to PBS—brought anti-establishment politics, racially-charged drama (the Negro Ensemble Theater’s *Days of Absence*, in which black actors in white face mocked small-town Southern prejudice), and Ivy League professors into American living rooms. Even some liberal critics were put off by *PBL*’s smug heavy-handedness, but most loved it. That Morgan wanted to join NPR was a big deal, and the Ford Foundation was dangling an alluring incentive: \$300,000 to cover his salary for the first several years.

Around 1625 Eye, news that the great man might be joining up was met with hurrahs—by everyone except Siemering. The programming chief didn’t want any part of Morgan. If NPR hired him it would lose the chance to establish its own identity. It would not be National Public Radio but Edward P. Morgan Radio, with all the Eastern condescension that suggested. Quayle, while hating to lose the \$300 grand, backed up his programming boss. NPR said no. It would instead go with Robert Conley, a friend of news director Cleve Mathews from their days together at *The New York Times*.

With that one stroke, Siemering went a long way toward shaping NPR. Walking the halls of 1625 Eye in those weeks before the debut, ducking into the offices of Quayle and other executives, the programming director expanded on the thinking behind the choice, enthusing about the opportunity the new network had to dispense with the “plastic, faceless men” who delivered the news on traditional American outlets. Nor would it be stiff, like the BBC. NPR would “share the human experience with emotional openness.” It would not “rip and read” headlines. It would “bring the people to the people.” If this sounded less like a broadcast entity than a vehicle for achieving a more perfect society, that’s because in a way it was. “Siemering had this vision of radio as an instrument of education in the finest sense,” said Jim Russell. “He saw radio as a totally different animal.”

Quayle and the others understandably wanted specifics. NPR didn’t have much money—just \$1 million that first year—but the executives demanded to know where the money would go. How, for instance, would the network’s initial program—a news magazine slated for afternoon drive time—work? The best Siemering could do was say that Conley would front the show, but that he would not be a host in the traditional sense, because he would not read the news. He would instead present produced segments, many originating from stations outside Washington. Sometimes he would

interact with reporters, other times with sources. The opinions of non-experts would be as valued—maybe more valued—than those of political and business insiders, and the arts would receive as much attention as public affairs. As for the shape of the show, Siemering couldn't be sure about that, either. "One of the most critical aspects of putting such a program together," he said, "is the ordering of items, the internal rhythm of the program and the weight of each item, which is not possible to transmit in printed form."

It was a little vague, but there was an underlying theory. "I tried to offer a skeletal outline, a framework for them to fill in," said Siemering. "You know, as you walk down streets in Washington—I was thinking of N between 17th and Connecticut—there's a variety of architectural styles. And I said, 'Each producer contributes their architectural style, but it needs to blend in with the street. It needs to conform to principles of architecture. It can't just be a shack next to a slick townhouse, but it's a producer's program, and you bring your uniqueness, your style.' In other words, I established the range, but the producers" and reporters would express themselves. What Siemering sought for NPR was individual distinctiveness, and while he might have struggled to spell it out, he made it plain in his personnel decisions. "Bill didn't hire people on the basis of competence," said Jack Mitchell. "He wanted to do something new and original. Anyone who had experience had the wrong kind of experience." In other words, he was not looking for people with impressive resumes. He was looking for people who possessed the sort of intangible qualities that would make the network stand out—as Linda Wertheimer was among the first to discover.

Twenty-eight years old with a torrent of brown hair and powerful connections (Senator Jacob Javits had suggested she apply to NPR), Wertheimer had every reason to believe she would leave with a job when she entered the tiny office at 1625 Eye for an audience with Siemering. A Wellesley graduate, she had spent a year in London working for the International Service of the BBC. From "the Beeb," she'd gone to News Radio 88 in New York, an all-news CBS affiliate that featured Charles Osgood, Pat Summerall, and a young Ed Bradley. But about midway through her interview at NPR, she sensed that its programming boss was not impressed by her glossy pedigree.

"What did your father do?" Siemering finally asked.

She responded that he ran Morrison's Grocery Store in Carlsbad, New Mexico, and that as a little girl she had taken orders by phone, standing on a crate by the butcher's case "being a well-spoken child who wrote well."

“Do you mean a neighborhood grocery store?”

“About three times the size of this office,” she replied, looking around the cramped room. Suddenly, she wasn’t just a Wellesley graduate but someone who understood what it was like to work in a small, family business.

Then and there, Siemering offered Wertheimer a position. “He decided that I wasn’t so uppity after all,” she said afterward, “although I was right on the raggedy edge.”

If job applicants were “thoughtful and bright,” Siemering grabbed them whether they had broadcasting skills or not. Carolyn Jensen, who came from *Der Spiegel*, knew nothing about radio, but she was studious, and he brought her aboard to set up NPR’s library. Kati Marton, although still in graduate school, had been raised in Hungary, the daughter of a legendary AP reporter, Andre Marton. That was all Siemering needed to know. As for those with a history in the medium, they, like Wertheimer, needed a counterbalancing attribute that indicated depth—or quirkiness. In his early 20s, Jeff “El Lobo” Kamen had been an announcer at Korvettes Department Store in New York: “Ladies lingerie, upstairs.” Susan Stamberg, an ex-producer at WAMU in D.C., had financed her education at Barnard as a typist for Jacques Chambruns (a controversial literary agent who represented Grace Metalious, the author of *Peyton Place*) then spent the mid-1960s in India as a State Department wife. At 32, she was the oldest successful job applicant. Filling out the group was a handful of people—Mike Waters and Rich Firestone among them—with whom Siemering had worked in the past.

“It was an odd assortment of folks,” said Russell, who at least had wire service experience. “He hired me as a safety in case these crazies went off the deep end.”

At the same time Siemering sought variety among his reporters, he fought for the equipment they would need to do a specific type of work. He wanted his people to be able to cover events on the fly, to capture raw sound—whether ugly or beautiful, gunshots from a riot or footfalls from a hike on the Appalachian Trail. Thus he requested lightweight Sony cassette recorders. As the debut of NPR’s first show grew closer, this brought him into conflict with George Geesey. Tough and smart, the network’s operations chief was a formidable character with a genuinely creative bent. Indeed, just a month before NPR was to go on the air, he walked into a programming meeting where staffers had penciled prospective names for their still-untitled effort on legal sheets taped to a wall. Each suggestion was worse than the last. Reaching into his wallet, Geesey removed a card on which he had jotted down inspirations and said, “It sounds like this

program will include everything. How about *All Things Considered*?” Siemering couldn’t thank him enough. That aside, Geesey had his own ideas about audio, believing that journalists on assignment should use reel-to-reel recorders. No one disputed his view that when it came to high fidelity, the Nagra, the state of the art in reel-to-reel machines, was superior to the compact Sony. But Nagras presented a practical problem. They weighed 25 pounds. Covering a chaotic event or a breaking story with one was like trying to play football while carrying a big old hard-shelled suitcase. The ensuing debate became absurd. NPR would transmit its shows over 12,000 miles of AT&T long lines looping around America in what was known as a “round robin.” While audio would leave the Washington studio at a fulsome 15 kilohertz, it would drop to 6 kilohertz as soon as it hit the wires and degrade to a tinny 3.5 kilohertz by the time it reached distant stations. In much of America, NPR would sound as scratchy as an overseas phone call—which meant that in terms of audio, the kind of recorders reporters used was irrelevant. The quality would be bad regardless. Engineers, however, are perfectionists, and Geesey was a quintessential engineer.

The compromise was to go with Sony TC-100s—but to customize them. Cassette machines record at a plodding 1 and 7/8 inches per second. By altering them to record at 3 and 3/4 inches per second (the more rapidly tape moves across a recording head, the higher the fidelity) NPR could enhance quality. This meant Siemering would get the compact recorders that enabled his reporters to venture about more easily and Geesey would get the sound he wanted. Only after making the changes to the Sonys did the two realize that the tape they produced would be unplayable on the machines used by everyone else in broadcasting. Whether a bold move or a futile gesture, the decision underscored an emerging truth—NPR would chart its own course.

At planning sessions Siemering had begun hosting each day at 1625 Eye, his people started to sense what they’d signed up for. Sprawled across the floor (few dared sit on NPR’s flimsy, castoff furniture for fear it might collapse), the staff listened as their programming chief played a selection of radio pieces. One of the tapes came from Susan Stamberg. It was a segment of a WAMU series titled *A Federal Case*. She had produced it, and she was proud of it. It had a serious topic and a voice-of-God male anchor, and it could have aired on CBS or NBC. As the piece concluded, Siemering hit the stop button and uttered what for an unfailingly good-natured man was a pointed rebuke: “This is exactly what we don’t want to sound like.”

Really? Really! thought Stamberg, who was both hurt and intrigued. “It had never occurred to me not to sound like that on the radio.”

Siemering “didn’t want the stentorian, artificial voice,” said Russell, who sat through the meetings and was forced to endure his own humiliations. “I had to unlearn some of the things I’d been taught by UPI.” Siemering urged Russell to talk normally. “I didn’t know what that was. Bill said, ‘Ignore the fact that the light’s gone on,’” meaning: Forget you’re on the air. “He never wanted anything embroidered. He wanted things to be honest.”

Not only did Siemering demand that his troops, even the hyperkinetic El Lobo, employ a conversational tone, but he insisted that they conduct interviews politely. That is, he wanted reporters to behave in an uncharacteristic manner. He wanted them to be nice. “Granted, there are different situations where you need to nail someone if they’re lying,” said the programming chief. “But you get a lot more by being open rather than attacking, because if you start attacking you get their defenses up.”

In the world of radio news, such considered opinions were exceptional. “Bill seemed to spend more time thinking than people in the rapid-fire broadcasting environment do,” said Russell. “You’d ask him a question and he’d actually ponder it. That was very surprising.” Stamberg felt the same way. Siemering, she realized, was less a programming director than a visionary. In his hires, his choices of equipment, his maxims, he was, well, a philosopher king. That’s what she dubbed him: the philosopher king. Around the news department, others also began using the term, realizing that they were working for someone staking out new ground. True, a few of the higher-ups—among them Quayle and Geesey—rolled their eyes. Philosopher king? “We’d hired all these people who knew about content but not about broadcasting,” said Quayle, “and what they needed was direction.” While Siemering was expounding, Quayle feared that such critical items as scheduling, story inventory, and long-term planning were being ignored. *All Things Considered* would be a beast, and it would demand nightly feeding, not oracular utterances. For all of that, however, everyone at the network shared a sense of optimism.

Siemering especially was in good spirits. On the eve of NPR’s premiere, he told the staff: “We have a blank canvas. There’ll be a lot of paint put on this canvas over the years. But the very first brush strokes are critical in terms of the color and style that we establish.”

The twin transmitting towers of WHA, the University of Wisconsin educational radio station, stood outside the capital city of Madison near a failed housing development named Lake Forest, better known as Lost City. Eveline and William Siemering, Sr. and their four children lived in Lost City in a frame home 200 yards from the towers. Cornfields and forests stretched to the horizon. It was the tag end of the Depression, and half the lots were empty. There were few kids to play with, and the neighborhood could seem desolate. Occasionally, though, a maintenance man at the towers threw open the door to a tiny redbrick building and switched on a radio monitor. People gathered to hear the shows: *Chapter a Day*, *The Farm Program*. For William Siemering, Jr., shy, gawky, the youngest in the family, it was magical and transporting.

As a first grader at Silver Springs School, where eight grades were housed in two rooms (classes were separated by roll-up dividers), Bill began to understand what WHA meant to his Midwestern community. “The teacher would turn on the radio, and we’d have *The Wisconsin School of the Air*—instructional programs. I learned nature, social studies, music, art, science—all from the radio.” Equipped with guidebooks, instructors led students through readings, experiments, and drawing projects featured in the broadcasts. “From first grade on, I regarded radio as this wonderful source of imagination, and I looked forward to it. It was a little break. Each program was twenty minutes long—morning and afternoon, five days a week—and they were very well-produced. It was something so different in the classroom. The teachers had real limited resources in a place like that.”

Knowledge, drama, and the human voice—the boy loved them all, which was no wonder. His parents had met in theater school in Minneapolis during the early twenties. Both aspiring actors, they went on the road with a Chautauqua circuit—the “most American thing in America,” said Teddy Roosevelt—performing sketches and Dickensian set pieces in band shells on town squares across the high plains. They played small, dusty places that craved culture and political discourse. William Jennings Bryan, the great populist, was one of the attractions. After a couple of years, William Sr. opened a movie theater in rural Wisconsin, and booked films with an eye not to the box office but to edification. The business failed. He took a job with the VA in Madison and settled into

family life. But the excitement of those long-ago days remained, and the couple's two sons and two daughters grew up hearing about them.

Although Bill was hardly a rugged young man, he absorbed the rhythms and virtues of his rural world. He worked summers for a local fellow who did custom combining and hay-baling. The pair would go from farm to farm. Bill drove the tractor that pulled the baler. In the beginning, the land owners looked at him suspiciously, wondering if he'd "take hold." But he labored late into the twilight, never slacking off until the dew formed on the ground. "It was hard work but it was good work. There was a satisfying ache. I learned about stewardship."

By the time Bill started at Madison's West High School, the Siemerings had moved into the city. It was less lonely there. Even so, he was plagued by moments of alienation. His father was Episcopalian. His mother, however, was a Christian Scientist, and she raised him in her faith, teaching him that if he was sick something was amiss in his soul—he was out of alignment with God. Practitioners bearing copies of Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health with Keys to the Scriptures* would come and pray for him. He felt different than his classmates, more inward-looking. He longed to connect with them, with everyone, in truth. A speech teacher, Ruth McCarty, encouraged him to get involved in student productions. Soon he was building sets and, from time to time, acting. Before graduating in 1952 and heading to the University of Wisconsin, he told Mrs. McCarty he wanted to design scenery for television. She urged him to talk with her husband. Harold B. McCarty, the director of WHA, informed the incoming freshman that he couldn't offer him a job in TV, but he had one at the radio station.

WHA was located in Radio Hall, a hulking stone structure that offered a vibrant surprise inside: a giant mural depicting the founders of 9XM, a University of Wisconsin experimental station that in 1917 transmitted America's first radio news and music programming. The figures in the piece include physicists wearing dusters and holding vacuum tubes, reporters sitting at a table covered with paper, a man at a microphone. For a student enthralled with broadcasting, Radio Hall was Mecca, and Siemering threw himself into the activities there, working 20 to 30 hours during school weeks and full time in the summers. He lugged gigantic Magnecorders—he needed both hands to carry one—into classrooms, where he taped segments for *The Wisconsin School of the Air*. He auditioned to be an announcer and soon was reading the news. He joined the Radio Hall Players and appeared in dramas that aired live. Along the way, he also absorbed the

underlying notion—particularly strong on heartland campuses, where the progressive era had never truly ended—that college stations exist to spread wisdom beyond school boundaries. WHA was a far-reaching source of enlightenment. To Siemering’s agriculturally attuned mind, the station functioned like a seed broadcaster, although the seeds were intellectual. This was his first serious idea about broadcasting, and while it was hardly original, the more he contemplated it the more radical it seemed—and, in some larger, undefined sense, applicable.

After graduating in 1956 with a degree in geography (speech was his minor), Siemering, who had enrolled in ROTC, was called to active duty with the Army. He became a “broadcast specialist” and hoped to work in Armed Forces Radio. He was instead assigned to the United States Disciplinary Barracks in Leavenworth, Kansas, a maximum security lockup. There he supervised prisoner education and produced a closed-circuit program of inmate news. On weekends, he manned the mixing board at nearby KCLO, which played country music and called itself “The Heart of the Nation Station.” On average the prisoners at Leavenworth had no more than a 7th-grade education. Some were on death row. The gulf between his experience and theirs was so vast he wasn’t even sure how to talk to some of them.

Out of the Army in 1958, Siemering taught speech at a high school in Eagle Rock, Wisconsin—a resort town on the Michigan border. He married Carol Kane, an organist at a Christian Science Church. Then came Sputnik, and he received a National Defense Education Scholarship to pursue a master’s degree in counseling at the University of Wisconsin. The thinking behind the scholarship was that he and others like him would encourage kids to study space-age subjects such as math and science. Siemering was ambivalent; his heart really wasn’t in counseling. Still, this was a heady time to be in Madison. Carl Rogers, the central figure in humanistic psychology, was on the faculty. In 1961 Rogers published his seminal work, *On Becoming a Person*. Siemering did not take a class from him, but he saw Rogers around campus and was smitten by the book. Rogers’ premise—captured in the phrase “unconditional positive regard”—was that therapists could affect change by fully accepting patients, notwithstanding their ugly past acts or utterances. Some said the permissive ‘60s started here. To Siemering, the concept was immediately relevant (this was how to talk with the men he’d met in Leavenworth), and it led to his second big idea about radio. If broadcasters practiced unconditional positive

regard and spoke *directly* to listeners instead of *down* to them, they could establish a new level of intimacy in the medium.

Siemering took a job at his alma mater, Madison's West High. During the summer of 1962, he went back to work at WHA—and got a call from a former member of the Wisconsin faculty who had become dean of students at the University of Buffalo and needed a manager at WBFO, the college station. That fall, Siemering, his wife, and their two daughters drove their green Dodge Rambler east. The dean challenged him to make WBFO as relevant to Buffalo as WHA was to Madison. It would not be easy. The station operated like a club. It did not broadcast year round. The programming consisted largely of jazz and folk LPs students brought in from their home collections and plopped on the turntable. Whoever felt like reading the news did so. Siemering would recall: “I was like, ‘Oh, man.’”

Siemering needed a couple years to establish order at WBFO. While doing so, he got to know Buffalo. It was, of course, different than Madison. Industrial and dirty, it was also very black, and one of the blackest neighborhoods was “the Fruit Belt,” so called for a profusion of streets with names like Mulberry and Grape. Pale and at 30 still clean-shaven, Siemering was one of the whitest white men the Fruit Belt had ever seen, but he was sincere, and people invited him to sit on their porches and talk. From what he learned and recorded during these visits, he produced a three-part series titled *To Be Negro*. This was the first of several specials he put together on ethnicity in western New York (*The Nation within a Nation* focused on the Tuscarora tribe of the Iroquois), and it signaled a shift in content at the station that was both dizzying and in absolute keeping with the times.

In 1969, following tense negotiations (“I remember one woman saying, ‘I don’t feel comfortable talking with whitey’”), Siemering opened a fully-equipped WBFO satellite studio in a Fruit Belt storefront. It aired 27 hours of programming each week. Black music. (“We were the first station to broadcast Roberta Flack locally.”) Black art. (“We sponsored a festival.”) Black public affairs. (“The Chicago activist Saul Alinsky had a project in Buffalo called BUILD. The TV stations barely mentioned it. I thought, Maybe we need to devote more than three minutes a night to this.”) Local painters installed a mural in the lobby depicting the history of black communications, starting with African drums. “It wasn’t quite what they have at WHA, but it was the same idea.”

Siemering's transformation of WBFO, while certainly political—"I wanted to use radio to give voice to people who didn't have one"—was ultimately as much about aesthetics. The station was headquartered at the university Student Union in a small suite that included offices, a room with a teletype machine, and a studio whose glass windows were papered over to separate it from an adjoining studio occupied by one of the school's resident geniuses, Lukas Foss, an atonal composer who conducted the premiere of his friend Leonard Bernstein's *Symphonic Dances*. Foss had founded the Creative Associates, a group of avant-garde Buffalo performers whose work Siemering soon began airing. In October, 1969, Buffalonians listening to WBFO received a shock. *City Links*, a non-stop 28-hour sound sculpture put together by Creative Associates featuring live audio from several urban locations, was on the air. Producer Maryanne Amacher cut back and forth among feeds, immersing the audience in the clangs of heavy machinery at a Bethlehem Steel Factory, the sibilance of street traffic, and the roar of jets taking off from the airport. "The idea was that there's music all around if you'll just listen," said Siemering." Rich Firestone, then a student engineer at the station, was more succinct: "Bill was an innovator."

Programming at WBFO jelled for Siemering in early 1970. By this point, the station had acquired a fair degree of professionalism. Not only did it employ some talented undergraduates, among them reporter Ira Flatow and engineer Jonathan "Smokey" Baer, but it also had hired Mike Waters, a silver-tongued former newscaster at a local country-and-western outlet. As a result, WBFO was ready when in March the university was hit by an anti-Vietnam War rally that turned violent. The protest was centered at the Student Union, and police tear-gassed it. But WBFO stayed on the air. "We broadcast a kind of play by play of this event," said Siemering. "I interviewed the leader of the movement and asked him, 'You went to a parochial school. How did you find yourself here?' I interviewed the acting university president. 'Where were you when you decided to let the police tear-gas this building? Was your decision influenced by your desire to become president?' On the air, I said, 'There isn't a right or wrong in this. People are acting on their perceptions of reality. That's what we're talking about. If you haven't heard your views expressed, come on down and we'll put you on the air.' We were a force of reason."

The impact of WBFO's exhaustive coverage was far reaching. Much of Buffalo tuned in. "Mike Waters and I were covering a march coming up Main Street," Baer said. "We

ran into a woman's apartment, and the woman had it [WBFO] on. She was not a student, and she was listening to 88.5 FM, and we realized we were a source." For Siemering, it was galvanizing. He combined what he'd learned from broadcasting the riot with what he had discovered at the Fruit Belt satellite studio and what he had realized when he put Creative Associates on the air. It gave him one more big idea about radio: The best and most vivid material originated not from the top but from somewhere else, often the bottom. Points of view expressed by demonstrators were as valid as those of administrators. Instead of being dispensed from on high, news should frequently bubble up. The commercial networks had it wrong. They were missing the story.

Out of Siemering's musings emerged a daily WBFO show called *This Is Radio*. On it he would play raw tape from Buffalo City Council meetings then bring on his reporters to assess the contents. He would follow that with a side of *Tommy*, the Who's new rock opera. Then he would air a chat with a writer or professor. The program was a product of its era, although it didn't traffic in revolution. (Staffers rejected demands from militants that they include reports from Radio Hanoi that contained "the truth about Vietnam.") It was more of a happening: sometimes unfocused, other times on point. "*This Is Radio* was Bill's experiment in breaking the format," said Flatow. "In other words, let's not define what a show is in a box. Let's not say it's a talk show. Let's not say it's a magazine show. Each day, let's just let the show find a life of its own. What was going on that day was the way we would program that day."

This Is Radio was Siemering's landmark creation at WBFO. He was so thrilled with it that he'd occasionally burst out, "*This Is Radio*—damn it!"

Bill Siemering's timing was impeccable. As it happened, a number of radio executives were meeting at various locations that winter to draw up plans for what would become National Public Radio. Educational broadcasters, represented by WHA president Karl Schmidt, chairman of the NPR board, were dominant. Also important were independents such as WGBH in Boston. They functioned in their cities like civic institutions, akin to symphony orchestras and museums. Then there was Pacifica, a Berkeley-based, quasi-Marxist outfit with outlets not just in the Bay Area but also in Los Angeles and New York. Where educational and independent stations were non-commercial, Pacifica stations were anti-commercial. Finally there was the gentle dissident from Buffalo. They

comprised an incongruous bunch, united by a common cause—bringing to life a new radio enterprise, funded by the government and dedicated to elevating the electronic news media. They also shared something else: the awareness that NPR had almost been stillborn.

On a Saturday two years earlier, Jerrold Sandler, a Washington, D.C., educational radio lobbyist and former production manager at WUOM, the University of Michigan radio station, got bad news from a reporter regarding what was then called the Public *Television* Bill, the last piece of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society program. The words "and radio" that would have authorized something like NPR had been deleted, and the legislation was headed to Congress on Monday. The bill had grown out of a Carnegie Commission study proposing "the utilization of a great technology for great purposes." Television viewers would receive "wonder and variety...excellence within diversity ...awareness of the many roads along which the products of man's mind and man's hands can be encountered." The legislation's chief advocates, most of them in TV, had never wanted radio to be part of it. They saw the medium as obsolete. Television was the future. But Sandler and several other WUOM alumni knew the potential of stodgy old radio, and they'd fought to get it in. When Sandler learned that the enabling language had inexplicably disappeared, he telephoned Dean Coston, a friend from Michigan who was now an undersecretary at the Department of Health, Education and Welfare—the agency that wrote the bill. Coston and a sympathetic White House advisor sat down with a typewriter and scotch tape and reinserted the two critical words. They copied the doctored pages then reassembled the bill. The result was a mess. Typefaces did not match, and tape marks showed, but in all the appropriate places the legislation again said "and radio." This was the draft the administration submitted.

Television supporters were furious. But following an all-out campaign on Capitol Hill by Sandler and former WUOM station manager Ed Burrows, the opposition capitulated. Not only that, the legislation itself—again thanks to the work of the Michigan contingent (Senator Robert Griffin, a Republican from the state, sat on the committee that held hearings)—received a new title. That fall, Congress passed the National *Broadcasting* Act, creating the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), an entity sufficiently far reaching to encompass both skies-the-limit public TV and irredeemable public radio.

Future PBS executives scoffed at radio, and they could not have been more right to do so. Powerhouses like WHA were exceptions—most outlets were awful. To determine just

how awful, the CPB engaged WGBH president Hartford Gunn, who in turn hired Sam C.O. Holt, an urbane Alabamian who'd done time at both the Boston station and in network TV. From an office in Harvard Square, Holt surveyed the nation's educational broadcasters. He was dismayed. Of the 425 stations he examined, half were "10-watters," meaning their signals didn't reach beyond their campuses. Many were adjuncts of school audio-visual departments. Few possessed adequate control rooms, equipment, or staffs. Programming was spotty, often consisting of no more than college lectures. "It was pretty pitiful," Holt said.

Gunn and Holt agreed on part of the solution. First and foremost, public radio needed professionalizing. Federal grants soon enabled a number of stations to meet basic criteria. Less obvious, public radio also needed a uniform sound. TV viewers watched programs. Radio audiences listened to stations. Gunn imagined a network that broadcast "tightly-formatted, in-depth national and international news and public affairs, with the emphasis on analysis, commentary, criticism and good talk." Holt concurred, but he differed on a critical point. Where Gunn wanted big-city independent stations like his WGBH in Boston to create the programming, Holt realized that key Midwestern outlets would chafe at being chattel to a Brahmin. He asserted that production should be centralized in Washington. CPB saw things Holt's way, setting public radio on a path distinct from that of public TV. Unlike PBS, NPR would broadcast *and* produce its own shows.

Nonetheless, issues remained. The heartland stations subscribed to a populist ethos, while those in cities like Boston embraced something more elitist. In this context, Siemering, whose well-known work at WBFO made him a champion of broad-mindedness as well as highbrow programming, held the middle ground. During the winter meetings to create National Public Radio, its board selected him to write a mission statement. He finished it in the spring of 1970, and by that summer, when network leaders gathered in Chicago to finalize the hiring of Don Quayle as president, everyone in public radio was talking about it. The WBFO manager had both caught the gist of things and defined it. This was why Karl Schmidt asked him to read the work aloud to the room.

"National Public Radio," Siemering began in his quietly forceful way, "will serve the individual. It will promote personal growth. It will regard the individual differences among men with respect and joy rather than derision and hate. It will celebrate the

human experience as infinitely varied rather than vacuous and banal. It will encourage a sense of active constructive participation rather than apathetic helplessness.”

Siemering was not just pitching an idea—he was issuing a call.

“In its cultural mode, National Public Radio will preserve and transmit the past, will encourage and broadcast the work of contemporary artists and provide listeners with an aural experience which enriches and gives meaning to the human spirit.

“In its journalistic mode, National Public Radio will actively explore, investigate and interpret issues of national and international import. The programs will enable the individual to better understand himself, his government, his institutions and his natural and social environment so he can intelligently participate in effecting the process of change...

“National Public Radio will not regard its audience as a market or in terms of its disposable income, but as curious, complex individuals who are looking for some understanding, meaning, and joy.”

On he went, concluding: “National Public Radio should not only improve the quality of public radio but should lead in revitalizing the medium of radio so that it may become a first class citizen in the media community.”

When Siemering sat down, Schmidt turned to Quayle and asked, “Do you think that if you come onto NPR as president that you can implement that?”

“Well, if the author comes along with me as director of programming,” replied Quayle, “we probably could.”

No one at the meeting, least of all Quayle, anticipated this.

“I did it on the spot,” he said. “I did it on the spot.”