



## Cater: field general in the 1960s campaign for federal aid

*S. Douglass Cater, a former White House aide who played a central role in creation of the Public Broadcasting Act more than 25 years ago, died Sept. 15 [1995] at the age of 72. A public policy expert and journalist who helped revive London's Observer newspaper late in his career, Cater was a past president of Washington College in Chestertown, Md. This appreciation was written by Bill Harley, who was president of the National Association of Educational Broadcasters (NAEB) at the time when Cater took a hand in the future of the field. Originally published in Current, Oct. 9, 1995*

*By Bill Harley*

I cannot let the passing of Douglass Cater go by without calling attention to the enormous contribution he made to public broadcasting. All of us educational broadcasters owe him a great debt of gratitude. As special education adviser to President Lyndon Johnson, he played a central role in developing and passing the legislation that created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and its spinoffs PBS and NPR.

It all began with the conference that NAEB held in 1964 in cooperation with the U.S. Office of Education. At this meeting, Ralph Lowell of Boston proposed a commission to study the financial needs of educational television. Lowell and NAEB's C. Scott Fletcher drew up a formal proposal for such a study commission and sent it to the White House. Cater persuaded LBJ to call John Gardner, president of the Carnegie Corp. of New York, who agreed to finance the commission.

Cater got LBJ to endorse the idea in these words: "our security depends on the enlightenment of our citizens, ... our freedom depends on the communication of ideas through many channels. I believe that educational television has an important future in the United States. I look forward with great interest to the judgments which this commission will offer."

Later Cater wrote a speech called "Managing Miracles," which the President delivered on the occasion of signing the bill and addressing via direct wire the NAEB convention.

Cater and Alan Pifer, vice president of the Carnegie Corp., promptly organized a 14-person commission to conduct "a broadly conceived study of noncommercial television." This group met eight times, heard comments from 225 individuals and organizations and visited all of the 92 ETV stations in 35 states. The commission's final report made 12 recommendations, including new legislation, which Dean Coston of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare and Nick Zapple of Sen. John Pastore's staff promptly organized into a bill incorporating many of the commission's recommendations.

While Congress considered the bill, Cater was our field general. Chuck Marquis, NAEB's liaison on the Hill, and I and other friends would meet every morning in Cater's basement office at the White House. After pooling information, we would discuss strategy and attitudes on the Hill, and then Cater would decide who would be dispatched to go talk to an

undecided congressman, or what station manager or station board chairman should be asked to phone a senator who needed educating. We would fan out to the Capitol and later report our successes and failures. And while all this was going on, Cater was writing persuasive op-ed pieces for major newspapers.

"The House vote was a nail-biter," Chuck Marquis remembers. "Cater wanted exact counts of votes that our motley crew of educational broadcasters had sewn up. It was never enough. His response was: 'the President expects you to help with this. You've got to do a whole lot better than that.' Later, Cater and I were sitting in the House Gallery when the Act was debated and passed. The tally was a tie--the Democrats for, Republicans against--with Cater and I watching paralyzed. Suddenly nine more Democrats appeared, the vote ended and we won."

Though new legislation often takes years, the bill went through the long legislative process with amazing speed.

Douglass Cater had many other accomplishments to his credit, but for those of us who worked with him in this area, he will always remain what Edwin Yoder called him in a *Washington Post* article: "godfather to public broadcasting."



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