

Democrats Gore and Lieberman threaten state censorship of US entertainment industry

David Walsh
20 September 2000

US Vice President Al Gore and his running mate, Senator Joseph Lieberman, have threatened to impose forms of state censorship on the film, music and video games industries should they win the November election. Gore and Lieberman, in an interview conducted by the *New York Times* September 11, declared that they would use “truth in advertising” laws to prosecute studios and record companies responsible for promoting supposedly violent entertainment among minors, if the industry did not “clean up their act” within six months of the inauguration of a Gore-Lieberman administration. This threat goes beyond anything proposed by most right-wing Republicans in Congress. The campaign of Republican candidate George W. Bush has not advocated taking such steps, and in the wake of the Gore-Lieberman comments, still declined to do so.

The interview, requested by the *New York Times*, was conducted on the eve of the release of a report by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) harshly criticizing the entertainment industry for marketing R-rated films and television programs, music and video games containing what the commission considered violent or sexual content to children under 18. The interview also preceded by several days a Senate Commerce Committee hearing held to consider the FTC report.

While the Federal Trade Commission stopped short of proposing government sanctions against entertainment companies, Gore and Lieberman made a point of threatening punitive action against the industry, either through new legislation or new federal regulatory authority.

In the course of the interview, Gore said, “If necessary, we will support strengthening of the current laws that cover false and deceptive advertising,” and argued that the FTC could wield such authority without violating First Amendment free speech guarantees. At one point the interviewer asked how Gore and Lieberman would enforce the R-rating, which requires that children under 17 be accompanied by an adult when viewing certain films, at multiplex movies houses. “Put guards at the theaters?” the interviewer asked. “That’s certainly one possibility,” Gore replied.

The measures threatened by Gore and Lieberman represent an attack on constitutionally protected freedoms of speech and expression. It should be noted that the material targeted by the Democratic candidates are not X-rated works, which themselves are constitutionally protected for adult audiences, but rather a much broader range of material that is being branded “violent.” The obvious question that is posed, but not even addressed by Gore and Lieberman, is: who determines what is overly violent? Whose standards are to be codified in law and enforced by the police powers of the state?

What is to prevent state-enforced sanctions against so-called violent films, records, video games, etc., from being extended to include bans on material considered unpatriotic, irreligious or politically subversive?

This is not to deny that much of the material marketed by the entertainment companies is filled with gratuitous violence, and expresses reactionary and anti-social views. Opposing censorship or the threat of

censorship does not imply indifference to the potentially harmful impact of some of this material, or an endorsement of the entertainment industry moguls. But their cynicism and crude pursuit of profit must not become the pretext for legitimizing new state-supported attacks on democratic rights.

This overt threat of state censorship comes from the same presidential ticket that only two weeks before publicly attacked the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of conscience and challenged that amendment’s insistence on the separation of church and state. This most recent declaration vindicates, with remarkable speed, the warnings of those, including the *World Socialist Web Site*, who said Lieberman’s assertion that the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion but not freedom from religion constituted an assault on the juridical foundation of all democratic rights in the US.

The threat of state censorship by Gore and Lieberman was not an off-the-cuff remark, but rather a calculated political act. The interview with the *Times* was timed to coincide with the release of the FTC report denouncing the entertainment industry and the subsequent Senate hearing. The candidates were well aware of the contents of the report, which was commissioned by the Clinton administration.

As was the case with the previous statements of Lieberman on religion, this latest broadside was in all likelihood seen by the candidates and their political handlers as an expedient means of outflanking their Republican opponents and stealing their “family values” thunder, thereby attracting the votes of certain sections of the electorate. Once again, however, they have challenged basic constitutional guarantees of free speech and democratic rights. That they do so recklessly and even thoughtlessly does not diminish the seriousness of the implications of their statements for the democratic rights of the American people.

The FTC report was entitled “Marketing Violent Entertainment to Children: A Review of Self-Regulation and Industry Practices in the Motion Picture, Music Recording, and Electronic Game Industries.” The study was commissioned by the Clinton administration in the wake of the Columbine High School massacre in Littleton, Colorado in April 1999. The FTC was requested to conduct an inquiry as to whether “violent entertainment material” was being advertised and promoted to children and teenagers. The study concluded that the entertainment industry, contrary to its promises and its own regulations, was doing precisely that.

The September 13 hearing of the Senate Commerce Committee, presided over by Senator John McCain of Arizona, one-time candidate for the Republican Party’s presidential nomination, became a kind of competition between the two parties as to which could castigate the entertainment industry in the strongest terms. All concerned proceeded with general indifference to the constitutional issues involved.

Lieberman appeared as a witness before the committee. Although he did not reiterate his “six months” threat, he told the senators that the practice of marketing allegedly violent materials to those under 18 “is outrageous, it is deceptive and it has to stop.” Lynne V. Cheney, whose husband is the

Republican vice-presidential candidate, asserted: “There is a problem with the product they [the film and music companies] market, no matter how they market it.”

Few in the entertainment industry had any principled response to the Senate hearing and the Gore-Lieberman censorship threat. Among those who did, Danny Goldberg, president and chief executive of Artemis Records, condemned attempts to censor the music industry. “So-called self-regulation achieved by political intimidation is the equivalent of censorship,” he commented. Screenwriter Rod Lurie, who campaigned for Gore in 1988, said, “When you have Al Gore saying that Hollywood has six months to get its act together, that sounds like McCarthyism to me and I find it very troubling.”

Larry Katanoff of Threshold Entertainment pointed out that the FTC had uncovered nothing illegal when it found that the film industry marketed R-rated movies to 12-18-year-olds. He noted that the purpose of the R rating was not to exclude teenagers but to require adult accompaniment. “There’s nothing wrong with marketing to those kids and getting them to ask their parents to take them,” he said.

The response from leading lights in the entertainment industry was predictably muted. By and large, the industry is a Democratic stronghold and a source for a massive amount of financing. On September 14, the day following the McCain hearing, Gore appeared at a fund-raiser at New York City’s Radio City Music Hall, featuring a long list of performers, including Bette Midler, Paul Simon and Ben Affleck. The event raised \$6.5 million from its well-heeled guests.

The campaign against Hollywood’s alleged depravity and for a return to “traditional values” has been a rallying cry of the extreme right for years. While Gore and Lieberman are framing their attack on the entertainment industry rather narrowly, focusing on allegedly deceptive marketing practices, it would be the most serious error to suppose that the assault will end there.

Even if one accepts the category of “violent entertainment,” significant differences exist within this vague designation. The trenchant anti-war film *The Thin Red Line*, for example, has scenes of bloody mayhem as part of a critique of militarism. On the other hand a raft of exploitation films appeal to the basest instincts, using scenes of aggression and brutality to excite the nerve-endings of a numbed and thrill-seeking audience. The censor might very well restrict the promotion or viewing of both, but it would be the exclusion of the socially critical film that would serve his real purpose.

In the 1930s, the film industry, under pressure from right-wing elements and the Catholic Church, adopted self-regulation in the form of the notorious Production Code. The Code banned all sorts of sexual, “immoral” and “antisocial” behavior for decades. As this writer noted in another context a year and a half ago, “One historian has asserted that the Production Code imposed in 1934 was intended both to exclude sexual conduct and violence from the screens and to ‘use popular entertainment films to reinforce conservative moral and political values.’ Adherence to the Code, for example, required such changes that MGM dropped plans to film Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here*, the author’s vision of the rise of American fascism. The Production Code Administration insisted that Fritz Lang’s anti-lynching film, *Fury* (1936), not include a black victim or any criticism of the Jim Crow South.”

The imposition of the Production Code, on the eve of the upheavals of the mid-1930s, was one of the means by which the film industry and its overseers made certain that the social and political issues posed by the Depression would not find adequate reflection on screen.

What no one in the current debate cares to discuss is the source of the violence both in films and music and in everyday American life. This is a complex issue, but the ignorance and superficiality of the politicians and media hinder a serious examination of the question.

Over the past two decades a particular kind of social atmosphere has

emerged in the US. The political and media establishment are principally responsible for bringing this into being, with their encouragement of the worship of the market, their glorification of individual greed and ruthlessness, militarism and national chauvinism, and their attacks on all socially progressive trends of thought. A peculiarly brutal society has been created, in which acts of solidarity and kindness are looked upon as quixotic at best. The naked use of military force against defenseless peoples overseas have taken their toll on the national psyche, as have the victimization and criminalization of the poor and the brutalization of minorities and others by the police at home, none of which is criticized by Gore or Lieberman.

The violence in the media both emerges from and strengthens this trend. The entertainment industry hardly has clean hands. It is a largely cynical and corrupt business, coining fortunes out of the confusion and disorientation and carefully manipulated desires of its audience. There is undoubtedly something diseased about many of its products. It does have an impact and has helped brutalize and degrade American life. The Gore-Lieberman campaign, however, is directed at exploiting the genuine concerns of parents and others.

It is certainly not the task of socialists to provide uncritical support to the Hollywood studios, particularly as their executives are certain to cave in, as history has repeatedly demonstrated, when more systematic efforts at political censorship are launched.

The current campaign against violence in the media is not aimed at clarifying anyone’s understanding of the pressing problems afflicting American society. It is telling that after many months in which to consider the lessons of the Columbine tragedy and many similar school shootings, the political establishment can propose only one response: various forms of repression, ranging from more police and security in the schools and the profiling of students to threats of censorship against the entertainment industry. The school shootings exposed a deep-rooted social malaise that the privileged political and media establishment cannot confront.

Gore and Lieberman may be motivated primarily by immediate political concerns. The drive toward regulation of the film and music industry, however, has deeper objective roots. The unease within the ruling elite about the socially explosive consequences of its policies over the past quarter-century, which have created an ever-widening breach between a fabulously wealthy upper crust and the masses of working people, must find expression in efforts to regulate and restrict artistic criticism. Violent films and video games and obscene rap lyrics may be held up as the problem at present, but something else, something more disquieting to the status quo, is the real target.

This most recent episode sheds new light on the political axis that underlies the Democratic Party campaign. For all their populist rhetoric, Gore and Lieberman are complicit in a reactionary attack on democratic rights. Any notion that a Democratic victory in the November elections would represent a “lesser evil” and that a Democratic administration would be more protective of basic rights than a Republican administration is an illusion.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact