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Coughlin

DAVID ROSENBLUM
285 Madison Avenue
New York

November 3, 1939

Mr. Richard C. Rothschild
American Jewish Committee
386 Fourth Avenue
New York City

Dear Dick:

I am returning herewith the memorandum about the Coughlin situation in New England.

The memorandum is interesting because the situation it describes is fairly typical of the situation in which most of the stations that have been carrying Coughlin find themselves.

The National Association of Broadcasters has gone on record squarely behind the Code and has definitely stated that it expects its stations to abide by it or resign from the Association. The chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, in a speech over the Columbia network on October 26, stated flatly that although the Code was not the work of the Communications Commission, it was "none the less important as an example of self-regulation consistent with the public interest." He made a strong talk for the Code, and said among other things: "It has been, and we may expect it to continue to be, the policy of the broadcasting companies to give free time to the responsible leaders who desire to speak on controversial issues. And at the same time to provide for the listeners an equal opportunity to hear the other side."

Mr. Fly also made the following two statements in his speech:

"It should be borne in mind that the Government does not license the radio station itself because it thinks that the owner has any legal right to be heard. The real reason the station is permitted to operate is because of the service which that station undertakes to give to all of you -- the radio audience. I repeat, that such is basic.

"And I venture to repeat that all of us who are concerned with this problem should move into the field conscious of the need for self-limitation. No one of us is qualified to claim the power finally to adjudge the issues and to lay down an arbitrary and unchanging rule of conduct. It is a field where tolerance is essential. It is a field that should be subject to continual review in the light of experience. And it is a field where proper rules of conduct, voluntarily and deliberately self-imposed, should be given a fair opportunity to demonstrate whether or not, in actual practice, they will promote the public interest."

If you haven't seen Mr. Fly's speech, Milton Krents can get you a copy. It is worth reading.

I am sure that the strong stand taken by the NAB and by the chairman of the FCC will lead most stations that have carried the Coughlin programs to abide by the Code. The enclosed memorandum, however, merely suggests the pressure stations are going to be under to keep Coughlin on the air. That pressure will consist of a constant stream of misrepresentations and lies regarding the Code, and the way in which it was adopted, and the NAB and the FCC (for samples, see recent copies of Social Justice), plus the usual strong arm tactics of picket lines and threats to advertisers and prospective advertisers, plus letters and telegrams from Coughlin followers to the station and to the FCC.

If these lies and charges go unanswered, and if no effort is made to meet the strong arm methods, and if nothing is done to make articulate the views of the vast part of radio audiences that believes in the Code, (you will note that Chairman Fly emphasizes that "the radio service is for the radio audience"), I am afraid that Coughlin's methods will win out here as they did in Germany.

You and I realize, of course, that there are various ways in which lies can be answered and strong arm methods counteracted and the views made articulate. I agree with you that there are fairly obvious direct methods of activity in each of these fields which we should not adopt, but I believe we should do more than we are doing. After all, if we aren't willing to fight in this situation, I don't know who is going to do the fighting, and I am quite sure we are not going to win simply by default.

One of the least things we can do is to take steps to mobilize and make articulate the views of people in New England who believe in the Code. The Coughlinites are very active in demanding that Coughlin be kept on the air, and, as you know, are being urged over the air and through the pages of Social Justice and through Christian Front meetings and other avenues, to send letters and make protests to the stations and to the NAB and to the FCC. If these letters are all one-sided, they are bound to have an effect on the station, on the NAB and on the FCC, all of whom are interested in serving the public and in watching the reactions of the public to the steps they take, as a guide in serving them.

Last week, I pointed out to Dorothy Gordon the importance of getting the women's clubs and other organizations in New England to get behind the Code with resolution and letters. That would at least strengthen the position and give courage to radio stations like WEFB, which are honestly trying to act in accordance with the Code. Dorothy Gordon was in a position to start such a move through the League for Political Education in Boston. I think it was a mistake when the Administrative Committee decided to veto the plans which I had suggested to Dorothy Gordon. If we are doing anything else in New England, I shall be interested to know what it is.

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I hope Station WSPR is not going to adopt the third alternative in Mr. Ehrlich's memorandum, as he thinks they will, because that is merely postponing the evil day when they will have to put Coughlin off the air, and when they will be subjected to much more vicious attack and strong arm pressure than they would have to meet now, when they are after all merely abiding by the rules adopted by the industry and have the backing of the NAB and the FCC,

Cordially yours,

(signed) David