



WE HAVE MET THE ENEMY AND HE IS VICE PRESIDENT

BY ROBERT BUTTON

To the late great Fred Allen, NBC's leading comic philosopher, life was a battleground on which he, and most of the rest of us, confronted an enemy which he called a vice president. To Fred this was a generic term meaning anybody of self-important demeanor who, with temporary corporate backing, tries to impose his will on others, particularly in matters of morality, taste and art.

I was once a kind of sword-bearer to a vice president of a network. My duty was to read the script of Fred Allen's next Sunday night show and delete from it any suggestion of indelicacy, double-entendre, sexual eccentricity, moral lapse or sin in any form whatsoever. I would then return the script to Fred, together with admonishments that he would be turned off the air if he insisted on delivering the offending lines. This I did in the

This article, by Robert Button of Greenwich, Connecticut, originally appeared in the Greenwich Time and was submitted to us by Mr. Buttons' cousin, Mary Fran Purse of Northfield, Illinois, who says that Mr. Button is still as mysterious as he was back in the Fred Allen radio days.

form of a message from my vice president, who would remain holed up in his concrete cubicle out of communication with the outside world. As it turned out, even there he was not safe from the wrath and scorn of Fred, who in his earthy way championed the rights of ordinary folk to indulge in a wide variety of minor sins as part of their Constitutional privilege.

For the network, it was a losing battle. One day Fred brought in a script in which he had as his guest interviewee a falconeer, complete with falcon. Nobody worried about this one because it was hard to imagine how a conversation with a falconeer could become salacious.

A lot of Fred's action scenes were right out of the barnyard, where anything could happen, but falconers are for the great open spaces and the clean fresh air. Thus the falcon, in this case, felt comfortable in the open spaces of NBC's largest studio and took off from his perch, soaring around the studio and dumping on the unprotected heads of the studio audience. Amid general panic Fred merely observed that the script had been through the usual process of approval and the falcon was simply expressing his views of this process and those who conduct it.

Fred usually resorted to other media to express his displeasure at the broadcast network's attempts to muzzle him. What was expunged from his radio script would sooner or later appear in print. Anyone with a corporate title was a likely target of his ridicule, but since I had no title at all, he was baffled by the problem of how to get at me.

My vice president, who let me do the dirty work, turned up in the Allen script frequently. Once Fred referred to him by his title in a conversation with Ersil Twing, a character on the Allen show. "What's a vice president?" asked Ersil. Fred's answer: a vice president is a bit of fungus that becomes attached to the underside of old oaken desks.

"Hmm," went Ersil, "Seems to me there should be some product that could eradicate this fungus."

"There is," replied Fred. "A mysterious Mr. Button goes round from office to office with a long pole which has a sponge on the end. This sponge has been dipped in a fungicide, and he sloshes it all over all the desks where vice presidents might be lurking."

"I see," said Ersil, "and is this product our sponsor?"

"Yes," said Fred, "it claims to get rid of vice presidents with one application, or your money back."

"Friends" said Ersil, "if you are troubled with low backpain due to a vice president, send us your name and address with a dollar and we will sympathize deeply with you on our way to the bank."

Now this script was declared non-grata by the authorities, but, two results followed. First, the vice president in



FRED ALLEN

charge left town shortly afterward. Secondly, I became known as "the mysterious" Mr. Button, which in a long lifetime is probably the best title I ever had. All the vice presidents I ever worked for were in and out of the revolving corporate door, in rapid succession. But as "the mysterious," I escaped notice, censure and dismissal long enough to have made the friendship of one of the most lovable, considerate and perceptive public figures in the history of American entertainment. After all, I was really on his side. ■

(ED. NOTE — The famous Fred Allen "Eagle" show will be broadcast on Old Time Radio Classics on WBBM on Sunday, January 16, 1994. Other Fred Allen shows are scheduled on WBBM and on Those Were The Days in December and January.)

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