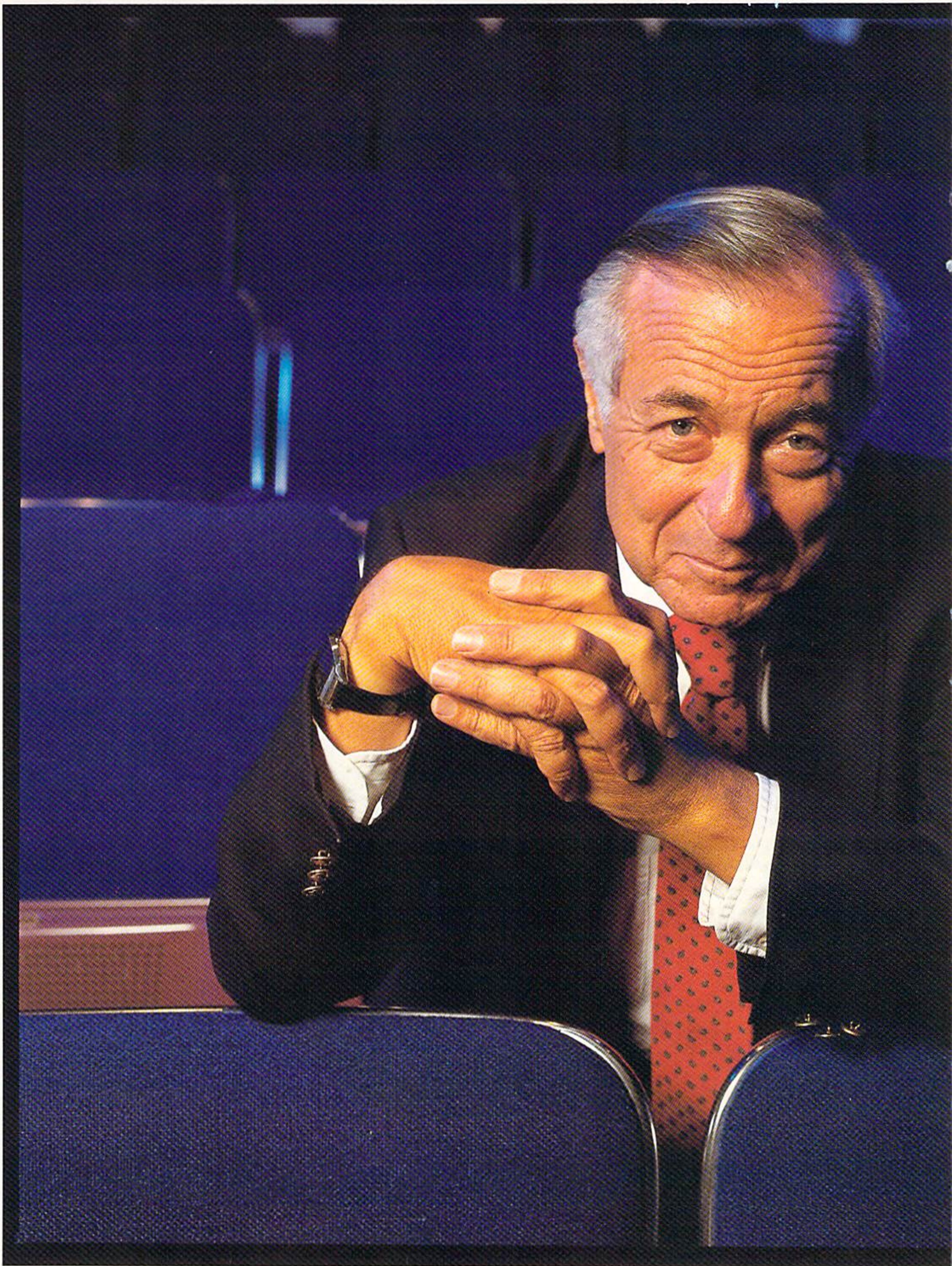
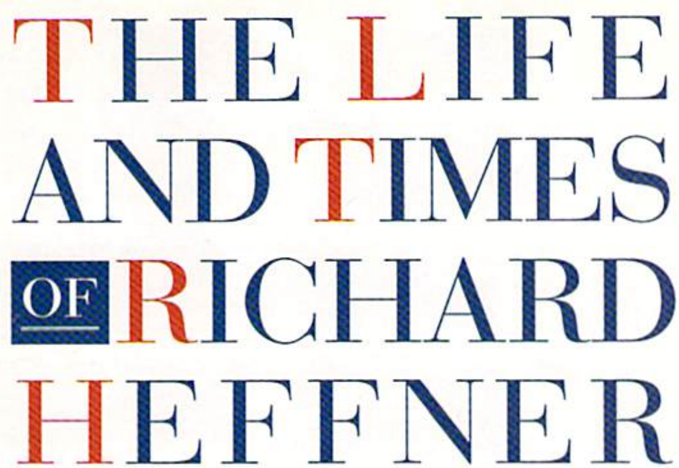




ONCE CALLED "THE LEAST-KNOWN MOST-POWERFUL MAN IN HOLLYWOOD," THIS RUTGERS PROFESSOR HAS SPENT A LIFETIME TEACHING AND SHAPING POPULAR CULTURE.

• BY BILL GLOVIN •

Trying to get through Richard D. Heffner's life in an hour of conversation is like trying to complete *War and Peace* before bed. At one time or another in his 40-plus years in academe and the media, he has discussed the issues of the day with heads of state, U.S. Supreme Court Justices, broadcast pioneers, scholars, and movie stars. During our interview in his bare-bones College Avenue office, Heffner drops names as casually as most folks drop crumbs: Eleanor Roosevelt, Thurgood Marshall, Hugh Hefner, Martin Luther King, Jr., Elie Weisel, Robert Redford, Jeffrey Katzenberg.

A professor of communications and public policy at Rutgers for 30 years, Heffner created and still hosts the PBS series "The Open Mind," a groundbreaking 38-year-old public-affairs talk show; spearheaded the battle to found the educational-broadcasting station Channel Thirteen/WNET; served for 20 years as chairman of the motion-picture industry's ratings board; and has sat on more commissions and committees than most people have the time or patience for.

In 1953, he was granted a private audience to talk history with former president Harry Truman. The day after legendary journalist Edward R. Murrow first challenged Senator Joseph McCarthy on television, Heffner talked with Murrow about joining the staff of CBS. When Martin Luther King, Jr., appeared on "The Open Mind" in 1956, Heffner had to explain to the audience who the young minister was. Seven years later Malcolm X appeared on the program the day following the assassination of Medgar Evers.

As chairman of the film industry's Classification and Ratings Administration (CARA) from 1974 until his retire-

Photograph by Nick Romanenko

Eleanor Roosevelt presents the Sherwood Award to Heffner (middle) and WRCA-TV general manager Bill Davidson.

From left: New York Governor Averill Harriman; FDR's longtime confidant, James Farley; and Heffner

From Left: NAACP's Roy Wilkins, Father John LaFarge, Irving Engel of the American Jewish Committee, and Heffner.

Playwright and FDR speechwriter Robert Sherwood (left) and Heffner on the set of "Man of the Year."

Heffner broke new ground in commercial television in the 1950s and '60s, offering intelligent discussion on controversial topics with some of the nation's leading political, legal, and religious figures, first on "Man of the Year" and later on "The Open Mind."

'Open Mind' Moderator Denies Show Seeks Sensational Topics

ment earlier this year, Heffner was ultimately responsible for seeing that the hundreds of movies released each year carried the appropriate rating, a position that earned him the sobriquet "the least-known most-powerful man in Hollywood." Heffner bore the ire of disgruntled movie executives like Alan Parker, Clint Eastwood, William Friedkin, and Wes Craven who complained that Heffner was too tough on their films. "I've had directors call me every name in the book," says Heffner, offering up a few unpublishable examples. "But I was always ready for them because they all said the same things."

Having barely scratched the surface of his remarkable life, the professor pushes back his chair and tells me he's sorry to cut things short but he has to teach a class. Like one of the parade of film-industry types who tugged at him for years, pleading to have their movie rating softened, I petition for another hearing. Despite his busy schedule, he invites me to his home. Perhaps the filmmakers who labeled Heffner arrogant and unmovable might have had some self-serving purpose.

Wall-to-wall bookcases, photographs of his two grandchildren, and a picture-window view of what he wryly calls "the gorgeous state of New Jersey" dominate the apartment on Manhattan's Riverside Drive that Heffner shares with his wife of 45 years, Elaine, a psychiatric social worker. It's a few weeks later and he's ready to fill in some of the details as the sun sets behind us in his living room. Later, as the evening stretches into the late hours, we talk over dinner at a neighborhood cafe.

Born in 1925, Heffner was raised during the Great Depression on 108th Street in Manhattan. His father, Albert, was "a very

successful bookie who dropped out in the fifth grade," says Heffner. When his father wasn't running numbers, he moonlighted as a telegrapher. In fact, the night the *Titanic* went down, Heffner relates, his father and another young man named David Sarnoff received disaster updates from the roof of Wanamaker's. "Sarnoff went on to found RCA," he says, his soft blue eyes twinkling. "Unfortunately, my father didn't follow in his footsteps." The dry humor is vintage Heffner.

At age nine, Heffner was diagnosed with a rheumatic heart and a physician suggested that moving to a dry climate could be a matter of "life or death." So Heffner, his older brother, and mother moved to Arizona for two years. "A city kid suddenly living in the desert," he says sarcastically. "My wife says that I still see myself as a cowboy." Returning to Manhattan, he was assigned to a special class for children in poor health and turned to books. He was admitted to the prestigious De Witt Clinton High School, which he calls "one of the most formidable influences on my life." There his classmates included photographer Richard Avedon and writer James Baldwin. Heffner went on to earn undergraduate (cum laude) and graduate degrees in American history at Columbia University's Columbia College in 1946 and 1947, respectively. He's proud to have been taught by Richard Hofstadter, Lionel Trilling, and Ernest Nagel.

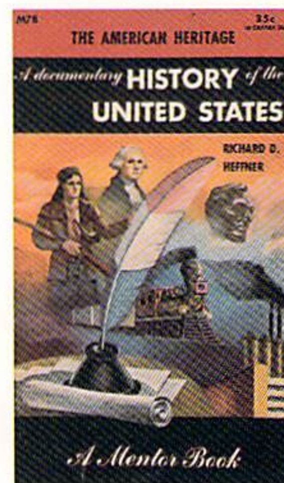
An academic path took him to the University of California, Berkeley as a teaching assistant, then back east to teach history and political science at Rutgers for two years, and then on to Columbia and Sarah Lawrence College. He wrote *A Documentary History of the United States* (Mentor, 1952) and edited an abridged edition of Alexis de Tocqueville's classic *Democracy in America* (Mentor, 1956). He's proud that his first history book—designed as an inexpensive 35-cent paperback—is in its fifth printing and still retails for only $4.95.

But by 1953, the young historian was looking to reach a broader audience than the one he had in the classroom. Encouraged by a friend's father, Heffner decided to pitch an idea for a half-hour radio program that would commemorate the eighth anniversary of Franklin D. Roosevelt's death. Rejected by several stations, he finally convinced the owners of WMCA-AM, Helen and Nathan Strauss, to air the yet-to-be-produced show. Heffner sent Eleanor Roosevelt his recently published history book, hoping to induce her to participate. She agreed, and he interviewed her at her cottage near the Roosevelt family estate in Hyde Park, New York. But Heffner's string of luck ran out when WMCA's chief engineer accidentally taped Heffner's voice over the former First Lady's.

"Malvina Thompson, Mrs. Roosevelt's secretary, had just died, and she had put herself off bounds [to the press]," remembers Heffner. "Elaine and I went to see one of our favorite entertainers that night, Danny Kaye, and even he couldn't cheer me up." Helen Strauss, who was Mrs. Roosevelt's friend and former neighbor, saved the program by convincing her to redo the interview at a Manhattan hotel.

WMCA liked the episode enough to offer Heffner $20 a week to produce, write, and narrate a weekly radio program called "History in the News," and Heffner left full-time teaching for broadcasting. He was soon attempting to break into a relatively new medium called television, but the door kept getting slammed shut. Several station managers told Heffner (who was now almost 30) that if he wanted to break into television at his "advanced" age, he should pay his dues like they had—at a newspaper.

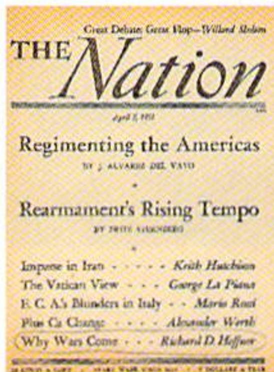
But then the door opened a crack. Virginia Warren, the daughter of California governor Earl Warren, had been Heffner's student at UC–Berkeley. He had subsequently become a friend of the family. Warren, who was presidential candidate Thomas Dewey's running mate in 1948 and would later become U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice and chair of the commission that investigated the assassination of John F. Kennedy, had come to New York in 1952 to campaign for presidential candidate Dwight D. Eisenhower. Over lunch, Heffner told Warren of his broadcasting ambitions. Warren offered to write a letter on Heffner's behalf to his friend, Edward R. Murrow, who was coproducer of "See It Now" and former vice president of news at CBS. Although Heffner would already have gotten his feet wet in radio before finally meeting with Murrow 18 months later, Murrow would have a profound influence on the rest of his



Heffner's history book—now in its fifth printing—helped him win private audiences with Harry Truman and Eleanor Roosevelt.

career. "Murrow was the only one who wasn't bothered by the fact that I didn't have a newspaper background," says Heffner. Based on Murrow's recommendation, CBS offered him a job as a producer.

But Heffner wanted to be in front of the camera, not behind it. He rejected the offer but remained always grateful to Murrow. In fact, Heffner's trademark sign off is a tribute to the media pioneer: "As an old friend used to say, good night and good luck." He finally broke into television in 1955 when WRCA-TV (now WNBC-TV) asked him to produce and host a weekly history show called "Man of the Year." But it was not until 1956, when he launched "The Open Mind," that Heffner really hit his stride as producer and moderator. A trailbreaker in commercial television, the program offered intelligent and low-pitched discussion before, in Heffner's words, "everybody began talking on TV." Among the topics discussed before they were fashionable were homosexuality, race relations, anti-Semitism, psychoanalysis, and divorce. *New York Times* media critic John Corry, critiquing the show in 1987, said, "One could listen and learn, and if not be persuaded, at least be informed. There are not too many places on television where that can happen the way it does on 'The Open Mind.' "



Through the years, Heffner has either published or been the subject of articles in *Newsweek, Life, TV Guide,* the *New York Times,* the *Los Angeles Times,* and other publications. Among his many writings is this April 1951 review of Kenneth Stampp's book, *And the War Came.*

After launching the show, Heffner worked as program director for the Metropolitan Educational Television Association (META), a consortium of leading educational and civic groups in New York, and director of special projects at CBS. Heffner was tempted to leave CBS in 1960 when Murrow asked him to join the Kennedy Administration's United States Information Agency, which Murrow directed. Frank Stanton, Heffner's boss at CBS, convinced him to stay in New York, however, and lead a META-connected investment group that included John D. Rockefeller in their attempt to buy a VHS station. That station would become Thirteen/WNET, and the struggle to launch it would become one of the more stressful periods of his life.

"Our great problem was with New Jersey's governor, [Robert B.] Meyner," he remembers. "Because Channel 13 had been assigned by the FCC to Newark, Meyner felt that we were raping, pillaging, and depriving New Jersey of its only VHS signal."

With a $6.2 million deal seemingly in the works and with FCC approval pending, Meyner protested and the acquisition was put on hold. For six months, the governor's office and the investor group haggled. Finally, the FCC gave its blessing. "But then Meyner went to federal court and got a restraining order," says Heffner. "A court of appeals denied Meyner's motion. That just antagonized him more."

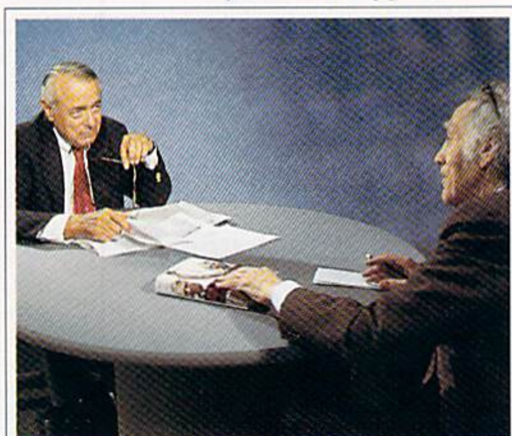
On a snowy night in December, Meyner walked the steps of the U.S. Supreme Court to personally hand the night watchman a petition asking the judges to reconsider the lower court's decision. Desperate, Heffner brought in his friend, Norman Cousins, editor of *The Saturday Review* and a friend of Meyner, to advise the investors on a way to appease the governor. Cousins met with the investors, only to be scoffed at. "Norman walked out of the meeting and said, 'The hell with them,' but I convinced him to put the interests of educational broadcasting in New York ahead of the stubborn investors. So Norman went and played tennis with the governor, and convinced him to let me and our attorney meet with him."

Diplomacy won out, and a deal was struck. Heffner became WNET's first general manager, and the station aired its first programs that September. "It was a terribly important part of my life," says Heffner, who often worked 20 hours a day during this period. "If we hadn't succeeded, there probably wouldn't be a VHF public broadcasting station today in this market."

A fund-raising squabble between the station's president and Heffner led to his dismissal in April 1963. Successive front-page stories in the *New York Times* reported that prominent writers and educators, boycotting the station in protest, withdrew from programs in which they were scheduled to appear, and some 50 non-union staff members submitted a petition supporting Heffner and offering to accept a 10 percent salary cut to keep him on staff. "I was devastated. I had given everything I had to that station," he says. That week he received several offers, including one made by his former professor at Columbia, Rutgers' president Mason Gross, to return to the faculty of Rutgers. "I wanted to teach in this important area of communications, which I felt was the most important area

of our time," he says. Gross offered him the position of University Professor of Communications and Public Policy in April 1964, and he's been at Rutgers ever since. In 1987, philanthropists Edythe and Dean Dowling, admirers of "The Open Mind," endowed the Dowling Chair of Communications and Public Policy in honor of Heffner. Upon his retirement, in accordance with the Dowlings' wishes, the professorship will be renamed the Richard D. Heffner Chair of Communications and Public Policy.

In 1974, when Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), offered Heffner the role of chairman of the board of CARA, Hollywood's six-year-old ratings board, he responded by saying that "his mother hadn't raised him to count nipples" and that he would think it over.



IN 1994, "THE OPEN MIND" STILL OFFERS INTELLIGENT DISCOURSE WITH CONTROVERSIAL FIGURES LIKE ATTORNEY WILLIAM KUNSTLER.

With a skeptical but open mind, Heffner accepted the chairmanship of CARA on a trial basis and under the condition that he spend only one week a month in Los Angeles and handle other business by telephone from New York. A staunch proponent of free spech and a director of the American Civil Liberties Union, he hoped he could provide thoughtful leadership, help MPAA regulate itself, and stave off the real threat of government censorship of films.

Despite the brutal commute and his wife's lobbying, Heffner resisted the pressure to relocate to California. He believed it was important to remain removed from the self-important atmosphere of Hollywood, which, says Heffner, is "a one-industry town. Even at nonindustry functions, the discussion always gets back to Hollywood. I wasn't comfortable schmoozing with people who were involved with projects involving millions of dollars, where you might be tempted to compromise your judgement because friendship was at stake."

At times, the pressure on Heffner to bestow the desired ratings was enormous. But Heffner, the father of two sons, says his criteria for rating films was simply what he believed other parents would think was appropriate for their children. How did he draw the sometimes fine line between PG and G and R and PG-13? To answer, Heffner uses U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's definition of pornography. "I know it when I see it."

Before Heffner's chairmanship, CARA was perceived as tough on sex and lenient on violence. "Jack Nicholson used to say about the [old] ratings board: 'If you see a nipple, the movie gets an R. If you see a nipple and it gets cut off, it's a PG, because it's not sex, it's only violence,' " says Heffner, who reversed Nicholson's theory. "Walter Krim [who bought United Artists from Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin] once said about me: 'His predecessor was a fanatic about sex, and he's a fanatic about violence.' " He's proud that a *New York Times* headline once labeled him "the man who gave an X rating to violence."

He credits his long survival to his "perverse sense of humor and the fact that I got a big kick out of the irrationalities, the lies, and the bullshit. [Some] hated my guts; they thought I had it in for them. [Director] Robert Evans got up at an appeal once, pointed a limp finger at me, and said, 'You are the mortician of this industry,' " he recalls. "But the industry hasn't died yet; there's still plenty of films and money being made."

The youth of America—the demographic segment of the population that the board is designed to protect—is more vulnerable than ever, Heffner says. Is there anyone who really thinks violent video games and all the mayhem on television and in film don't have a negative effect on kids? he asks. Despite studies that attest to the contrary, he's a firm believer that violence on the screen begets violence in the streets.

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Richard Heffner

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"If the media mavens, the people who make this stuff, don't discipline themselves, you can be sure that there's going to be censorship in this country," he says. "But that's the last thing I want." Now that he's stepped down as chairman of CARA, he's planning to use his 20 years in the industry to write a book on media self-regulation. "Do I have great concerns about whether voluntarism works in a profit-driven, media-driven society?" he asks. "Yes, I have very great concerns. Is it still the best system? Probably. But there are a few more insights that I think I can provide." His book will advise the makers of shoddy material to impose their own limits before the censor comes and starts dictating stricter limits. "Civil rights and child labor are areas where society was pushed to a point where it needed to act, and it did," he says by way of example. Does he feel his book can make a difference? "I'm hopeful," he says.

Of his 20 years spent viewing and re-viewing thousands of movies, casting the tie-breaking vote when the board split evenly, and taking on the critics, he says wearily, "It was fun in many ways. It was aggravating in many ways. It was fascinating always."

It's 8:45 on a Monday morning, and a few students are still straggling into "Communications and Human Values," Heffner's undergraduate seminar that began at 8:10. Heffner chides them for being late, and despite the fact that it's early in the semester, the students have already sized him up as a gentle soul who will cut them some slack for their Monday-morning tardiness.

Students I spoke with called Heffner inspirational and spoke of their respect and admiration for him. Governor Mario Cuomo of New York, who has appeared on "The Open Mind," once said, "I've learned from Professor Heffner. His questions require you to think." A former student, now an attorney in South Jersey, says, "He's the kind of man you're lucky to meet once or twice in a lifetime." He and others even credit their former professor with changing their lives.

"I make every effort to force my students to deal with complex ideas and difficult ideals," he says. The first half of this seminar, for example, involves journalistic liberties. Class discussion focuses on the recent criticism *The New Yorker* faced when staff writer Alastair Reid admitted that views of Spain presented in an article were based on composites rather than facts. Heffner probes; students respond. Like any good teacher, he seems as ready to learn from them as they are from him. When the discussion moves to Socrates' role as a master teacher, a student remarks that since Socrates had been accused of being a pedophile, his motives should be reconsidered. This R-rated thought seems to disturb Heffner's view of the philosopher.

Heffner plans to teach, he says, as long as he has something to offer. He worries, however, that his long tenure on the ratings board will be his legacy. "That is just a small piece of what defines me," he says. "Teaching, my work on 'The Open Mind,' the founding of Channel 13, my role as a father and a grandfather also define me."

As the period winds down, Heffner asks for a volunteer to lead the class in next week's discussion of Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*. The task is apparently too daunting; the silence builds until a student sitting to Heffner's right asks, "And will that person act as you?" All his years in front of the camera and the public spotlight surface: Heffner places his hand on the student's shoulder. "No one," he thunders, "could act as me!" ❑

Bill Glovin is the senior editor of Rutgers Magazine.

Deep Secrets

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interested in trying to isolate the natural antidotes these animals use to detoxify the effects of their environment. If scientists are able to identify these chemicals and make versions that are safe for humans, they could work in much the same manner as antioxidant vitamins work to repair damage to DNA.

The deep sea, with its intense pressures and temperatures, may also offer a helping hand to industry. "We now know that there are enzymes [in the ocean depths] that are very stable at tremendous temperatures. If more could be found out about them, they may be a help to the detergent industry or the food industry," says Lutz.

There are other plans for eventually making tangible use of Lutz's discovery. "We want to look at whether we can design equipment to make it feasible to get at this inexhaustible supply of minerals," says Corell. "If that were the case—and we could do it safely and in a cost-effective manner—we would be harvesting a rejuvenating supply of ore rather than mining a finite deposit."

But for now it is simply back to the deep for more exploration. Back for another cramped, cold, claustrophobic ride in *Alvin*, which Lutz plans for November of 1995. "The deep sea is inner space," says Lutz. "We are now capable of looking into inner space with the degree of clarity that we are able to look into the far reaches of outer space. We can now discover the secrets that are on our own planet. It is the one frontier that is within our grasp and is reachable within our lifetime or our children's lifetimes. There is still so much we can learn from the processes on this planet. We could spend the rest of our lives down there and still not learn all there is." ❑

John Carpi is a freelance medical and science writer who lives in New York City.