

# A Tribute to Steve Allen

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Steve Allen, who died Oct. 30, 2000, was a unique, even heroic, figure in popular American culture. He was closely identified with the entertainment industry, and was heralded as one of the pioneers of television talk shows. His talents were multifarious: He was a comedian, wrote thousands of songs, innumerable short stories, novels, plays, and books.

I had known and worked with Steve Allen for almost thirty years—as a friend and colleague and in my capacity as publisher of Prometheus Books and as Chairman of CSICOP and the Council for Secular Humanism. His intellectual interests were encyclopedic, his devotion to liberal and charitable causes exemplary. He was his own man, standing against the bombast and bunkum of the passing parade.

He was a powerful advocate of the skeptics movement; and he did what he could to further its aims, ever willing to speak at our conferences and workshops. He never tired of lending his support to our efforts. We are particularly grateful for the fact that he was at the inaugural openings of the Center for Inquiry in Amherst, New York (1995) and the Center for Inquiry—West in Los Angeles (1997).

Most notably, Steve Allen accepted the appointment as Co-chairman (along with Nobel laureate Glenn Seaborg) of the Council for Media Integrity, a CSICOP-sponsored organization aimed at getting some balance in scientific reporting in the media and some fairness in evaluating pseudoscientific claims.

Most recently he took TV and movies to task for their excessive violence and vulgarity, though many of his former libertarian friends turned against his campaign against obscenity in the mass media because he allied himself with conservatives—as well as liberals, I might add.

Steve Allen felt a special responsibility to improve the quality of the electronic media. It is not sensationalism or ratings (the bottom line), he said, that should be the sole criteria of programming, but the ideas and values that are expressed. Although he believed in freedom of expression and was opposed to censorship, he thought that the public have every right to criticize the purveyors of false or tasteless programs.



Last spring I invited Steve to a humanist conference in Los Angeles to test his ideas before a liberal audience—and he withstood both criticism and applause with decorum and aplomb. His controversial views will appear in *Vulgarians at the Gate—TV Trash and Raunch Radio: Raising the Standards of Popular Culture*, which will be published posthumously by Prometheus Books in April 2001.

All told, Steve published fifteen books with Prometheus, including *Dumbth: The Lost Art of Thinking with 101 Ways to Reason Better and Improve Your Mind* (reissued in 1998)—which became a bestseller. Critical thinking was high on his agenda. He produced *Gullible's*

*Travels*, an audiotape for Prometheus Books with original music and script (read and sung by him and his wife, Jayne Meadows), “in order to introduce youngsters to the brain and its proper use.”

His award-winning television series *Meeting of the Minds*, which he wrote and produced (with Jayne, two decades ago), stands out in distinguished contrast with the mundane wasteland of televised fare. This series pitted Socrates, Marie Antoinette, Sir Thomas More, Tom Paine, Karl Marx, Emily Dickinson, Galileo, Charles Darwin, and other historical figures in dialogue and disputation. When efforts were made by Prometheus (which had published four volumes of the scripts of *Meeting of the Minds*) to relaunch the series, it was difficult to find syndicators because many in the television industry felt that the series was “too thoughtful” for the American public—a sad commentary on the decline of taste and intelligence.

Two of his most courageous books were critiques of the Bible (*Steve Allen on the Bible, Religion and Morality* [1989] and a sequel). Martin Gardner, in the preface to the first volume, compared this favorably with Tom Paine's *The Age of Reason*. Steve was willing to publish these books because he wished to counter the rise of the Religious Right. What other celebrity in the American media would have the courage to do so? All that we have on the national scene today are professions of piety, almost never reflective dissent—a testament to the independence of the man.

Steve Allen was a freethinker—skeptical and humanist—in the best sense of those terms. His creative accomplishments were so many that I could only touch on some of them. What a grievous loss his death is to American culture and to those of us who knew him personally, admired, and loved him. □