

# Laggard Time Warner could lead industry

**T**ime Warner would love to get out of the cultural-pollution business. First of all, there's the shame problem.

Friends in the Time Warner empire tell me that my column on this subject last March was taped up on walls and doors all over the Time-Life building — a sure sign that many employees there are ashamed of the music division's low standards and the ethical shadow falling across the whole corporation.

Then there's the awkwardness about the opinions of Time Warner board member Henry Luce III. It's not nice to have the son of Time's founder loudly pointing out the scurviness of the product.

Time magazine wagged its finger too. Last week's splendid cover stories acknowledged that the basic charges against its parent company are true. Along the way, Time compared Time Warner's dubious decisions with those of other companies that have said no to vile products. "Time Warner has undeniably made itself a major presence in the outer reaches of hard-edged rap. . . . The standards of taste at Warner Music labels, moreover, have at times seemed extraordinarily lax," said one story. The other story asked: "How many rap songs about slicing women's throats does the world really need?"

Gerald Levin was unavailable to answer questions about those "extraordinarily lax" standards or the exact number of throat-slitting ditties that Time Warner feels compelled to offer us. As chairman of the world's biggest noncommunicating

communications empire, he refused to talk to his own news magazine or anybody else in the media last week, and Time Warner apparently pulled its spokesmen from all talk shows. Perhaps Levin is stashed away in an executive protection program.

Now Time Warner has a new difficulty. Call it the suburban problem. Sen. Bill Bradley, D-N.J., thinks the fight against cultural pollution should be carried to the leafy suburbs where board members of offensive companies live. He said last week: "If you see something that offends you, find out who the sponsor is, find out who is on the board of directors, find out where they live, who their neighbors are, their local clubs, churches and synagogues. Send a letter to the members of the board at their homes and ask whether they realize they are making huge profits from the brutal degradation of human beings. Then send a copy of this letter to all of their neighbors and friends."

Does it strike anybody that this is rather extraordinary advice from a liberal Democratic senator — to start embarrassing cultural polluters in front of their friends, neighbors and clergy? Bradley is showing us that this is a crossover issue.

Some people like to think that the current cultural campaign is a narrow, right-wing crusade. But the polls show otherwise, and so do the comments by Bradley, President Clinton and Vice President Gore. New York Daily News columnist Jim Sleeper has the right term for what's happening here. He calls it a "civic rebellion" against cultural polluters — a broad-based and rising campaign supported by ordinary citizens who feel overwhelmed by a dumbed-down and an increasingly coarse, corrupt and brutal popular culture.

Comments by politicians such as Sen. Bob Dole and Bradley are welcome, but the campaign really has little or nothing to do with Washington, public policy or legislation. It's

about using moral and consumer pressure to get companies to take responsibility for what they are doing to the culture.

As a result of all the negative publicity, there's a management consensus within Time Warner that the company has to set clear ethical standards and name a panel with the authority to make sure the standards are actually met. That announcement, scheduled for last Thursday or Friday, was postponed in favor of more fretting and delay.

In fact, there are problems. Some rappers have contracts guaranteeing control of the lyrics. Time Warner must be careful not to squelch black political protest along with the real target: the glorification of brutality and misogyny. And there should be some recognition that what appears to be spontaneous expression by a rap artist is often the result of rather coldhearted marketing.

Last week, Willie D., formerly of Geto Boys, told USA Today that he had some reservations about his startling lyrics, now that he has a month-old daughter, but "I have to put food on the table. For me, it's a business. I say it to get paid." In this case, what he said to get paid by a Time Warner label is that a woman deserved to get raped or murdered because she left her curtains open.

One reason Time Warner is taking so much heat is that it has been down this road before — with Ice-T's cop-killing song — and apparently learned nothing from the experience. The last time around, Chairman Gerald Levin stonewalled for weeks, talking piously about the First Amendment, then suddenly gave in and eased Ice-T out of the company. This time the company has spared us the First Amendment lectures, but the same sort of dithering has kept the problem from being solved. It's important to get moving. It's not just about erasing past sins. Time Warner has a chance to lead the whole industry.

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