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They Can't Seem to Please Him

Pity the poor television networks. They can't seem to please Mr. Nixon no matter how hard they try—and, heaven knows, they've been trying. In fact, they've been leaning over backward to give the President a fair shake, especially on the main, big-audience, half-hour evening news shows.

Yet, for all their pains, the President, at his latest press conference, blamed the networks newsmen for his loss of public confidence. For the last four months, he complained, he has been attacked in "every way" by "innuendo, by leak, by, frankly, the leers and sneers of commentators. . ."

The ordinary television viewers must wonder who, specifically, Mr. Nixon was referring to, for if anybody has reason to complain over recent political imbalance on the air it should be the Democratic National Committee, not the White House.

Recently, when Congress returned to Washington from a month's recess, CBS, on the Walter Cronkite's "Evening News," interviewed four freshmen representatives to get a cross section of opinion on what the voters back home are thinking, particularly about Watergate and the President. The congressmen were William Hudnut of Indiana, Ronald Sarasin of Connecticut, David Towell of Nevada and David Treen of Louisiana. Rep. Treen reported that only one voter out of 500 cares about Watergate. As for the Senate investigation, they want "that nonsense" stopped. The other three congressmen also said Watergate was more or less a bore to their constituents. Apparently, nobody was mad at Mr. Nixon.

These four legislators have one thing in common; they are all conservative Republicans. No members of the opposition were on the program at all. One shudders to think what the White House would have said if all those interviewed on CBS had been liberal Democrats, especially if they had reported that the electorate was deeply disillusioned with the President over Watergate. There surely would have been outraged protest by presidential spokesmen.

The CBS performance, however, was matched by NBC the night after Mr. Nixon's August 15 prime-time television speech on Watergate. In testing public reaction to the President's effort to explain away the scandal, NBC filmed interviews with a hard-hat construction worker and his family, a Midwest farmer and his family and the wealthy guests at a party in an exclusive Los Angeles suburb. Again, those interviewed had one thing in common: all had voted for Mr. Nixon last fall. It turned out that several of the group were not much impressed by the President's television defense, but even so how would the White House have reacted if NBC had instead sought out, say, an antiwar demonstrator, a liberal college professor and a party put on by a crowd of Democrats?

By this time, the White House would no doubt have filed a formal complaint with the Federal Communications Commission, charging NBC with tilting its program by filming only pro-McGovern, anti-Nixon voters. Doubtless it would have demanded equal time in thunderous words.

The NBC program in question was the John Chancellor evening news broadcast, with Gerrick Utley pinching on this occasion. After talking with Mr. Utley, who, like Chancellor, is widely respected for his objectivity, I am satisfied that the show was arranged in good faith, with no conscious intention of loading it against the Democrats.

The producers apparently felt there wouldn't be much news in a pro-McGovern Democrat reacting critically to the President's speech. No doubt they were right in thinking that a Republican-bites-Nixon interview would arouse more interest. Be that as it may, it is unlikely that the White House would accept such an explanation if the situation had been the opposite.

The White House doesn't like newspapers any more than television, although it is hard to see why. Shortly before the President's landslide reelection last fall, Editor and Publisher reported 548 daily newspapers for Nixon and 38 for McGovern. By circulation, it was 17,532,436 for Nixon as against 1,468,223 for McGovern.

George Sedles, the author, observes that "no one pointed to or 'viewed with alarm' the more alarming fact that there were 12 states without one Democratic newspaper." Apparently having more than 93 per cent of the nation's newspapers in his corner was not enough for Mr. Nixon. It is, of course, possible to get 100 per cent but only under certain kinds of governments.