

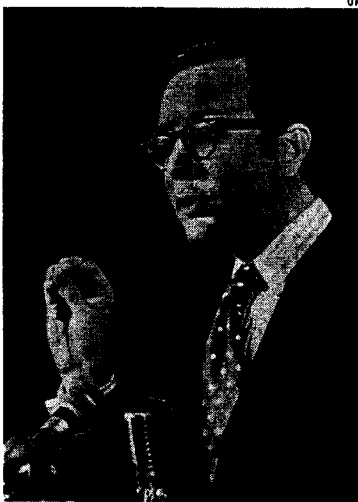
Restrained "Freedom"

The autumnal, post-landslide truce between the Nixon Administration and the TV networks ended abruptly last week with a wintry blast from Indianapolis. Speaking before a local chapter of Sigma Delta Chi, Clay T. Whitehead, director of the White House Office of Telecommunications Policy (OTP), attacked the networks—particularly network news—with a harshness reminiscent of Vice President Agnew's florid denunciations of three years ago. Whitehead derided what he called the "ideological plugola" of TV newsmen who sell their own political views, and tartly dismissed "so-called professionals who confuse sensation with sense and who dispense elitist gossip in the guise of news analysis."

To add bite to these Agnew-like barks, Whitehead revealed that the Administration will submit a bill to Congress that would dump responsibility for alleged network transgressions directly on the nation's nearly 600 network-affiliated local stations. "Station managers and network officials who fail to act to correct imbalance or consistent bias from the networks—or who acquiesce by silence—can only be considered willing participants," said Whitehead, "to be held fully accountable by the broadcaster's community at license-renewal time."

Conditions. This scarcely veiled threat brought a hail of phone calls to OTP offices in Washington from worried station owners. They quickly learned that the proposed legislation offers them blandishments as well. The bill extends the duration of FCC licenses from three to five years and makes life easier for local stations at license-renewal time. Competing bids for a station's license, for example, would be entertained only after the Federal Communications Commission had revoked or failed to renew it. Out would go the current FCC criteria stipulating the proportion of generally unprofitable news and public-service broadcasting a station must carry to retain its license; they would be replaced by two vaguely worded conditions requiring broadcasters to be "attuned" to community needs and to air "conflicting views on issues of public importance."

In other words, the Whitehead bill seemed designed to bring local stations more and safer profits in return for allowing themselves to be used as instruments of restraint against the networks, in accordance with some vague principle of balance, presumably to be defined by the Administration. In theory, no one could be against "fairness" or "responsibility." In fact, it looked like a blatant attempt to use the Government's licensing power to enforce certain political views or standards.



WHITEHEAD SPEAKING IN INDIANAPOLIS
Too high a price?

Despite the potential benefits they could receive, many local station executives argued that the policing or censoring of network programs is too high a price to pay. "The strategy seems to be to keep the networks in line by the threat of having hundreds of local station managers do Nixon's lobbying work for him," charged one TV executive in Houston. "If a news documentary blasts Nixon, the station managers will jump on the networks and do the job for the White House. It is simply outrageous."

Other local broadcasters voiced bewilderment over exactly how the Administration expects the monitoring of

network shows to work. Networks sometimes arrange advance screenings of controversial entertainment shows for local stations, but that would almost certainly not be feasible for news. As for correcting alleged imbalances, Don Owen, news director of CBS affiliate KSLA in Shreveport, asked: "What sources do we have in Shreveport, Louisiana, to balance the Watergate story by the network?"

Less responsible affiliates, points out a former CBS News president, Fred Friendly, may be happy to sidestep this problem. "Lots of affiliates don't want to carry documentaries," Friendly says. "Some never wanted to carry network news." Friendly speculates that if the Whitehead bill becomes law many stations might cancel network news and use the time slots for their own offerings and more profitable local advertising.

Meanwhile, the networks themselves generally maintained an air of injured silence. Whitehead, feigning surprise at the tempest he had caused, repeatedly insisted to newsmen and TV interviewers that the bill promises "more freedom for the broadcaster." Pressed to supply a specific example of "elitist gossip in the guise of news analysis," Whitehead replied: "I think almost anyone who watches television would have his own pet example of that kind of thing."

When the bill reaches Capitol Hill, however, Congressmen may want to know just whose pets the Administration plans to unleash. Presumably, the networks will be able to join with anti-Administration lawmakers to mount a powerful opposition lobby. But if the Whitehead measure is intended to make the television industry more divided and cautious, it will already have done its job even if it is defeated.

The Year's Most

Most promising new U.S. network: the BBC, ever more visible as the producer of such literate entertainments as **ELIZABETH R.**, **VANITY FAIR** and **AMERICA**.

Most unwelcome conversation stoppers: the cancellation of **THE DAVID FROST SHOW** (Group W) and three-fourths cancellation of **THE DICK CAVETT SHOW** (ABC).

Most slickly scripted and produced special: the Republican National Convention in Miami, whose predictable plot line made it even more boring than its Democratic competition.

Most dramatic live moments: the tragic terrorist raid at the Munich Olympics, which erupted during ABC's impressive running coverage of the sports events.

Most lonely program: **NBC RE-**

PORTS, the only regularly scheduled network public affairs show in prime time.

Most venturesome single show: **VD BLUES** (PBS).

Most tiresome repetition of a single gag: **BRIDGET LOVES BERNIE** (CBS).

Most effective force in children's TV: Action for Children's Television (ACT), whose campaigning reduced the number and subdued the tone of exploitative commercials (vitamins disguised as candy, product pitches by hosts of shows) during kiddie hours.

Most entertaining new series: **SANFORD AND SON** (NBC).

Most potent ratings organization: Nixon Inc., whose disapproval of broadcasting trends showed up in speeches, lawsuits, proposed legislation and, above all, in the drastic revamping of public broadcasting to tone down, among other things, its national news and documentaries.