

Congressmen Warn New FCC Chief Against Intimidating TV Newsmen

11/19/69
By William Greider
Washington Post Staff Writer

Several congressmen who oversee the Federal Communications Commission delivered a friendly, but blunt warning yesterday to the agency's new Republican chairman—don't "intimidate" the news operations of network television.

Dean Burch, the newly appointed FCC chairman, responded by denying that he had any intention of intimidation when he personally called the three networks and asked for transcripts of their commentaries on President Nixon's Nov. 3 speech on Vietnam.

Burch was making his first appearance as FCC chairman before the communications subcommittee of the House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee at a hearing on pay television systems. But

several subcommittee members switched the subject and asked him about the current rhubarb over Vice President Agnew's speech criticizing the network TV news.

Rep. Lionel Van Deerlin (D-Calif.) told Burch: "I'm sure it doesn't come as any surprise to you that there are some members of Congress who look with some misgivings on events of the past few days which look to some of us like a possible attempt at intimidation."

Van Deerlin said he was troubled that Burch, on his third day in office, chose to contact the networks personally for the transcripts, when the usual procedure is to obtain them through a request from the commission's secretary. Network executives told Van Deerlin they couldn't remember a similar request

coming directly from the chief of the regulatory agency.

"I just want to advise you in the friendliest manner possible," said Van Deerlin, "I hope your request'd'd not represent a new trend at the commission. . . . Our views are so strong on this that we might be found climbing up your back if there are more incidents such as this."

Burch replied: "I was not attempting in any way to intimidate anyone."

The FCC chairman explained that he had watched CBS on the night of the President's speech and was interested in comparing how the two other networks handled the event. Unfamiliar with the regular procedure, Burch said, "I thought that if I wanted the transcripts, the easiest way to get them was to ask for them."

See BROADCAST, A14, Col. 1

FCC Chief Warned Over TV Newsmen

BROADCAST, From A1

Van Deerlin said he was "delighted to hear this explanation," but a colleague, Rep. Richard L. Ottinger (D-N.Y.), didn't accept it.

Burch's phone calls, coupled with Vice President Agnew's speech a week later, were "a clear effort at intimidation of the networks' ability to comment . . . Anything that wasn't praise of the President wasn't acceptable," Ottinger charged.

The congressman added: "There's no question the coverage of this November Mobilization was affected by the administration's action. There was no live coverage of what was obviously the most important news event in the country . . . I don't think this would have happened were it not for the nervousness engendered by your action and the Vice President's remarks."

In the future, Ottinger said, "it may well be that the shoe may be on the other foot some day and you will value the right of the networks to criticize the administration in power."

Both Burch and Agnew have insisted that the criticism of network performance does not imply any desire for censorship. The FCC chairman said the agency's formal procedure for obtaining transcripts ought to be revised since it takes 20 to 30 days.

Several Republicans on the subcommittee came to Burch's defense. Rep. James T. Brody (R-N.C.) said he applauded Agnew's speech and didn't see any intimidation in Burch's action.

Rep. James Harvey (R-Mich.) said he thinks there is "some proper cause for concern" in how the networks handle news. Rep. Donald G. Brozman (R-Colo.) said it is clear that the House committee members do not want any undue pressures to influence the networks' news judgment.

Rep. Torbert H. MacDonald (D-Mass.), chairman of the communications subcommittee,

sought to close the discussion on a conciliatory note.

MacDonald said, "If there is any fire to the smoke—and I agree the smoke was quite visible, though I don't mean to imply that there is necessarily any fire—it could be the subject of a complete investigation by this committee."

On the subject of pay TV, the new FCC chairman endorsed in general terms the regulatory agency's policy of encouraging the development of subscription TV operations in major cities.