

Agnew Castigates TV Over News Handling

P. 11/14/69
Vice President Agnew criticized the three national television networks last night for "hostile" handling of President Nixon's Vietnam speech and accused "a small and unelected elite" of TV newsmen of abusing their power over public opinion.

The Vice President called on the networks "to turn their critical powers on themselves . . . toward improving the quality and objectivity of news presentation."

He said, "We would never

trust such power over public opinion in the hands of an elected government—it is time we questioned it in the hands of a small and unelected elite. The great networks have dominated America's airwaves for decades; the people are entitled to a full accounting of their stewardship."

The speech was delivered in Des Moines, Iowa, before the Midwest Regional Republican Committee.

Specifically, Agnew complained that the three networks imposed "instant analysis and querulous criticism" immediately after President Nixon's Nov. 3 address to the nation on Vietnam and, thus, hampered the President's plea for national unity.

"The audience of 70 million Americans—gathered to hear the President of the United States—was inherited by a small band of network commentators and self-appointed analysts, the majority of whom expressed in one way or another their hostility to what he had to say," the Vice President charged.

"It was obvious that their minds were made up in advance . . . One commentator twice contradicted the President's statement about the exchange of correspondence with Ho Chi Minh. Another challenged the President's abilities as a politician. A third asserted that the President was now 'following the Pentagon line.' Others, by the expressions on their faces, the tone of questions, and the sarcasm of their responses, made clear their sharp disapproval."

See AGNEW, A20, Col. 1

Agnew Lashes TV on News Handling

AGNEW, From A1

In passing, Agnew took a sharp slap at former ambassador Averell Harriman, who appeared on ABC with commentary on the President's Vietnam speech which Agnew characterized as "a broad range of gratuitous advice."

"A word about Mr. Harriman," Agnew injected. "For 10 months, he was America's chief negotiator at the Paris peace talks—a period in which

the United States swapped some of the greatest military concessions in the history of warfare for an enemy agreement on the shape of a bargaining table.

"Like Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner,' Mr. Harriman seems to be under some heavy compulsion to justify his failures to anyone who will listen. The networks have shown themselves willing to give him all the air time he desires."

Harriman, asked for his re-

action, said, "I don't think that statement deserves serious comment. All I would say is that I am glad to be included with the television news media which I feel, by and large, are trying to do a conscientious job in keeping the American public informed on the many subjects of national interest."

The three networks responded by broadcasting Agnew's speech live from Des Moines and it was carried by all three Washington affiliates.

CBS President Frank Stanton said in New York last night that no American institution should be immune to criticism but that Agnew's "unprecedented attempt . . . to intimidate a news medium which depends . . . upon government licenses" did not represent "legitimate criticism."

The White House said it did not receive a copy of Agnew's speech before it was released, and that the President has not discussed the issue of network news reporting with Agnew.

With yesterday's tough remarks, the Vice President has insured continued controversy surrounding himself. In recent weeks, he has become celebrated and castigated for his bluntly worded attacks on the peace movement and the demonstrations now beginning in Washington.

In his speech last night, Agnew said he wanted to focus attention on the network television newsmen and commentators—"this little group of men who not only enjoy a right of instant rebuttal to every presidential address, but more importantly wield a free hand in selecting, presenting and interpreting the great issues of our nation."

Agnew insisted, that, while these men choose the news that most Americans watch, the TV news men are not in tune with what most of the nation's citizens believe.

"To a man," Agnew said, "these commentators and producers live and work in the geographical and intellectual confines of Washington, D.C., or New York City . . . Both communities bask in their own provincialism, their own parochialism. We can deduce that these men thus read the same newspapers and draw their po-

litical and social views from the same sources. Worse, they talk constantly to one another, thereby providing artificial reinforcement to their shared viewpoints."

Agnew said their biases show up on television and cited as evidence the coverage of the street violence at the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago as well as an example from President Nixon's campaign in which an unnamed news anchorman accused Mr. Nixon of a "natural instinct to smash the enemy with a club."

"Had this slander been made by one political candidate about another," Agnew said, "it would have been dismissed by most commentators as a partisan assault. But this attack emanated from the privileged sanctuary of a network studio and therefore had the apparent dignity of an objective statement."

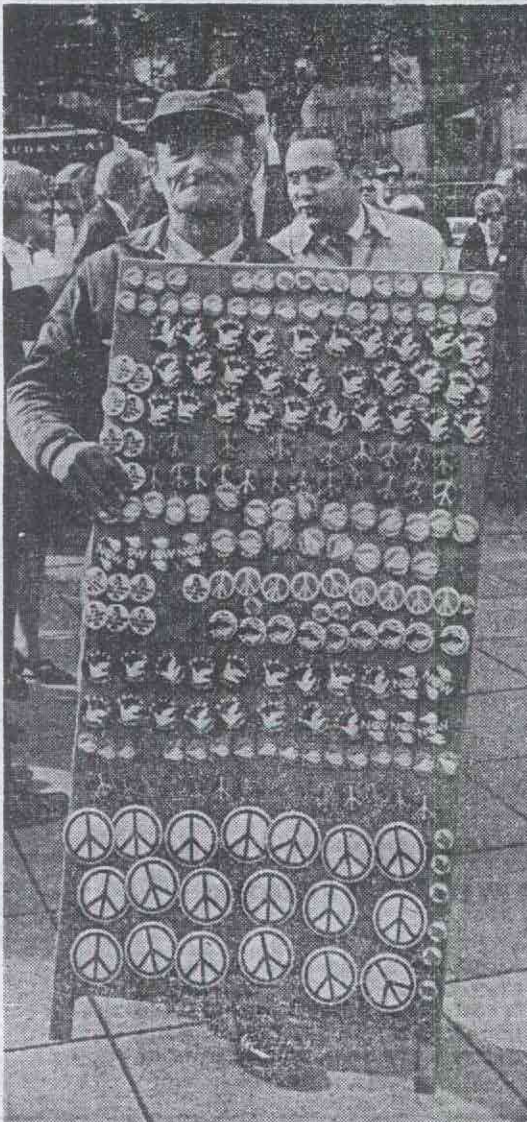
He charged further that the networks' "endless pursuit of controversy" produced "a narrow and distorted picture of America," emphasizing the demonstrators and militant leader over less dramatic sooties about law-abiding Americans.

'A Raised Eyebrow

"It was the networks that elevated Stokely Carmichael and George Lincoln Rockwell from obscurity to national prominence," Agnew chafed. "Nor is their power confined to the substantive. A raised eyebrow, an inflection of the voice, a caustic remark dropped in the middle of a broadcast can raise doubts in a million minds about the veracity of a public official or the wisdom of a government policy."

The Vice President, noting that other observers such as Walter Lippman have voiced concern about the concentrated power of the networks, said:

"I am not asking for government censorship or any other kind of censorship. I am asking whether a form of censorship already exists when the news that 40 million Americans receive each night is determined by a handful of men responsible only to their corporate employers and filtered through a handful of commentators who admit to their own set of biases."



By Arthur Ellis—The Washington Post

Percy Azeruvitz was busy hawking peace buttons.