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## "The Privileged Sanctuary of a Network Studio"

There is a decent and respectable case to be made that "a tiny and closed fraternity of privileged men" represent "a concentration in power over American public opinion unknown in history," but Mr. Agnew has not made it. His tirade against the network commentators in Des Moines yesterday would carry twice the force had it been accurate and even-handed, but that is not the Vice President's way; never use a scalpel when a meat ax can do the job.

Taking as his springboard the commentary of television newsmen following the President's Vietnam speech a fortnight ago, Mr. Agnew observed: "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 . . . to guarantee in advance that the President's plea for national unity would be challenged, one network trotted out Averell Harriman . . ." The Vice President asserted that the "sharp disapproval" of the commentators was made evident by "the expressions on their faces, the tone of their questions, and the sarcasm of their responses . . ."

To make it absolutely clear what precedents he had in mind, the President cited Winston Churchill's appeal to the British people to stand fast against Hitler. "(Churchill) did not have to contend with a gaggle of commentators raising doubts about whether he was reading public opinion right, or whether Britain had the stamina to see the war through." Wrong. Mr. Agnew should consult his English history. His second example, that President Kennedy did not have to contend with second-guessers in his resolution of the Cuban missile crisis is equally erroneous. For the facts about that, he would do well to consult Senator (now Ambassador) Kenneth Keating, whose doubts before, during and after the tense days in October, 1962 are well known.

Much of the rest of what Mr. Agnew had to say was either trivial or churlish or both. Mr. Reynolds's raised eyebrows or the tone of Mr. Seavareid's voice will not sway 200 million Americans. Mr. Kalb's contention that Ho Chi Minh's letter was moderate in tone is shared by a good many people in government and out, and is legitimate comment. What Mr. Agnew does not appear to grasp is the

difference between respect for the President's views and unquestioning acceptance of the rightness of those views. A thing isn't necessarily true because the President says it is true; and ditto, in spades, for the network commentators.

When Mr. Agnew veers away from special pleading, he makes a number of very interesting points. "How is this network news determined? A small group of men, numbering perhaps no more than a dozen anchormen, commentators and executive producers settle upon the 20 minutes or so of film or commentary that is to reach the public . . ." That's probably about right, although it is not true that the commentators are responsible to no one; they are in a final sense responsible to the viewers, who can switch them off and we assume often do. Still, an offended party in a two-minute film clip has little means of redress. Is it a good thing for 20 million Americans to assemble their impression of what's happening from Mr. Huntley and Mr. Brinkley? The NBC evening news reaches more people each night than the top 10 newspapers in the country combined. Huntley and Brinkley can make a personality overnight, and it is uncomfortably close to the mark when Mr. Agnew observes that "one minute of Eldridge Cleaver is worth 10 minutes of Roy Wilkins." But the question there is which of those men goes to the heart of the news. One isn't sure.

But Mr. Agnew isn't prepared to go into it intelligently. "In the networks' endless pursuit of controversy," he says, "we should ask what is the end value . . . to enlighten or to profit? What is the end result . . . to inform or confuse? How does the on-going exploration for more action, more excitement, more drama, serve our national search for internal peace and stability?"

So what the Vice President is doing is blaming the networks for bringing the bad news. It isn't the fault of the society that the ghettos are erupting or that students are protesting the war or that white girls are marrying black boys, it is the fault of television. Don't blame conditions, blame Walter Cronkite. The society is neurotic because television makes it so . . .

"Gresham's law seems to be operating in the network news," Mr. Agnew says. And in vice-presidential speeches.