

Portrait - election year

Ford Show Sold, but Not to Networks

By Jack Anderson and Les Whitten

Bitter are the ways of sweetness and light!

For a vagrant hour, I laid down my muckrake, put aside the adversary scowl and sat down with a President to sing patriotic paeans. For which lapses I have now been suitably punished.

The President's press secretary, Ron Nessen, has accused me of having duped the President. "I think we have been had," Nessen howled from Helsinki. "I think we got conned."

For a mischievous moment, I was tempted to let Nessen's statement stand. It isn't everyone, after all, who can claim credit for snookering the President.

I recall how my late mentor, Drew Pearson, reveled in the notoriety of having been called nasty names by three Presidents. How the old master would relish from beyond the pale the spectacle of his awkward protegee charged with traducing a President.

But a long-indentured slavery to the facts compels me to decline Nessen's unintended accolade and to set the record straight.

My appearance before the TV cameras with President Ford grew out of my Bicentennial activities. I was supposed to talk with the President about America, its past and its future, its failings and its greatness.

I got into the act because of my notoriety as an establishment baiter. It was thought that two such disparate figures

would give the program an extra dimension, having somewhat the unifying effect of a joint endorsement by beauty and the beast.

Nessen has now charged that I hoaxed the President into a television interview under false pretenses, claiming for it a wider distribution than I could deliver. Not so. He was told from the beginning that it was not planned as a network program, that it would be offered piecemeal to individual stations across the country.

This is confirmed by Nessen's own account to The New York Times, which reported: "When the interview was completed, Mr. Nessen informed the President that it had been made on 'spec' [speculation]. Mr. Ford shrugged and said it was worthwhile anyway."

In the meantime, the producers got enthused about the program, and the distribution sights were raised to the network level. It came as a genuine shock to me that none of the networks, not even the Public Broadcasting Service, would broadcast the President's patriotic reflections.

I let my outrage get the best of me and wrote a column assailing the network czars. Something is wrong somewhere, it seems to me, when no network will carry a Bicentennial program featuring the President. It troubles me that a few network czars have such a stranglehold on the public airwaves.

The column brought forth a flood of letters and calls. Readers protested the affront to the President. Lawyers urged me to

bring an antitrust suit against the networks. Station owners offered to run the program. And on Capitol Hill, Democrats and Republicans alike took to the floor to denounce the networks.

In all the uproar, not a person supported the networks. Everyone agreed that the President's views on America should be aired. It was unanimous.

But then Nessen, who is paid to promote the President, spoke up in Helsinki. Curiously, the genial Ron was not the least upset at the networks for refusing to broadcast his boss' views on the greatness of America.

"I am mad but not at the networks," he told The New York Times. "I'm mad at Jack Anderson."

Let the record show that Nessen wasn't mad at anyone before I excoriated the networks. I spoke to Nessen twice after my TV stint with the President. Ron expressed his delight with the program; he had no complaints; he said nothing about being "conned." Not until I got naughty with the networks did he get mad.

Allowances should be made, of course, for Ron Nessen. After all, he served the networks for 13 years; he has served President Ford for only 10 months. Ron's heart, apparently, is still with NBC News.

It is a bit astonishing, nonetheless, that Democratic stalwarts lambasted the networks for rejecting the President's patriotic remarks while his own press secretary defended the networks.

On the House floor, Rep. John M. Murphy (D-N.Y.), a power on

the House Commerce Communications Subcommittee, declared: "I am deeply concerned when the network executives, who have such a major effect on this nation's awareness, are of the opinion that the patriotic comments of the President are not appropriate news for a nation nearing its Bicentennial."

Witnesses who heard Murphy's speech reported that he received a standing ovation from his House colleagues.

From the Senate, Sen. Vance Hartke (D-Ind.), the No. 2 Democrat on the Senate Commerce Communications Subcommittee, fired off letters to all the networks and sent me copies: "Is it necessary," he demanded, "to remind the networks that communications channels they use are a public trust?"

And Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott (R-Pa.) pleaded: "Certainly, there must be time on some television network for a discussion with the President of the United States about the greatness of America."

More than 60 TV stations, which disagree with the networks, have offered to carry the program. I have decided, however, to accept an offer from columnist William F. Buckley to present the entire interview as part of his regular "Firing Line" (WNVT) broadcast Saturday. Buckley and I have locked horns in the past. It is in the spirit of America that we now join together to present the President's answers about America.

*1975, United Feature Syndicate, Inc.