

Live TV Coverage of Watergate to End

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The three major television networks voted yesterday to drop live coverage of the Senate Watergate hearings when the committee resumes its sessions next Tuesday.

CBS President Richard Salant said he was "outvoted 2 to 1" by representatives of NBC and ABC when they met briefly in New York to consider further coverage of "Phase II" of the hearings. The three networks have been covering the hearings live, gavel to gavel, on a rotating basis.

Television audiences will still be able to watch a taped delayed version of each day's Watergate hearings over the Public Broadcasting Service.

PBS, through its National Public Affairs Center for Television here, will continue to tape the hearings

for rebroadcast daily at 8 p.m. over the nation's 234 public TV stations. An NPACT spokesman said coverage will continue until Nov. 1, the committee's target date for completing the hearings.

Overnight TV ratings in New York and Los Angeles for the Monday and Tuesday telecasts (shown by ABC and NBC, respectively) indicated the hearings were drawing larger audiences than had day-time entertainment programs on the three networks during the week of Sept. 17-21.

"That's what I based my argument on," Salant said. He added, however, that no ratings were available to compare audience size with the surprisingly high viewership attained by the midsummer coverage of the hearings.

The three networks, which in July began covering the

hearings separately, later agreed to rotate coverage, which was intended to end at the conclusion of Phase I.

According to Salant, the bulk of yesterday's testimony by White House aide Patrick Buchanan indicated to the networks that the hearings had moved into the area of campaign "dirty tricks" rather than direct concern with allegations of White House involvement in the Watergate and Ellsberg burglaries and subsequent cover-up effects, so dramatically shown during the summer hearings.

NBC news president Richard Wald, who attended the meeting, said yesterday that the vote to cancel coverage was "very much a matter of news judgment."

"It's strictly a question of having gone very far with a fascinating experiment covering a very important is-

sue," Wald said. "We've come to the end of that phase of the hearings that was most closely tied to the most important of national issues."

Wald said that "from now on" NBC will cover the hearings "as we think we should, depending on the witnesses and the news values."

The NBC executive said there was no suggestion of Nixon administration pressure on the networks to cancel the coverage. "For all they care, it (the telecasts) could go on forever," he said. "It's a very important committee but I'd bet you can't name the next three witnesses due next week."

William Sheehan, senior vice president of ABC news, also said his decision to vote against further coverage "was a news judgment." He said there was "absolutely no" government pressure on

the networks to discontinue the hearing coverage.

Sheehan said ABC has three options on further Watergate coverage. "We will tape record the whole day and could broadcast live at any time; we can show a highlights version periodically, and we can show portions on our ABC Evening News."

Salant said CBS currently plans to show daily highlights at 11:30 p.m. until midnight starting next week.

All three executives stressed that live coverage could be resumed depending on the importance of the witnesses involved.

However, it was learned that the present pooling of TV equipment at the Senate Office Building is also under negotiation. A decision to dismantle the equipment would have direct impact on future coverage plans.