

Equal time for the closed fraternity

About the time the nation was getting over the Chicago Seven and turning to the spring seed catalogues, Vice President Spiro Agnew came forth with yet another blast at "kooks" and "demagogues" and the dangers of letting them posture all over the television screens and the front pages. The fact of the matter, of course, was that Agnew himself has been doing a great deal of TV and newspaper posturing lately, and it was suddenly evident that if the Nixon administration has been lacking in fun, it is certainly not lacking in things to make fun of. Last week, at the annual Radio-Television Correspondents Dinner in Washington, the President himself listened as Roger Mudd of CBS delivered the following version of Agnew's famous Des Moines diatribe, in which he first attacked the networks:

Mr. President, we are honored to have you with us and we welcome you to the 26th annual dinner of the tiny, closed fraternity of privileged men.

Most of us here believe our troubles began in Des Moines, Iowa last November 13.

But they did not, they began right here in this room—almost a year ago tonight—when the former president of this association, Robert McCormick, delivered the most important address of his administration.

When President McCormick completed his address—an address that he spent weeks in preparing—one network, the one with studios at the White House, trotted out Spiro Agnew for the occasion. He waited in the wings and when President McCormick concluded, Mr. Agnew recited perfectly . . . subjecting his words and policies to instant analysis and querulous criticism.

The purpose of my remarks tonight is to focus your attention on a little group of men at the White House who not only enjoy a right of instant rebuttal but more importantly wield

a free hand in selecting, presenting and interpreting the great issues of our nation.

First, let us define that power. At least 40 million Americans listen to the White House News. According to recent polls, 29 million listen to Spiro Agnew, the remainder being divided between Richard Nixon and Ron Ziegler.

How is this White House News determined?

A small group of men—most of them Germans—numbering perhaps no more than a dozen anchormen, commentators, special assistants, producers and deputies, settles upon the 30 minutes of news that is to reach the public. This selection is made from the eight or nine minutes of actual news.

Now, it must be recognized that the White House News network has made important contributions to the national knowledge. It has done what neither ABC nor CBS nor NBC could have done in terms of dramatizing the Super Bowl or the college football rankings.

The White House made its own Swiss Good Humor Man Honor Guard a national issue overnight. It has focused the nation's attention on some of our most controversial citizens—Bob Hope, Eugene Ormandy, Red Skelton.

But it was also the White House that elevated Harrold Carswell and Jimmie Muscatello from obscurity to national prominence. What do Americans know of the men who wield this power? Of the men who produce and direct the White House News—Klein, Ziegler, Ehrlichman, Haldeman, Kissinger, Snyder, Mollenhoff—the nation knows practically nothing.

Of their regular Monday-to-Friday Anchorman and their On-the-Road Correspondent most Americans know little, other than that they reflect an urbane and assured presence, seemingly well-informed on every important matter.

We know that, to a man, these commen-

tators and producers work in the intellectual confines of the White House; one even lives there; some eat in the same restaurant; most fly on the same plane and ride in the same kind of cars—all connected by the Signal Corps so that, worse still, they can talk constantly to one another.

The White House now has its On-the-Road Reporter out on assignment for a documentary series on the Silent Majority. The Agnew Unit producers are already so excited by the first 37,000 feet of film they are asking for six one-hour specials.

What's the secret? The secret at the White House is to use good news to drive out bad news. Ten minutes of Ron Ziegler is worth 30 seconds of Leon Panetta. Six minutes of Strom Thurmond is worth one minute of Cliff Alexander.

The American who relies upon White House television for his news might conclude that the majority of American students are square, if not oval; that pollution can be whipped by one big national Clean-up, Paint-up Week; that most of the astronauts are really Republican appointees.

But we are not going to cut off our TV sets and listen to the phonograph because the air waves do not belong to the White House; they belong to us, the networks. Perhaps it is time that the White House be made more responsive to the views of the networks. I am not asking for network censorship of the White House, but when a single commentator, night after night, determines for millions of people how much of each side of a great issue they are going to see and hear, perhaps some form of censorship already exists.

Tonight I have raised a question. I have made no attempt to suggest answers. These answers must come from the White House men themselves.

They are challenged—and the people of America are challenged—to let the White House know they want their news straight and objective—that every time their chief Anchorman arches his eyebrows, Teddy Kennedy gets to arch his; that every caustic remark by their On-the-Road Correspondent will guarantee one from Ed Muskie.

By way of conclusion, let me say that every network bureau chief and producer and reporter in this room depends on these men in the White House for interviews, exclusives, specials. Whether the nation gets to hear and see them is not my decision, not your decision. It is their decision.

We would never trust such power over public opinion in the hands of an unelected government. It is time we questioned it in the hands of an elected one.

