

Public TV: Debate Continues

By Tom Shales

Public TV spokesman Robert MacNeil yesterday accused the Nixon administration of trying to turn public television into "a domestic Voice of America" which would broadcast "nothing but the administration line."

The original congressional safeguards against political tampering with the system have been "subverted" by the White House, MacNeil charged. He said that public broadcasters are seeing "their dream being perverted before their eyes and their ideal of independence made a travesty by Mr. Nixon's appointees."

MacNeil, the senior correspondent for the National Public Affairs Center for Television (NPACT), which produces public affairs shows for public TV, made the charges in a speech to the Consumer Federation of America, meeting here.

MacNeil strongly criticized his new bosses: Nixon appointees Henry Loomis and Thomas B. Curtis, president and chairman of the board of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).

CONSUMER, From E1

rily about public TV, MacNeil also dismissed as "nonsense" recent charges by Clay T. Whitehead, director of the White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, that the commercial networks were guilty of what he called "ideological plugola." It was Whitehead who first expressed the administration's objection to the political content of pub-

lic TV shows. Loomis, as CPB head, is now making that idea part of his policy.

MacNeil, who has worked for NBC and the British Broadcasting Corporation in the past, was interrupted with applause when he said of the Nixon appointees, "Bias in their minds is apparently any attitude which does not indicate permanent genuflection before the wis-

Loomis has announced plans to de-emphasize public affairs programming on the network, and among the shows with uncertain futures as a result are two on which MacNeil appears: "Washington Week in Review" and "America '73."

MacNeil said that a request for viewer support on "Washington Week" brought 13,000 pieces of favorable mail to his office but that

Loomis' reaction to that (quoted from a Jan. 11 press conference) was, "The number and emotional content of letters is not necessarily a good measure of audience size or interest."

Said MacNeil, "I think that translates as, 'To hell with what the public wants.'"

Though he spoke primarily See CONSUMER, E4, Col. 1

dom and purity of Richard Milhous Nixon."

Loomis and Curtis, MacNeil suggested, are merely following orders from higher up—not from Nixon, but from those of the "PR (public relations) mentality" who surround him.

He cited Loomis' admission on entering office that he hadn't watched much public TV and his subse-

quent criticism of various public TV programs.

"If you heard someone say he disapproved of programs he never had seen," said MacNeil, "you might reasonably conclude that someone else had told him to dislike them. I conclude that." Loomis could not be reached for comment.

MacNeil said he did not know if there was a

"deliberate, premeditated campaign by the Nixon administration" to take over the broadcasting media. "Yet the pattern of their statements and actions over the past four years strongly suggests that."

In answer to the frequent charge that public broadcasting programs are consistently liberal and antiadministration in their view-

point, MacNeil said that the allegation was "simply not true" of his two programs and that the charge of liberal bias was just a "cheap canard" perpetuated by the press.

"I believe that what appears on the PBS network now is as responsible and balanced journalistically as Congress, which established the system, could wish," MacNeil said.

After his series of predictions about the fate of public broadcasting at the hands of the administration, MacNeil said, "If the changes I have outlined take effect, this will not be the sort of broadcasting organization I would care to work in. I would go back to the BBC in Britain where they have learned what freedom and independence are all about."