Surveying The Wreckage

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By John Carmody

Public broadcasting industry leaders were blaming the White House yesterday as they surveyed the wreckage of a four-month attempt to negotiate peace between administration forces on the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the nation's 147 public TV licensees over control of their national network.

The corporation's board, a majority of which was appointed by President Nixon, shocked the industry Friday when it voted to defer action on a compromise effort recommended by its own negotiating subcommittee.

Since January, that group had been in constant contact with a licensee negotiating team led by Dallas industrialist Ralph Rogers.

Friday's surprise action postponed indefinitely resolution of the long battle between CPB and the operators over control of program content and scheduling on the Public Broadcasting Service network. Until last fall, when the Nixon-appointed board took control of CPB, the network had been under the direct control of the stations.

Sources in the industry charged yesterday that the White House mounted an intense, 48-hour telephone campaign before the Friday meeting in a successful attempt to pressure a majority of the 14-member board to table the compromise. As late as Thursday night, these sources claimed, the Rogers group was being assured that their negotiations would be confirmed at the Friday meeting.

It has been learned that the compromise, agreed to by the "Rogers group" prior to the Friday meeting, contained these three principal points:

- CPB, consulting with the Rogers group (which has also assumed policy control of the station managers organization since negotiations began) would have the right to choose all programs funded by CPB. However, the compromise guaranteed a two-stage appeal mechanism for any Rogers group dissent on program choice. The final step in the appeal would be a "joint decision" of the two groups' chairmen, presently Thomas Curtis of CPB and Rogers.

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CPB, From B1

This point could be considered a victory for CPB, which had taken this programming function from PBS last fall, thus precipitating the all-out battle between the groups.

• All programs not funded by CPB would "have access to the interconnection (network)." This refers primarily to programs paid for from local funds and, most important, to the annual $15 million in Ford Foundation contributions spent in the key area of public affairs programming, a category strongly opposed by the "hard-liners" on the CPB board.

"Should there be any conflict of opinion," the CPB negotiators stated, "as to balance, fairness and objectivity of any of these programs, either group can appeal to a monitoring committee consisting of three CPB trustees and three Rogers group trustees." It would take four votes of this committee to bar a program's access to the network.

This point, stressing the need for at least one cross-over vote between the two factions, would seem to have been a victory for the station manager group.

• "Scheduling of the interconnection will be done by the Rogers group in direct consultation with the program staff of CPB." If CPB, in turn, objected to scheduling, the "two-stage" appeal mechanism would be used.

This was a key item in the long-standing battle over network control. Retention of a regular six-or-seven-day prime-time national schedule giving local stations a continuity similar to the competing major commercial networks, was deemed essential by the Rogers group.

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It has been learned that the negotiating group, composed of board members Jack Valenti, Dr. James Killian and Thomas W. Moore, was split 2-to-1 over the compromise agreement, with Moore, a New York TV executive, joining the "hard-liners" who seek total control of the Public Broadcasting Service network for CPB.

The Valenti-Killian team was said to be able to count only on the additional vote of CPB's Curtis in addition to their own votes and moved for the "deferred action" rather than risk an outright rejection of the compromise. Robert Benjamin of New York, a fourth supporter, did not attend the Friday meeting.

The current CPB board is thus split 10-to-4 against current compromise terms. The Friday action is also believed to constitute a considerable setback for board chairman Curtis, praised privately by Rogers and others on both negotiating groups for "bargaining in good faith."

The CPB negotiating group, according to its recommendation, sought to "put to rest all the acrimony which has threatened to disfigure our public image and rupture our congressional support . . . if this arrangement proves unworkable, we can change it, but let us give it a chance to work."

Instead, the CPB board immediately voted to disband the Valenti-Killian group and named a new negotiating team headed by Neal B. Freeman of New York. Also on the new team are Dr. Gloria Anderson of Atlanta and Jack Wrather of Beverly Hills. Freeman and Wrather are considered the leaders of the "hard-liners" on the CPB board.

Rogers warned yesterday of a "severe reduction" for public television as a result of the failed compromise. The Ford Foundation has stated it is withholding its annual $15 million in grants pending a resolution of the dispute in favor of the local stations. The loss of planning time is also said to threaten fall programming.

The CPB board meets early in May in New York. Rogers has set a May 17 meeting here for PBS.

Friday's action came as the Senate Commerce Committee voted out a two-year $140 million authorization for CPB. A similar bill was vetoed by President Nixon last June.