Undercut on Programming Compromise

Public TV Chairman Resigns

By John Carmody
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Thomas B. Curtis, an administration appointee undercut by the White House in his attempts to mediate a bitter battle between factions of the public broadcasting industry, has resigned as board chairman of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, it was learned yesterday.

The sudden resignation of the 61-year-old Curtis was seen as a clear victory for the administration-backed forces on the CPB board who have sought to control public broadcasting's network and, in the process, greatly limit the amount of national public affairs programming.

Public broadcasting already is far behind in planning its fall program schedule. Curtis' resignation and the ruptured negotiations are likely to cause irreparable damage by further reducing the time available to produce quality public affairs shows.

Curtis, a former Republican congressman from Missouri, yesterday refused to comment pending an announcement from the White House. He was named to the CPB board by President Nixon last July.

A White House spokesman also declined comment, saying the resignation letter had not yet been received.

Curtis was described as "very, very upset" last Friday when the CPB board turned down his recommendation to approve a compromise with a

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THOMAS B. CURTIS
. . . mediation fails

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negotiating group representing the nation's 147 public TV licensees who presently control the Public Broadcasting Service network.

The board chairman had assured members of the licensee negotiating team as last as the previous Thursday night that a majority of his board would support the effort at a compromise.

The vote Friday to "defer action" on the recommendations was seen as a direct slap at Curtis.

It followed an intense, 48-hour telephone campaign by White ouse staff members—reportedly including Clay T. Whitehead, director of the Office of Telecommunications policy, and Patrick J. Buchan special assistant to the President—to members of the presidentially appointed CPB board urging the rejection.

The negotiators worked out a compromise favorable to the licensees over a "censorship" plan that would give each side the right to contest a given program for the "fairness and balance" of its content. Each side would have had a 3-member monitoring team, but a 4 to 2 vote would have been necessary to kill a contested program.

Under the terms of the compromise, the local broadcasters would have remained in control of scheduling on PBS; CPB would have had final say on how federal funds were spent for programming; and the licensees, in turn, would have had access to the network for programs privately funded.

This last compromise point referred to an estimated $15 million which the Ford Foundation is currently "holding" for PBS. Ford, in the past, has resignated much of its aid for public affairs shows.

It has withheld a decision this year, however, pending resolution of the fight in favor of PBS.

The Public Broadcasting Service network is now under the nominal control of the licensees who run the nation's 234 public TV stations.

Last fall, when the Nixon administration gained a majority on the 15-member board, the CPB moved to take over complete control of the network, which the administration and congressional critics had long complained was oriented toward controversial and "unbalanced" public affairs programming.

The licensee group fought back under a new leadership headed by Dallas industrialist Ralph Rogers, board chairman of Station KETA there. He united the other leaders of the "lay boards" who control the local stations with the licensee group to form a new negotiating power, itself called "Public Broadcasting Service."

The "Rogers Group" agreed to dicker with a 3-man subcommittee appointed by the CPB board which included Dr. James Killian of Cam-