

Challenging Public TV

By Tom Shales

Members of a citizens advisory committee on public television got their first chance to confront the new public TV leadership yesterday and used the opportunity to challenge plans for de-emphasis of public affairs programs, question the directions that public TV will now be taking, and seek greater influence in future programming.

Two delegates to the 36-member Advisory Committee of National Organizations to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) said they are seriously considering quitting the committee and withdrawing their groups' support. They threatened the action unless CPB resists what they see as White House efforts to curb national public affairs programming.

Al Zack of the AFL-CIO and James D. Williams, communications director for the National Urban League, led

the attack on the Nixon administration policies represented by CPB president Henry Loomis and chairman of the board Thomas E. Curtis, both of whom took office in the fall. Loomis said soon after assuming his post that centralized CPB "network" programming of public affairs would be de-emphasized in the future.

Curtis said yesterday that his mind is not made up about the issue, but he is considered a supporter of the administration's views.

The advisory committee consists of 36 organizations with national constituencies. It was established not by the Public Broadcasting Act that created CPB in 1967, but by Loomis' predecessor, John Macy Jr., who set it up in 1969. He envisioned it as a liaison between the public and the corporation and as a source of lobbying power on Capitol Hill. Macy resigned in August of this year.

The questions fielded by Loomis and Curtis, during

the committee's fourth quarterly meeting of the year at a downtown hotel, were the latest chapter in a continuing debate over whether CPB should supply stations with centralized public affairs programs or delegate more of such programming—and the funds for it—to local stations. Loomis and Curtis see CPB as a service of mainly cultural and educational material.

Other organizations represented on the committee include the American Bar Association, the American Medical Association, the Boy Scouts of America, the National Council of Churches of Christ, the National Council of Senior Citizens and the U.S. Jaycees.

Hyman Bookbinder, representing the American Jewish Committee, was among the administration critics. "We crave for the right kind of public affairs," he told Loomis. Bookbinder said the

See PUBLIC, C10, Col. 1

Television

Confrontation Over Public TV

PUBLIC, From C1

commercial networks were failing to satisfy that craving.

Williams said, "My worst fears have been confirmed."

Williams demanded assurances from Loomis and Curtis that there will still be National public affairs shows on public TV, and that their assurances be "backed up by the White House."

Zack complained that the committee was not consulted on the first CPB programming decisions made for next season. "You're asking for our advice after the decisions have been made," he told Loomis. Zack said the committee had been bothered with "academic wastes of time" in the past because its advice was after the fact.

The group then voted to consider a three-part proposal, made by a subcommit-

tee, that it be polled and consulted before final programming decisions are made for next year.

Loomis and Curtis both maintained that they were eager for counsel from the committee. Curtis seemed to be anticipating the criticism to come when he said, early in his remarks to the committee, "I like a good fight as long as we know what were fighting about."

Curtis conceded that "there are people" in the executive branch who would like to see all CPB "network"-produced public affairs shows dropped from public TV and local stations originate such programming with a local rather than national emphasis. Their position "may dominate," he said, but he added that "the White House is not monolithic" and said it was still the CPB board that made CPB policy.

"I don't believe that in

many of the (public affairs) programs there has been proper balance and impartiality," Curtis said, referring to charges of "Eastern establishment", liberal bias in some CPB shows. "But I don't want to see it go too far the other way" to a pro-administration point of view.

"Because of abuses that have gone on, you have to pull back somewhat to get to the good wood and build on it," Curtis said.

Like Curtis, Loomis said he found the term "public affairs" ambiguous but said "We very much feel there should be discussion of important issues. It's a matter of how you do it. Much of what we do now is more superficial than it should be."

Loomis declined to specify what forms topical programming should take. Curtis said he thought a truly "in-

depth" public affairs program would be one that could be aired over and over again for the next 20 years.

Among the delegates present was actor-singer Theodore Bikel, representing "scientific, professional and cultural employees" in the AFL-CIO.

Bikel warned the public broadcasters against the threat of "corporate control," which he sees as a danger that comes with funds and grants from such big U.S. companies as General Electric and Mobil Oil, both now underwriting current public TV series. Curtis said he agreed with Bikel that programs should not be accepted for broadcast just because they are underwritten and therefore "free," but he said non-federal sources of additional revenue have to be found.