

AGNEW CHARGES NEWS DISTORTION ON TV NETWORKS

He Asserts Commentators
Inject Bias Into Coverage—
Asks Public to Complain

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The text of Agnew's speech
is printed on Page 24.

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 13 —

Vice President Agnew accused the television networks tonight of permitting producers on news producers of news programs newscasters and commentators to give the American people a highly selected and often biased presentation of the news.

In a speech released here and delivered in Des Moines, Iowa, before the Mid-West Regional Republican Committee, the Vice President called upon the American people to "let the networks know that they want their news straight and objective."

Mr. Agnew called upon television viewers to register "their complaints" on the bias of news commentators by writing to the networks and phoning to local stations.

In addition to attacking the networks, the Vice President also attacked the Johnson Administration and Averell Harriman, the former United States peace negotiator in Paris, for the "concessions" that he asserted had been made to the North Vietnamese.

During the 10 months that Mr. Harriman was chief negotiator, Mr. Agnew said, "the United States swapped some of the greatest military concessions in the history of warfare for an enemy agreement on the shape of a bargaining table."

Mr. Agnew did not say what the "concessions" were.

Negotiations over the shape of the table took place after the end of the bombings of North Vietnam, Nov. 1, 1968, and were completed in mid-January.

Mr. Agnew said that Mr. Harriman, who had commented on the President's Vietnam speech two weeks ago over the American Broadcasting Company's network, was apparently under "heavy compulsion to justify his failures to anyone who will listen," and "the networks have shown themselves willing to give him all the time he desires."

At the conclusion of his speech, Mr. Agnew seemed to challenge the networks to carry his speech nationally. He said that every elected leader depended on the television media and yet "whether what I have said to you tonight will be heard and seen at all by the nation is not my decision, it is not your decision, it is their decision."

The three networks accepted the challenge. They all carried the speech live. In New York

Continued on Page 24, Column 4

Continued From Page 1, Col. 4

their regular news programs moved up to clear time for Mr. Agnew's address.

C.B.S., in a statement, called Mr. Agnew's speech "an unprecedented attempt" to "intimidate a news medium" that depends for its existence upon a government license.

N.B.C. said the speech was "an appeal to prejudice." It said "any fair-minded viewer knows that the television networks are not devoted to putting across a single point of view but present all significant views on issues of importance."

A.B.C. said it had "always been and will continue to be fair and objective." It said it was confident in the ultimate judgment of the American people.

In an interview in the current U.S. News & World Report, Mr. Agnew sharply criticized the press, saying that he sometimes thought those writing for the papers, especially the "big-city liberal media, were 'about the most superficial thinkers I've ever seen.'"

In his Des Moines speech, Mr. Agnew said that the American people would be right in refusing to tolerate in Government the kind of concentration of power that had been allowed in the hands "of a tiny and closed fraternity of privileged men, elected by no one, and enjoying a monopoly sanctioned and licensed by Government."

As a particularly flagrant example of what he called the biased reporting of "self-appointed analysts," the Vice President cited the treatment of the President's speech on Vietnam two weeks ago.

Most of the commentators, he said, expressed "in one way or another, their hostility to what he had to say," and "it was obvious that their minds were made up in advance."

Expanding his criticism to cover also the producers of the programs, the Vice President said:

"To guarantee in advance that the President's plea for national unity would be challenged, one network trotted out Averell Harriman [former Ambassador to Moscow and until recently head of the United States peace delegation in Paris] for the occasion."

"When the President concluded," Mr. Agnew went on, "Mr. Harriman recited perfectly. He attacked the Thieu Government as unrepresentative; he criticized the President's speech for various deficiencies; he twice issued a call for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to debate Vietnam once again; he stated his belief that the Vietcong or North Vietnamese did not really want a military takeover of South Vietnam . . ."

"Every American," Mr. Agnew declared, "has a right to disagree with the President of the United States, and to express publicly that disagreement. But the President of the United States has a right to communicate directly with the people who elected him, and the people of this country have the right to make up their own minds and form their own opinions about a Presidential address without having the President's words and thoughts characterized through the prejudices of hostile critics before they can even be digested."

In recent weeks Mr. Agnew has drawn both criticism and praise for the pungency of his language as he has characterized Vietnam war critics as "an effete corps of impudent snobs" and demonstrations against the

war as "a carnival in the streets."

There has been much speculation here on whether the President has encouraged, or at least not disapproved, the Vice President's recent speeches.

There were some who thought that the President was encouraging Mr. Agnew to play the "point of the spear," as Mr. Nixon did it in the early years of the Eisenhower Administration.

There were others who believed that Mr. Agnew was acting on his own.

But there seemed little question that in his attack on the networks Mr. Agnew was expressing the resentments of the White House. Several White House officials have made no secret of their anger at the way at least one network handled the commentary after the President's speech.

Comment By Harriman

Asked for comment tonight on Mr. Agnew's criticism of him, Mr. Harriman said:

"I don't think that the statement deserves serious comment. All I can say is that I'm glad to be included with the television news media, which I feel, by and large are trying to do a conscientious job of keeping the American public informed on many subjects of national interest."

An examination of what Mr. Harriman said as a guest commentator for the American Broadcasting Company sug-

gests that he was not explicitly critical of the President.

He began by saying, "I'm sure you know that I wouldn't be [so presumptuous [as] to give a complete analysis of a very carefully thought-out speech by the President of the United States. I'm sure he wants to end this war and no one wishes him well any more than I do."

Not Seeking ConsrosHIP

Mr. Harriman went on to say that his approach to the problem differed in some ways from that of the President, and gave his reasons. But he concluded by saying: "There are so many things we've got to know about this, but I want to end this by saying I wish the President well, I hope he can lead us to peace. But this is not the whole story that we've heard tonight."

Mr. Agnew said that he was not asking for Government censorship of the networks. He was, he said, simply asking whether the commentators themselves were not censoring the news.

"The views of this fraternity," he said "do not represent the views of America. That is why such a great gulf existed between how the nation received the President's address — and how the networks reviewed it."

While not proposing censorship of television commentary, Mr. Agnew seemed to suggest that the networks had not the

same claim to First Amendment rights as the newspapers.

The situations were not identical, Mr. Agnew said, because the television has more impact than the printed page, and because the networks have a near monopoly and the viewers have little selection, whereas a man who does not like a newspaper's views or news handling can switch to another paper.

Rebutal by Network

In New York, Dr. Frank Stanton, president of the Columbia Broadcasting System, characterized Mr. Agnew's speech as "an unprecedented attempt by the Vice President of the United States to intimidate a news medium" that depends for its existence upon a Government license.

Asserting that public opinion polls have frequently indicated that the public has greater confidence in television news than in that of any other medium, Dr. Stanton said:

"Our newsmen have many times earned commendations for their enterprise and for their adherence to the highest professional standards. Since human beings are not infallible, there are bound to be occasions when their judgment is questioned. What ever their deficiencies, however, they are minor compared to those of a press which would be subservient to the Executive power of Government."

Julian Goodman, president of the National Broadcasting

Company, made the following statement:

"Vice President Agnew's attack on television news is an appeal to prejudice. More importantly, Mr. Agnew uses the influence of his high office to criticize the way a government-licensed news medium covers the activities of Government itself. Any fair-minded viewer knows that the television networks are not devoted to putting across a single point of view but present all significant views on issues of importance.

"It is regrettable that the Vice President of the United States would deny to television freedom of the press.

"Evidently, he would prefer a different kind of television reporting—one that would be subservient to whatever political group was in authority at the time.

He said that "the peoples of the world will certainly strengthen solidarity with the Vietnamese people, and strive shoulder to shoulder to defeat the Nixon Administration's policy of aggression and neo-colonialism."

Was this, diplomatic sources asked, simply rhetoric or was it, as some French sources with long experience in South-east Asia fear, an indication that Communist China could be counted upon to add military support to its present political and economic support of Hanoi.

No answer was available here.