

Nixon Aide Explains TV License Challenges

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The Nixon administration's chief television spokesman yesterday described the license renewal challenges to two Florida television stations as a "very blunderbuss approach" to the issues of airness and responsibility in broadcasting.

Clay T. Whitehead, 34, director of the White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, made his comment during a lengthy defense of the administration's television policies in which he described his own use of the words "ideological plugola" as "exceedingly descriptive, colorful and masterfully vague."

The two Florida television stations, in Jacksonville and Miami, are owned by the Post-Newsweek Stations, Florida, Inc., a subsidiary of The Washington Post Co.

At an hour-long breakfast session with reporters, Whitehead said that the administration's upcoming legislative proposals on license renewals will give the federal government less of a "finely honed club" to use against license holders. He was then asked whether he considered the four challenges to the Post-Newsweek stations as "finely honed."

"No challenge is ever finely honed," Whitehead replied. "It's a very blunderbuss approach. You're talking about putting some man out of business."

Without specifically relating his statement to the Florida challenges, Whitehead said that "if a challenge is brought with the purpose of harrassing a

station . . . I think that's an abuse of the licensing procedure."

He was asked if this is the case in the Florida challenges.

"It would be highly improper, if not downright illegal, for me to comment on any specific license situation," Whitehead said.

The Florida challenges are based on the argument that local ownership would better serve the communities. Many of the participants in the three challenges to the Jacksonville license and the single challenge in Miami have close ties to the Nixon administration.

The Jacksonville station is widely considered as an aggressive investigator of local irregularities with a politically liberal orientation. However, all of the challengers have denied that their license applications, now pending before the Federal Communications Commission, are politically inspired.

Whitehead said that complaints about a purported desire of the Nixon administration to censor critical stations are "poppycock." At one point, he also suggested that the implied threat of a license removal is far more effective than actually removing a license.

"The main value of the sword of Damocles is that it hangs, not that it drops," Whitehead said. "Once you take a guy's license away, you no longer have any leverage against him."

Whitehead said the administration's license-renewal legislation will be introduced in the House today or Monday by Reps. Harley O. Staggers (D-W.Va.) and Samuel L. Devine (R-Ohio).

The measure would extend license renewal periods from three to five years while making local stations responsible for what Whitehead has called "the totality of broadcast programming."

This would make local stations accountable, among other things, for the content of network news shows.

Whitehead contends that the result of this policy will be to encourage a greater diversity of opinion at the local level. Presently, he said, the three major networks have "an extensive amount of dominance over the totality of news from television."

Critics within the industry have expressed fears that local stations will shun controversy to avoid having their licenses challenged.

Only Tuesday the CBS television network, in a move it said was "virtually unprecedented," canceled the showing of an anti-Vietnam war drama, "Sticks and Bones," which had been scheduled for tonight.

The network acted after 70 or more of its 197 affiliates had canceled out on the prime-time drama. Whitehead said he approved of the network being responsive of its affiliates.

"This is a good example of how the process ought to work," he said.