

By LES BROWN

Richard S. Salant, president of CBS News, yesterday defended the policies of his division, the amount of coverage it has given to the Watergate story and the work of Dan Rather, the White House correspondent, to some of the angriest critics of CBS News—the managements of stations affiliated with the CBS-TV network.

In a speech at the annual CBS affiliate conference in Los Angeles, Mr. Salant acknowledged, from mail he has received from the member stations, that "there is not insignificant number of you—I don't dare conduct a poll of just how many—who are disturbed by what we at CBS News do, and don't do." But he added, in what was to be the preface to his defense, "I'm

afraid I can give you relatively little comfort and little hope of mending our errant ways."

CBS-TV has approximately 215 affiliates that carry the network and its news programming and on whom the network is dependent for its mass national circulation.

Exchange of Quips

May of the station owners and managers have accused CBS News of bias against President Nixon and of dwelling excessively on the Watergate affair and its related news stories. A number have, in particular, expressed to the network their displeasure with Mr. Rather's performance, especially at the televised Houston press conference in March at which he exchanged quips with the President.

When a mixture of applause and boos from the audience

greeted Mr. Rather at the news conference, President Nixon asked, "Are you running for something?"

Mr. Rather had replied, "No sir, are you?"

May of the station operators deplored the newsman's remark as showing disrespect to the President, and some believed his remark to be an open show of hostility.

Of that incident, Mr. Salant stated: "All of us, including, I suspect, Dan Rather, wish it hadn't happened." He then praised Mr. Rather as a "superb journalist" who had the respect of his professional peers.

Major Peacetime Story

He told the broadcasters he would neither terminate nor reassign Mr. Rather, stating, "I cannot do what I believe to be wrong."

To the charge that C.B.S. News was overplaying Watergate, using the term generically, Mr. Salant argued that it was the major peacetime story of this generation, bound to be the subject of entire history books. He said that the importance of the story and the issues it embraced—"relating to the fundamentals of our governmental structure, of the democratic process, of the relationship between the governors and the governed, of the basics of the election process itself"—justified its dominance of the network's newscasts.

Mr. Salant told the affiliates that the verdict on the fairness and accuracy of the C.B.S. Watergate coverage would have to be left to history.

Unique in Journalism

"I would point out that those who accuse us of unfairness and bias against the Administration might remind themselves that there are others who passionately believe we have been biased in favor of the Administration," he said.

Noting that the relationship between a network news division and its affiliated stations is a unique one in journalism, Mr. Salant contended that "while no news organization can be defiant and arrogant if it is to survive, its news judgments must be totally independent and free—-independent and free even of those on whom it is most completely dependent and to whom it is most deeply obligated."

News judgments cannot be delegated outside the news organization and cannot be put to a committee vote, he said.