

TV: Moyers's 'Essay on Watergate'

'Journal' Returns With Impressive Show

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

Last Friday, President Nixon, in still another of his analyses of the "electronic media," complained that "I have never heard or seen such outrageous, vicious, distorted reporting in 27 years of public life. . . . When people are pounded night after night with that kind of frantic, hysterical reporting, it naturally shakes their confidence."

The President later explained that he was referring more to "commentators" than to reporters, but that hardly made the attack less curious. Even the "electronic media" would concede that most of the investigative reporting damaging to the Nixon Administration has been centered in the print press.

The print press, however, has solidly established its First Amendment rights, while the electronic press is still subject to potential points of pressure from the simple fact that broadcasting stations are licensed by the Government. More important, the audience for even the best of the print press is relatively limited. The TV audience is vast. That is what primarily concerns politicians.

TV coverage of the Watergate morass has generally been adequate. If the TV audience is being pounded night after night, that pounding has been justified by a seemingly unending string of scandals and revelations. If TV commentators can be faulted, it is that their contributions have been too few and too scattered. TV has kept up with, and in some instances developed, the news. The missing ingredient, for the

most part, has been broad perspective.

There have been exceptions (e.g., a couple of months ago John Chancellor of the National Broadcasting Company did a first-rate survey of the Presidency as an institution), and tonight at 8 the Public Broadcasting Service will be presenting one of the most impressive. "Bill Moyers' Journal" returns to a regular weekly schedule, despite a good deal of resistance earlier this year in official Washington circles, with "An Essay on Watergate."

Mr. Moyers offers a "personal attempt" to get to the roots of the Watergate morality, or Watergate's lack of morality. The essay is dabbled with biography, recalling his early days in Washington and his eventual job as press secretary to Lyndon B. Johnson. It is a review of American history. It is a series of interviews with expert commentators. It is neither frantic nor hysterical. It is absorbingly intelligent.

Packed tightly with information and analysis, the program begins with images of America out of the startlingly recent past, images that still existed when Mr. Moyers first went to Washington 20 years ago. "Where I grew up," he recalls, "the Almighty and Uncle Sam were inseparable." And Kate Smith assured us it was so every time she sang "God Bless America."

Then came McCarthyism, and President Eisenhower's misrepresenting the use of U-2's, and Sherman Adams, and Bobby Baker, and Vietnam. Protective naiveté was increasingly more difficult. It's not, Mr. Moyers notes, that the past was without scandal. He reviews the more prominent examples, from the Robber Barons to Teapot

Personal Review Is Not 'Frantic' or 'Hysterical'

Dome. But "today the ante has gone up and the motives are different." The goal is no longer money but power.

Mr. Moyers discusses the facts and theories with such commentators as William S. White, the syndicated columnist; Richard Strout, journalist and columnist (TRB on The New Republic); Henry Steele Commager, the historian; James David Barber, political scientist, and George Will, Washington Editor of The National Review.

Snippets from tapes of the Senate Watergate Hearings are used for devastating corroboration. When Senator Herman E. Talmadge of Georgia speculates that Presidential authorizations might include murder, and John D. Erlichman replies that "I don't know where the line is, Senator," Mr. Moyers observes:

"There in brief is the Watergate morality embedded in the Nixon White House. Belief in the total rightness of the official view of reality and an arrogant disregard for the rule of law."

He concludes on a note of optimism: "It was close, it almost worked, but not quite. Something basic in our traditions held." That something basic, he believes, is old-fashioned idealism.

"What is best about this country," he adds, "doesn't need exaggeration. It needs vigilance." And it needs vigilance from television, both reporters and commentators. Mr. Moyers gives an excellent demonstration of the possibilities this evening.