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TV Networks, in Shift, Put Ford Talk On Air After White House's Request

By LES BROWN

The television networks yesterday reversed a decision not to carry the President's economic address before the Future Farmers of America in Kansas City after having received a formal—and some felt, irritated—request by the White House for live coverage. When the request was made, by Ron Nessen, Mr. Ford's press secretary, all three networks immediately complied.

Although some in Washington viewed the incident as possibly the first conflict between the Ford Administration and the broadcast medium, the network news chiefs dismissed it as merely part of the Administration's education in the ground rules concerning broadcast access for the White House.

"Historically, any time a President flat-out asks for air time, he'll get it," said William Sheehan, president of ABC News. "That's what the party out of power always complains about, but when the President wants to speak to the nation there's no way we can deny him the air."

"But when the White House only announces that the President will be speaking somewhere, and leaves the coverage of it to our judgment, we may decide it's not all that newsworthy. That's apparently what all three networks had decided in this instance."

CBS News yesterday issued a statement that it was "acceding to this request, while noting that it raises questions that we must consider for the future."

A CBS News official said the questions related to the right of a President to get television time as he chooses. The official added that CBS, in accordance with its policy, would grant time to those in government who might oppose President Ford's economic position if his address provoked "substantial national disagreement."

The networks had determined over the weekend that they would not cover the President's speech live, because the description of the contents and the forum in which it was to be delivered did not suggest to them an address of special importance, news officials said.

Mr. Nessen's statement, which accompanied the request for television coverage, said:

"The networks did not feel it was newsworthy enough to carry live that the President would be addressing the American people on what they as individuals and collectively can do to assist in the fight against inflation and the effort to save energy."

Saying that he would "certainly not question on the networks' new judgement," Mr. Nessen noted that it was the first time the Ford Administra-

tion was asking the networks for time.

The request presented a particular problem for NBC-TV since it threatened to interfere with the telecast of the third game of the World Series. The White House initially had scheduled the speech for 10:30 P.M., Eastern daylight time, but when advised that it might conflict with the final innings of the ball game arranged for it to be delivered at 8 P.M.

NBC officials then called Bowie Kuhn, Commissioner of Baseball, to request that the start of the game be delayed at least until the President had concluded his speech. Mr. Kuhn agreed to a 15-minute delay that would make possible some pregame backgrounding on the network, but less time than the 30 minutes normally allotted.

ABC-TV pre-empted the situation comedy "Happy Days" and will show the episode at another time; CBS-TV elected to delay its full Tuesday night schedule until the president ended his speech.

Several network sources observed that neither Presidents Kennedy nor Nixon, who were alert to television viewing behavior, would have scheduled an address to coincide with a major sporting event. Nor, they said, would either have risked irritating the dedicated audience for prime-time television by asking air time for anything less than a major address.