

N.B.C. News Chief to Staff: Don't React to Agnew

By FRED FERRETTI

Reuven Frank, president of news for the National Broadcasting Company, has told his staff that because of Vice President Agnew's recent attacks on television news "we can expect an increase in specific audience criticism of individual stories, reports and evaluations."

Despite this, he wrote in a four-page memorandum to his division's employees, "You will be expected to maintain your high professional and ethical standards as before. N.B.C. News will not diminish its effort to report the news. . . . Nor will we react to the Vice President's attack by departing in any way from high professional standards. No one is asking you to change because more people than ever before are looking over your shoulder."

Mr. Frank became the second network news president formally to ask his staff to stiffen its back. Last week Richard Salant, president of news for the Columbia Broadcasting System, urged his staff to resist pressure.

Speeches Called Threats

Mr. Frank's memo began: "The most important thing I know is that the National Broadcasting Company, which considers the speeches implied threats, is determined to resist those threats." After outlining the performance expected of news employees, he analyzed

Mr. Agnew's two speeches criticizing the news media — the first in Des Moines, Iowa, on Nov. 13 and the second in Montgomery, Ala., on Nov. 20.

"In Des Moines," wrote Mr. Frank, "we saw the threat of government power to control the news, a challenge to the Constitutional provision of press freedom, and an appeal to sectional prejudice by talking about a few bad men in two evil cities."

The Montgomery speech arose according to Mr. Frank "from the usual politician's frustration phenomenon," and was "an important retreat" from Des Moines.

Plea for Sympathy Seen

In the Montgomery speech, "the Vice President asked for personal sympathy; answered a New York Times editorial most of his hearers could not have read; deplored some specific news judgments, and implied that if there were more daily newspapers more would agree with him."

"One of the dangerous tendencies in the Des Moines speech was repeated in the Montgomery speech," wrote Mr. Frank, "the appeal to symbols of local and regional prejudice. The most prominent one in the Montgomery speech was The New York Times, which had been built into an evil local symbol by Governor Wallace."

Mr. Frank referred to declarations by Mr. Agnew and by Herbert G. Klein, Director of Communications for the Nixon

Administration, that no threats were implied by the Vice President, as "disingenuous."

"The Vice President says he is against censorship, whether official or by a small, self-generating group of evil, Eastern men. This may sound fine, but it is nonsense. Censorship must be official, or it isn't censorship. Newsmen editing news is not censorship, even if they do their jobs badly. As for official censorship, it is Mr. Agnew who raises that specter."

Mr. Frank said he had waited to write to his staff until the initial tumult had passed, so that what he wrote could be considered in the light of the entire incident.

He mentioned evocations of the so-called "silent majority" and wrote: "But we too, have a silent majority, the ones who don't write, who are entitled to our best and most dedicated efforts even when they can't abide the results."