

# New White House Pressure on TV

By Kay Mills

Newhouse News Service

WASHINGTON — Spiro Agnew spearheaded the Nixon Administration assault on TV network news in 1969 when he objected to "instant analysis" of presidential speeches and reminded broadcasters they hold federal licenses to operate.

Now a man named Clay T. Whitehead, director of the White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, tells how the Administration thinks the word can be made deed.

His suggestions represent a marriage of interest between broadcasters who seek "stability" in the license renewal process and the White House, which has made no secret it dislikes the "eastern liberal establishment bias" it sees at the networks and in the likes of the New York Times and Washington Post.

Broadcasters' licenses must be renewed by the Federal Communications Commissions every three years. More and more com-

munity groups — blacks, women, suburbanites, environmentalists — are challenging the renewals. Defending against challenges costs money, which some broadcasters cannot afford.

They claim they also cannot plan ahead for buying equipment, signing labor contracts or developing new programs. So they want some stability, some guidelines of expected performance.

There are already 100 bills in the House and three in the Senate on the subject. But public interest activists, such as Bill Wright of Black Efforts for Soul in Television, pledge broadcasters won't win without a fight.

So along comes Whitehead in a speech Monday in Indianapolis with a proposal for license renewal bill with certain guidelines for a "responsible free press."

The catch came when he said local stations affiliated with the networks should be held responsible for "the 61 percent of their schedules that are network programs as well as for the programs

they purchase or create" locally.

Should there be any doubt of his target, Whitehead went on:

"There is no area where management responsibility is more important than news . . .

"Just as publishers and editors have professional responsibility for the news they print, station licensees have final responsibility for news balance — whether the information comes from their own newsroom or from a distant network . . .

"Station managers and network officials who fail to act to correct imbalance or consistent bias from the networks — or who acquiesce by silence — can only be considered willing participants, to be held fully accountable by the broadcaster's community at license renewal time," Whitehead said.

It smacks of a trade-off. The White House gets another crack at the networks through local stations. The broadcasters, described by

one of their own as "scared to death" at the potential industry instability, get the promise of Administration backing for firmer renewal guidelines.

In fact, the chairman of the National Association of Broadcasters License Renewal Effort, Metromedia executive Mark Evans, views the Whitehead speech as a "boost to our efforts."

Evans bristled at the implication the press has drawn from the speech that responsibility for network programs is tied to license renewals. He doesn't see it that way and he said he didn't think a bill like that would pass.

FCC Commissioner Nick Johnson quickly defended the network right to present news as they see it. Issuing a four-page statement, Johnson said that "now that Spiro Agnew has apparently exhausted his usefulness as a warrior, it appears that young Clay Whitehead is to provide us 'four more years' of Nixon's war on the networks."