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Politics, Watergate and Television

By James Reston

WASHINGTON—For the last couple of years the Nixon Administration, with Vice President Agnew leading the charge, has been protesting against what it calls "instant analysis" of Presidential speeches by television commentators, and now the Columbia Broadcasting System has announced that it will abandon this practice.

The timing and reasoning of the C.B.S. decision are a little puzzling. If anything, C.B.S. has been even more insistent than N.B.C. or A.B.C. in demanding that all the rights and obligations of the press under the First Amendment should apply equally to broadcasting.

Yet, just when the broadcasting industry was beginning to get strong public support for this principle of equal protection under the First Amendment, and precisely when the public was learning from the Watergate scandals that maybe Presidential statements needed the most searching analysis, "instant" and otherwise, C.B.S. announces that it will adopt a policy of "delayed reaction."

Presumably, this decision was made by William Paley of C.B.S. in order to be fair to the President and he has a point. To have a carefully prepared Presidential address on the complicated, ambiguous and even dangerous problems of the day subjected to the immediate impressions of the C.B.S. stars obviously troubles the man in the

White House. They would rather have rather wait.

This all seems fair enough, until you think about just how fair it is. The problem of avoiding sudden or ill-considered reactions to Presidential speeches is not created by the broadcasters but by the President. Whenever the President decides to make a major speech, it is constructed with the greatest care, after days and even weeks of preparation and calculation and is ready, subject to last-minute accidents, long before it is delivered.

The reporters and commentators engage in "instant analysis" only because the White House holds back the text until the last minute, though the text is prepared, completed and mimeographed many hours before. The White House wants it that way. It wants to create a carefully calculated public reaction from the American people, without any "yes buts" from the commentators. In short, it blames the networks for reaching too quickly to Presidential speeches and being "unfair," though it has unfairly denied them the texts in time to make the careful and thoughtful analysis it says it wants.

Accordingly, it is odd that Bill Paley, of all people, should impose a hard rule of no instant analysis on his correspondents, especially since, with the best will in the world, it is unenforceable. The President makes statements every day, and the C.B.S. White House correspondent reports

on them and comments on them. Is Mr. Paley going to tell his White House correspondent merely to report what the President says every day and not analyze what the President said until later? If so, John Chancellor and David Brinkley at N.B.C., and Howard K. Smith and Harry Reasoner at A.B.C. are going to have a field day.

This issue of "fairness" and "instant analysis," of course, is only one illustration of the much larger problem of the role of television in American political life. "Equal time" under the present so-called "fairness doctrine" is neither "equal" nor "fair."

If the White House announces in advance that the President will make a "major announcement" on Monday night at 9 o'clock—on prices, Vietnam or Watergate—he is assured of a vast TV audience. But even if the commentators or Democrats are given equal time on Wednesday, the audience will not be the same or "equal" and the debate will certainly not therefore be "fair."

Actually, the problem of "instant analysis" of Presidential speeches is much simpler than the problem of television's role in the courts and in the Watergate hearings.

In general, judges have banned the television cameras from the courtrooms on the ground that they put unnecessary and unfair pressure on sensitive witnesses and create an atmosphere of tension and theater.

Except on special occasions, such as the President's State of the Union address before the Congress, television has been kept out of the Senate and the House, but the Senate has permitted many of its hearings to be televised, while the House has not.

What to do about all this—about the right of witnesses to testify without undue television pressure, and the right of the public to know what is going on—is an unresolved question, which the Watergate scandals have brought to the fore.

Archibald Cox, the Watergate prosecutor, wants the Senate television hearings limited lest they interfere with the prosecution and conviction of people who may have broken the law. Senator Sam Ervin of North Carolina wants the televised hearings to go on in order to educate the public and provide a basis for new corrective laws.

This is a devilish dilemma that needs careful study for the days ahead, when television will play an increasingly powerful role in political campaigns and in educating voters.

But meanwhile, we need all the analysis we can get of Presidential power and television power, for if the President can use all the power of his office and command instant access to the TV networks, without instant analysis of what he says, the American political system will be even more unbalanced than it was at the beginning of the Watergate scandals.