

White House vs. TV News

By William Greider
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Washington

"What the President is asking for is very clear," the White House press spokesman said, "and that is perspective."

So the White House yesterday offered a tart critique of Washington journalism, especially the three television networks, fleshing out President Nixon's complaints about "outrageous, vicious, distorted reporting."

The TV networks should sort out the flood of charges against Mr. Nixon more cautiously, the White House suggested. The TV news editors should balance the film footage more evenly between friends and foes of the President. The commentators should tone down their commentaries on Mr. Nixon's troubles.

Even Walter Cronkite, the senior voice of CBS News, was the subject of White House criticism, though the President's deputy press secretary declined to attack him by name.

And a presidential speech writer, Patrick Buchanan, suggested in a TV news interview that the three national networks have a dangerous domination over public opinion. "It's injurious

Back Page Col. 1 24 OCT

From Page 1

to the Democratic process, in my judgment, and ... every legal and constitutional means ought to be considered in order to break up that dominance," Buchanan asserted.

"Do we have an orchestrated counter-attack?" another White House aide asked aloud, the very question which occurred to many journalists. "The answer is no. I wish to hell we did."

CRONKITE

Walter Cronkite, it developed, was the TV commentator whom President Nixon had in mind at Friday evening's press conference when he complained that one network aired an accusatory story about his personal finances — even when it knew the story wasn't true.

As deputy press secretary Gerald Warren elaborated on the incident yesterday, it was plain that he was talking about Cronkite, though the commentator's name and network were never mentioned.

The broadcast in question was an interview last

Wednesday/evening in which Cronkite talked to Archibald Cox, the special Watergate prosecutor fired by Mr. Nixon. Among other things, the CBS commentator asked Cox about a previous report that his investigators were looking into a "secret private investment portfolio," supposedly administered on the President's behalf by his friend, Bebe Rebozo. Cox gave an ambiguous reply.

Warren complained that CBS reporters had already inquired at the White House about the story and been told "quite forcefully that there was no truth to the report." At the very least, said Warren, the commentator should have noted with his question that the White House denied the story.

For some reason, the President's spokesman did not make a point of attacking the network that originated the story, ABC, which broadcast the initial story on the previous Monday night—an account that vividly characterized the supposed secret portfolio as "The Nixon Checkers fund of 1973."

22 OCT

In yesterday's counter-attack, none of the presidential aides pretended that the issue of fair news coverage or the potential benefits of attacking the media would solve all of the President's problems, but they treated it like an important front in the war against Watergate critics.

"This is an ongoing, continuing, serious problem, with advances and reverses," said Buchanan. "On balance, Friday night was definitely an advance."

The assortment of phone calls and telegrams in reaction to the President's criticism of news media seemed consistent with Buchanan's estimate. All three networks reported receiving several hundred calls at their New York headquarters after Mr. Nixon lambasted them — all weighted against the video.

At ABC, all 272 phone calls were complaints against TV commentators. At NBC, the 600 calls included about 250 critical of NBC plus another 75 which supported the President in general. About 150 asked for impeachment, another 90 supported the network. CBS got mixed reviews from callers — a majority criticized both the TV network and the President.

COMMENTS

White House aides offered precise comments on the press coverage that has surrounded the President's crisis, started ten days ago when he fired Cox. While Buchanan and others throw in mention of newspapers, most of the real bite is directed at TV. "We've given up on you guys," one presidential aide quipped to a newspaper reporter.

Specifically, Buchanan and others cited the TV coverage a week ago when Washington was in an uproar over Cox and the resignation of top Justice Department officials.

On the three network evening news shows of October 22, Buchanan said, the comments of 19 anti-Nixon people were broadcast, including senators and others calling for impeachment or resignation.

On the same three programs, Buchanan said only two pro-Nixon comments were shown, plus more or

less neutral remarks from the new acting attorney general.

HYSTERICAL

Moreover, Buchanan said the tone of the news programs was "hysteria."

Another White House aide, who commented not-for-attribution, spoke with feeling and frustration about how difficult it has been to get the White House's side of the story told in recent days. The President, he acknowledged, has free access to the airways anytime he wants to make a public statement or hold a press conference.

"But the old man can't go on the tube every day," the aide insisted.

This staff member suggested that a "chicken-and-egg" question arose from the storm of public protest surrounding the firing of Cox. "Was public opinion so outraged that the imbalance was justified?" he asked. "Or did the ratio cause the outpouring of public opinion?"

At the White House, it was clear that they believe the latter.