

Networks Weigh Reaction to President Nixon's Attack

By LES BROWN

The television networks apparently have no desire to make war with the Nixon Administration, even though high-ranking officials of all three regard the recent attacks on electronic journalism by the White House as unfounded and unjust.

But while stating that they intend to "ride out" the present crisis with the President, who has disparaged some television reporting as "vicious" and "hysterical," corporate executives have indicated that the issue would probably be dealt with in their own speeches and in those by their news executives and commentators.

"It doesn't help the country if we escalate a confrontation between the President and the

media," Julian Goodman, president of the National Broadcasting Company, said. "The President's charges are so vague that there's really nothing for us to look into. So I think the best thing we can do is to do what we've been doing, which is the best professional journalism job we can do."

Burden of Coverage

Elton H. Rule, president of the American Broadcasting Company, said he did not believe his network had treated the President badly and stated frankly that, like President Nixon and others, A.B.C. would like to put the Watergate hearings behind it because of the financial burden the special coverage imposes on the network.

He made it plain that the network takes no special pleasure in reporting on matters embarrassing to the White House, but as to the President's charges that the news has been distorted, Mr. Rule said, "We are not going to try to make amends for a complaint we think is inaccurate."

Executives of the Columbia Broadcasting System also said they would not directly challenge the disparagement by the President or his speechwriter V. Buchanan of television news reporting. But the network did reach Mr. Buchanan by phone after his appearance on the "C.B.S. Morning News" last Monday to ask for specific charges of news distortion by the networks.

Callers Favor President

To the extent that phone calls and letters to the networks represent public opinion, the response has been strongly in favor of the President since the Oct. 26 press conference at which he assailed network journalism. But network officials point out that the response has not been substantial and is far from a mass demonstration of indignation and that when a criticism is made, callers tend to be those who agree with it.

N.B.C. has tallied slightly less than 1,500 mail and phone responses, approximately 75 per cent of which were in agreement with President Nixon that the networks were unfair to him and distorted the news.

A geographical breakdown seemed to indicate that the response was a planned campaign, as the mail came from 41 different states.

At A.B.C. there were 224 letters generally siding with President Nixon or opposing the conduct of the press and around 50 disagreeing with the President and supporting the

broadcasters. There were also 272 phone calls blaming A.B.C. commentators for biased analyses—a number described by network experts in audience reaction as "not extraordinary."

It compares, for example, with the 155 calls following the recent appearance of James R. Hoffa on "The Dick Cavett Show" criticizing the network for giving exposure to an convict.

At C.B.S. the mail count has been running approximately 5½ to 1 for the President in his dispute with the networks, but the phone calls have in the majority supported C.B.S., according to a network news spokesman. Exact figures were not available, he said but, relative to other issues that provoke a public response, the number of messages was modest.

Networks Strike Back

C.B.S. has already begun to strike back, on the speaker's circuit. Yesterday, Bill Leonard, senior vice president for public-affairs broadcasters, said in an address to the United Foundation in Detroit:

"I suggest to you that it is perfectly clear what has aroused Mr. Nixon's anger. It's perfectly simple: We've been reporting some of the things that have been happening in this country during the past year. We didn't create these things, only reported them. But they don't make the Nixon Administration look very good, and for that reason they become 'outrageous, vicious and distorted.'"

He then enumerated the "laundry list," from the Watergate break-in and cover-up to the secret bombing of Cambodia, the expenditures at San Clemente, Calif., and Key Biscayne, Fla., the intrigues surrounding the White House tapes and the indictments of Presidential aides. He said of broadcast reporters "If the

President doesn't respect them, the thoughtful viewer does."

Still circulating, meanwhile, is the text of an address to the Radio-Television News Directors Association in Seattle, delivered on Oct. 10 by William J. Small, Washington news director for C.B.S.

Largely, it is a sample of Mr. Buchanan's views on how to use the news media he has been criticizing, drawn from 34 documents made public when the President's speechwriter and adviser appeared before the Senate Select Watergate Committee last month.

Several of the documents suggested letters or telegrams to be drafted by Mr. Buchanan or other members of the staff and designed to appear in newspapers and magazines as if they had come from ordinary citizens. They were to be messages critical of the press or of Mr. Nixon's 1972 opponent, Senator George McGovern.

Splinter Tactics

Another advocated supporting a fourth party ticket headed by Dr. Benjamin Spock on the premise that any vote for it would be one taken away from the McGovern-Sargent Shriver ticket. He wrote that "any private help we can give that ticket by ads, public relations money, publicity, etc., might help."

From "The Assault Book," dated June 8, 1972, whose co-authors were Mr. Buchanan and his assistant Ken Khachigian, Mr. Small quoted these sentences:

"Some people of the media are slobbering all over George. They may have to be charged publicly with being pro-McGovern to force them to back off a bit."

In the same document, with reference to Sander Vanocur, who was then a commentator for the Public Broadcasting System, they wrote:

"Incidentally, given his performance the other night, Vanocur is a positive disaster for us, and McGovern's most effective campaigner. He may have to be fired or discredited if we are to get anything approaching an even shake out of that left-wing, taxpayer-subsidized network."

Mr. Small also cited a note addressed to the White House chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, from President Nixon, dated Oct. 28, 1969, it referred to the probability of John V. Lindsay winning the New York mayoralty election that year, which Mr. Buchanan had advised was "due to the Procacino collapse."

The President wrote: "The press, of course, will try to interpret this as a referendum on Vietnam. It is vitally important that this be nailed prior to the election and, of course, be nailed immediately afterwards as strongly as possible."