

The Administration vs. TV: How the Tide Turned

By LES BROWN

The Nixon Administration's campaign to subdue the television networks, dating from the early part of the President's first term, effectively came to an end late in October, observers in both Washington and New York believe, when "secret" memorandums on communications strategy surfaced among the Watergate documents.

News

Analysis

The memos, written by Jeb Stuart Magruder, Lawrence M. Higby, Patrick J. Buchanan, and other White House aides, were studded with such phrases as "get the networks" and "tear down the institution" and with recommendations to use the Internal Revenue Service, the Federal Communications Commission, the Justice Department and other Government offices to harass the networks and create a climate of doubt about their objectivity in news.

The memos, taken together, had the impact of documentary proof of what had previously been suspected: that there was an orchestrated effort in the administration to pressure the networks into adopting a sympathetic attitude toward the White House.

Since the memos became public, Government offices have become defensive about pursuing actions involving the networks, or wary of preparing new actions against them.

The F.C.C., for example, re-

cently abandoned a proposal, drawn from an economic study, that the networks be divorced from the five stations that each of them owns. An F.C.C. source said it was dropped for just the reason that it would probably be construed as part of the intimidation plot.

The F.C.C., however, is going forward with a proposed rule to prohibit the networks from producing their own entertainment shows or from leasing their facilities to outside producers. This has less the ring of invented harassment because it is already the object of an antitrust suit by the Justice Department.

Networks' Defense

Even so, sources in the Justice Department, in pressing the suit, filed in April 1972, felt the need to explain recently that there were no political motives behind it, and to assure the press that it did not originate within the Nixon Administration. The case had been prepared as early as the nineteen-fifties.

They said the department's antitrust division had prepared the case as far back as the late nineteen-fifties, but that all Attorneys General since then—including John N. Mitchell—had refused to authorize it.

It was when Mr. Mitchell left and Richard G. Kleindienst became acting Attorney General that the suit was approved, the Justice sources said.

For their part, observers point out, the three television networks have used the revela-

tions of the White House campaign as their first line of defense against all governmental actions.

Their immediate public reaction to the F.C.C. plan to restrict their production activities was to assert that it would impair their ability to produce news and special-events programming.

The networks have made it appear, by implication, that this was another act by Administration forces to threaten their news capabilities, observers point out.

It has been noted, too, that the White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, whose power over the broadcast industry has waned in direct ratio to Watergate's diminution of the President's powers, seems to have receded into the background since the memos came to light.

Its director, Clay T. Whitehead, who once captured headlines by condemning network news with such phrases as "elitist gossip" and "ideological plugola," and by advising affiliated stations to "jump on the networks" over their alleged news bias, has dropped out of prominence. Once highly visible, he has not made a significant—let alone provocative—speech in months.

Crucial Memo

The memo that finished it all as far as the campaign against the networks was concerned, observers believe, was the one by Charles W. Colson, the former White House special counsel, which told not only of

his missionary calls upon the corporate chiefs of the three largest broadcast organizations but also of how they allegedly indicated their readiness to comply with the Administration.

Mr. Colson's memo to H. R. Haldeman, then President Nixon's chief of staff, reported that the network officials were "very much afraid of us" and anxious "to prove they are 'good guys.'"

The document, dated Sept. 25, 1970, became public Nov. 1, when Senator Lowell P. Weicker Jr., Republican of Connecticut and a member of the Senate Select Watergate Committee, released it and others to the press.

Network officials reacted to it with indignation and seemed to feel challenged to prove both their independence of the Government and their courage to withstand Administration pressures.

C.B.S. Reversal

Symbolically, shortly after the Colson memorandum came to light, William S. Paley, chairman of the Columbia Broadcasting System, reversed his five-month-old policy barring C.B.S. newsmen from analyzing, or commenting upon, Presidential speeches immediately after they were delivered.

Mr. Paley's associates have insisted that there was no connection between the Colson memorandum and the C.B.S. chairman's action.

Whether that is the case or not, observers contend, the change in policy marked the turning point in courtesies to the White House and the end of an era of attempted repression by the Government.

Continued Assaults

Although, in a practical sense, the Administration's efforts to mold the networks by threat and governmental devices may be over, few expect the verbal assaults from Mr. Buchanan or the President himself to cease.

But after Mr. Nixon's press conference at which he accused the networks of "vicious and distorted" reporting, the public-opinion polls showed that network news credibility had not been damaged.

Therefore, observers note, the broadcast temples on New York's Sixth Avenue do not any longer shake with fear when harsh criticism is directed at them from the executive branch of the Government.