

A PBS Plan Nixed

By John Carmody

President Nixon has let it be known that he intends to reject a long-range plan for financing public television drawn up by his chief TV adviser, Clay T. Whitehead.

The President is known to oppose the use of federal funds to support a public broadcasting system which engages in public affairs programming.

According to a White House source, an "extremely cryptic" presidential memorandum delivered to Nixon

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aides a week ago, "gave no clue whatsoever" as to why the President was rejecting the long-awaited bill beyond a suggestion that Mr. Nixon wanted "a very limited funding bill of short duration and less funds."

There has been no final action on Mr. Nixon's memorandum. Whitehead, director of the Office of Telecommunications Policy and author of the five-year plan, in question and White House supporters of public broadcasting are preparing a final appeal to the President on his return from the Middle East, June 19.

In the past year, public TV—which depends on federal support for one-third of its budget—has worked to reorganize itself along new lines.

Word of Mr. Nixon's intention to turn down the long-range plan, for example, comes at a time when a new "marketing cooperative" system has been invoked which will serve to fulfill a need for "localism" called for by the White House. The plan calls for local stations to bid on programs they wish to present, rather than having programming selected and fed from Washington.

The marketing cooperative seems likely to eliminate most major public affairs shows from the public TV schedule, at least for the fall.

Another irony is that Whitehead was the first administration official to attack the Public Television Service (PBS) as a potential "fourth network," to criticize "liberal" public affairs commentators like Sander Vanocur (who subsequently left PBS) and to call for more "localism."

The turn down would be considered an embarrassment to Whitehead, who has repeatedly said he planned to resign his administration post once the long-range plan was approved by the President and moved to Congress, where it was expected to win quick approval this summer.

In the last several years, Whitehead has borne the brunt of congressional criticism, notably from Commerce Subcommittee Chairman Sen. John O. Pastore (D-R.I.), for his failure to provide a long-promised administration funding bill.

The bill, which has been on the President's desk for two months provides \$70 million for public broadcasting in fiscal 1976 and would reach, in graduated steps, \$100 million annually by 1980. In addition, public broadcasters agreed to provide \$2.50 for each federal dollar allocated.

The rejection, if appeals fail, will not immediately affect public broadcasting funding. A \$60-million authorization for next year was voted in 1973 by Congress as part of a two-year package. Action on that appropriation is already pending.

The long-range plan was hammered out last spring in a compromise between Whitehead and officials of both the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and PBS.

Whitehead is reportedly adamant that no changes be made in the bill, which has already been approved by the Office of Management and Budget and White House aides.

Eighteen months ago, the Nixon administration attempted to break up the PBS network by giving CPB programming and scheduling authority. CPB is the quasi-official agency set up by Congress to distribute federal funds to PBS and other public broadcasting groups.

In the ensuing power struggle, PBS retained its identity CPB got a voice in some programming decisions and an elaborate system of PBS committees was set up to give power to local station managers.

Whitehead, feeling that most administration criticisms had been met, then agreed to produce a long-range funding plan.

The CPB-PBS negotiators, in a rare show of unanimity, had sought a final \$200 million annually and a 2-to-1 matching ration.

But Whitehead prevailed.

Although Hill supporters of public broadcasting had promised quick passage of the funding bill this year, the intrusion of Watergate and the backlog of important communications issues facing committees (FCC license renewal bill, FCC appointments, etc.) probably make it unlikely that a bill similar to the Whitehead compromise could be passed in Congress. It also seems unlikely that the probable presidential veto that would follow could be overridden in this session, according to Senate sources.