

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

March 9, 1971

file

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT'S FILE

FROM: CHARLES W. COLSON *WC*

SUBJECT: Meeting with CBS Executives
March 9, 1971
4:00 p. m.

At the outset of the meeting the President asked that no notes be taken. He told the CBS Executives that this would be a completely informal, candid discussion of anything they wanted to bring up and problems, of course, relating to the broadcasting industry.

The President said at the beginning that he appreciated CBS running the Colombo Dinner on Sixty Minutes, that he thought it had gone very well and hoped that the public found it informative and useful. The CBS officials seemed very pleased that the President was aware of this - they said they thought it was an excellent program which was well received by their audience.

The CBS officials seemed somewhat reluctant to begin the discussion. They said they would like to hear from the President whatever he might have on his mind. There followed a general discussion of business problems and particularly general broadcast industry problems. The President explained the purpose of the meeting again - explained that he had met with ABC and that he would subsequently be meeting with NBC.

There was then a discussion of a possible One-on-One program. The President said that he would be glad to have anyone that CBS wanted to do the interview, that he was soon going to do Howard K. Smith and that would be followed whenever it seemed appropriate by a similar One-on-One interview with CBS. There was no response from the CBS Executives.

The President then talked somewhat about press conferences and the fact that he did not want to use prime time all the time because he felt that this would be an unfair burden on the networks. He did say that at his next office press conference he would have a camera so that the networks could use it for news program purposes.

There followed a brief discussion of Fairness Doctrine problems - the President said, as he did to the ABC Executives, "all I ask is that you are as fair to them (the Democrats) as you were to us when we were on the outside." He made reference to the fact that any change in policies ought to be prospective and not retroactive - that if we lived on the outside with certain rules, those rules shouldn't be changed now because we happen to be on the inside. (this was an obvious reference to Stanton and his attempt to start a loyal opposition series). The President looked directly at Stanton during this part of the meeting but Stanton said nothing.

There was a discussion regarding environmentalists. The President said he thought they had gone too far in many instances - that they were challenging everything, that we do live in a civilized society, that some people want to go back in time when men lived primitively and that was really a very unhappy existence for people. He said he had no sympathy with the environmentalists who were demanding equal time on the air for every reply to every issue. This led to some discussions of the present concern that the Fairness Doctrine will be applied to advertising. The President asked what could be done about this and I explained that with the exception of Nicholas Johnson the FCC seemed to be very solidly on the side of the broadcasting industry on this issue. Herb Klein explained the status of the case which is presently in the courts in California. The President said that he would be very conservative in his view here, would agree with the industry completely and would, of course, do whatever he could to help. Paley said he wished the President could represent CBS as their lawyer.

The President then talked at some length about the need for a healthy industry, the dangers of over-regulation, the proliferation of stations (citing L. A.), the need for the industry to be fair itself in its treatment of all issues. He used a very effective analogy saying that he always feels with respect to government employees that he must bend over backwards to be certain that he is being fair, inasmuch as government employees are denied the right to strike. He made the point that the broadcast industry itself should be extremely concerned that it is being fair so that government regulation is not imposed on it. He pointed out that the industry had a special duty in view of its somewhat privileged position.

The political broadcasting bill came up early in the discussion with the CBS Executives asking the President where he stood on the issue. The President talked at some length on why he vetoed last year's bill - that it was discriminatory, that it did not apply to any elements of the media other than TV, and that it was largely a very unenforceable bill. The President said that Colson was working on the subject - that they should stay in close touch with him and that he expected that there would be an Administration position. I talked for a few moments about the present status of the bill, some of the problems with it and restated Bob Dole's position that if section 315 is to be repealed that the repeal should apply to all political candidates - not just to the Presidency. Stanton said that CBS, of course, agreed with this position (Stanton's testimony in the Congress, however, referred only to removing the equal opportunities doctrine of section 315 for Presidential elections). Both Stanton and Paley seemed to be pressing the President on the point of 135 as to how he personally felt. The President said that this was, of course, a political issue and that he doubted that any legislation would come out inasmuch as the Democrats would always press for something that was for their advantage and the Republicans, of course, would want something to their advantage. He said this was an extremely difficult area in which to legislate and that he doubted that the parties could get together in view of the conflicting political positions. I once again talked about the difficulty of enforcement, particularly with respect to labor unions and also the difficulties that the FCC would have in administering section 315 if it were repealed. The President picked this point up and followed it through. We never really gave an answer to their question regarding our views on 315; eventually they dropped the issue.

The President asked the CBS Executives how they had found their relationships with Dean Burch. They were highly complimentary saying that he was one of the best chairmen that they had ever dealt with - that he knew his job thoroughly - that he was very fair and always took all viewpoints into account. Stanton said he had heard that Burch was leaving. The President asked me whether this was so and I said there had been such a rumor but that I did not think Burch would leave. The President said he thought Burch had been an excellent chairman, that he wanted him to stay on and then asked me to arrange to bring Burch in for a meeting with him (this had a very significant impact on the CBS Executives). The President said that he had never really met with the FCC; he had them in once for a brief discussion but that he wanted to have a more extensive discussion of broadcasting industry problems with Burch.

Stanton raised the question of the satellite issue which is now before the FCC. He said that CBS had wanted its own satellite, but really now was only concerned that satellite service would be available; they would prefer it however not connected with AT&T because they would be back in the same monopoly situation and have the same difficulties which they now have in dealing with simply one source for transmitting their signal. The President asked that I look into this problem and do what I could to be helpful.

There was considerable discussion about the effectiveness of Tom Whitehead's office. The President asked whether Whitehead was thoroughly staffed, whether he had good people and whether he was doing what he should be doing. I indicated that I thought he was doing an excellent job - that he was studying the overall communications problems, the impact of executive branch policies on the future of communications. Both Stanton and Paley stated that they had good relationships with Whitehead - that they had met with him frequently; they did not comment on whether he was adequately staffed or doing the things that needed to be done. The President asked that I check into this, and also at that point told the CBS Executives that I was his "expert" in this field and that I was a lawyer. Paley had earlier made reference to my meetings with him in New York. The significance of the President's reference was not at all lost on the CBS Executives. Stanton looked visibly taken back by this comment and I am sure he fully understood its implication.

The President asked whether CBS, like ABC, was concerned with the cable question. Paley replied that they were really not in the same way, that they were endeavoring to spin off their subsidiary which was in the cable business but they had thus far been held up by the FCC and prevented from doing so. They expressed the hope that the Viacom (the subsidiary) spinoff would soon be approved because if it were not there would be a chaotic impact on CBS. (the President and I had a subsequent discussion about this point).

The President also raised the license renewal problem saying that he understood the difficulties which many stations had and that he came down on a conservative side of this issue; he thought it was important that there be continuity of ownership in order to provide the necessary capital investment to provide service to the public. (CBS has had its problems in this regard, but made no comments).

On a number of occasions during the meeting the President made the point that he was on "their side" on the business policy and economic issues. He said that we may often differ on coverage and we may often take issue with what CBS reports - that is understandable and that has always been the case - but, "I want you to know that I come down on your side on these issues because I believe that a strong and healthy industry is important for the country."

There was a discussion about the Frazier/Ali fight. CBS said they had no objection - they could understand why something like this would be done, closed-circuit, because there was so much more return to the promoters. They expressed apprehension that the Super Bowl contract when it is up for renewal will go the same route and the public will be denied the benefit of seeing it.

The President impressed Bill Paley very much by recalling golf games which he had played with Paley at the Links. The President said he remembered the outstanding food and turned to Paley and said "will you please tell the chefs at the Links that I do recall what marvelous food they served and give them my best. Tell them that I miss it." Paley was very flattered by the President's recollection and of the personal comments that were directed to him both on this occasion and at other times during the meeting.

As the meeting was about to adjourn the President said he wanted to take just a few minutes to talk about some general philosophical concerns. He then talked at great length about the need for the U.S. to maintain its role in the world - why it is so important to our future security - why the wave of neo-isolationism is wrong. He used the SST as an example, pointing out that a great nation must continue to forge ahead, even taking many risks and even using resources that people would argue should be used in other ways; for example, in improving the ghettos and life here at home. He said that a great country, however, cannot falter. It must make explorations in space - it must build new, technologically difficult aircraft; it must continue in a posture of a world power, which in our case is a power for the forces of peace not for the purpose of aggression. He spelled out in some depth the arguments of the isolationists and then took issue with each of them, pointing out why he felt they were misguided - albeit honestly misguided.

Throughout the meeting the CBS Executives, with the exception of pressing for an answer on section 315, really skirted all of the difficult issues. It seemed that the President was having difficulty in drawing them into conversation. They really raised very few points on their own - seemed reluctant to engage in a real "give and take" like that which occurred during the ABC meeting. This left the President in the difficult position of having to keep the conversation going for the entire period of the meeting. They were very restrained in their attitude; obviously very pleased with the President's comments on the business side of the broadcasting industry and equally impressed with several points during the meeting when the President took a very firm line on what have been controversial issues between the Administration and CBS. They never at any point attempted to take issue with him. Overall they seemed very weak in their presentation, making it difficult to maintain a good discussion.