

John Chamberlain

Arraigning the TV Networks

VICE PRESIDENT Spiro Agnew has hurt the credibility of the big TV networks with his what-for lectures, but everything he has said will pale into relative insignificance next week when a block-buster book, "The News Twisters" (published by Nash of Los Angeles), hits the stands. Written by Edith Efron of TV Guide, whose interview with commentator Howard K. Smith surely tipped Agnew off to the vulnerability of the networks' news coverage, the book presents evidence that the TV reporting of the 1968 campaign was just about as one-sided as a match between Muhammad Ali and my 7-year-old granddaughter. I am not indulging in hyperbole when I say this; I am merely recognizing the irrefutable nature of Miss Efron's arraignment.

The girl has left nothing to chance. What she did was to set three tape recorders to work for seven weeks during the autumn of 1968, transcribing all the early evening ABC, CBS and NBC network news shows. The big issue of the day was, of course, the Nixon-Humphrey presidential race. But there were various subissues, such as the Vietnamese War, the "kids," racism, the black militants, and the WASPS (or white Anglo-Saxon Protestant middle class). Taking some 100,000 words per network, including what the reporters, the politicians and a gaggle of public personalities had to say, Miss Efron started counting, breaking everything down into "for" and "against."

The tabulations leave a telltale smear of egg over the faces of practically everyone connected with TV news policy. Nor will anyone from CBS' Frank Stanton on down to his office boy be able to issue credible denials. The reason is that Miss Efron has included her taped stuff in her book as appendix matter. The reader, if he so chooses, can do his own counting. It's all out in the open.

IN A SHORT column I can only summarize what Miss Efron proves. President Nixon, of course, had his own share of the prime time, and so did the Republican-Conservative politicians. But the point is that the network reporters and editorialists were virtually unanimous in assaulting the mind, and morality and the character of Richard Nixon. As Miss Efron shows, the network reporters in alliance with the Democratic-Liberal politicians portrayed Hubert Humphrey "as a talkative Democratic Saint studded over with every virtue known to man." Nixon, on the other hand, was pictured not as a human being but as "a demon out of the liberal id."

This is Miss Efron's qualitative evaluation, and her picturesque words may seem loaded, but they take off from that murderous quantitative count of the appendix material.

The count on the 1968 subissues is equally devastating. Liberals emerge from the tabulations of the TV reporting and editorializing as good people without race prejudice. Conservatives, on the other hand, are bad, and crawl with anti-Negro phobias. America is a bad country that oppresses blacks. The blacks who react violently are justified in attacking whites. Leftists are funny people and harmless. The "kids" on the campuses have "noble motivations and moral goals," even when they are burning graduate school dissertations and throwing the deans downstairs.

Again, there is much, much more to this arraignment than Miss Efron's own say-so. It is the quantitative tabulation of the appendix stuff that uncovers the network "party line."

I HAVE ONLY scratched the surface in this effort to present what John F. Kennedy would have called "the thrust" of Miss Efron's book. Incidentally, her count on the taped reporting shows that it is not only the conservatives and the middle-class whites who got a raw deal on the news shows of September-October, 1968. Negroes who dissociated themselves from the Black Panthers were left out in the cold. So, for that matter, were those members of the New Left who had philosophical reasons for following such prophets as Herbert Marcuse and Paul Goodman. Counting from those tapes, Miss Efron shows that TV reporting and editorializing have been incapable of departing from the crudest and laziest sort of stereotypes.

The interesting thing is that Miss Efron comes from within the "Establishment." She has been, at various times, a staff writer on the New York Times Sunday Magazine, managing editor of the special editorial departments of Look magazine, and Central American correspondent for Time and Life magazines. In pre-"Papa Doc" Duvalier times she organized the first journalism school at the University of Haiti. True, she once studied in a course I gave at the Columbia University School of Journalism in the early forties. But I was a liberal, then, albeit an evolving character, so I can't be accused of making her a conservative. As a matter of fact, her book is not ideological at all; it is simply honest reporting of what can be done within the present "liberal" ethos to evade the FCC "fairness doctrine" while giving lip service to it.