

U.S. News

BY DAVID GERGEN

The dawn of satellite politics

If you were just zapping through regular television fare last Wednesday night, you would never have seen it. But if you had special equipment—a dish equipped to receive Ku-band transmissions, pointed 99 degrees west, aimed at SBS 6, Transponder 15—you would have witnessed something truly different: the creation of a new politics in America.

For 20 years, Paul Weyrich has served as a spark plug for conservative activists in Washington, D.C., drawing them together on a regular basis to plot strategy. A year ago, he decided to take his meetings out of the back room and into grass-roots America. The result is "National Empowerment Television," a pioneering attempt to link high technology with a growing hunger among people outside Washington to seize control again.

Through a series of televised programs, NET has already become a potent new force, and if you saw it in action last week, you could easily see why. The show was staged in a row house in northeast Washington, home of the Free Congress Foundation, which Weyrich heads. By satellite, it was beamed into 65 communities, where groups of 40 to 150 local conservatives—about 40 percent of them Democratic—gathered before specially equipped TV sets. Through an 800 telephone number, each group could call in and talk live with Weyrich, show co-host Michael Schwartz and guests.

For half an hour, social activists lined up to tell the audience how to help in attacking "hot" issues. Abortion opponent Patricia Bainbridge, for example, urged viewers to step up a boycott of companies giving funds to Planned Parenthood, "the largest single provider of abortions." Her attacks would infuriate liberals, but what she wants is results, and she's getting them: She says 22 big companies, including AT&T, have cut off contributions.

Populist technology. The evening's *pièce de résistance* was Education Secretary Lamar Alexander, who spent 45 minutes fielding questions and listening to complaints about the country's schools and morals. Ever sensitive to populist politics—he may be in the thick of the 1996 presidential contest—Alexander was making his third appearance on NET. So fascinated has he been that he is trying to set up his own separate network tying together communities pledged to the administration's education reforms.

How strong is National Empowerment Television? Powerful enough that a parade of cabinet officers and

senators has quietly trekked before cameras; Dick Cheney is due in May, and Richard Nixon has agreed to come later. "There is a real, perceptible impact in the White House and on Capitol Hill when they focus on an issue," says a Bush adviser, who adds that anger expressed by participants in a show earlier this year was a major spur in the president's decision to fire John Frohnmayer, chief of the National Endowment for the Arts.

The headiest moment for NET, says Weyrich, was the Supreme Court confirmation of Clarence Thomas. For months, participants in his teleconferences worked to help Thomas. Then, at a crucial moment, people in Western states collared two wavering Democrats, verbally beating up one of them. "We got both votes," Weyrich is convinced. So, apparently, is Thomas. The new justice has turned down all requests for speeches and interviews, but he has made one exception: an appearance on NET to thank the participants.

Weyrich now broadcasts three shows a month and is building rapidly. The biggest is for social conservatives, another for economic conservatives, the latest—and most intriguing—for blacks. Energized by the Thomas fight, black groups in 12 cities now talk about ways of preserving families and neighborhoods. "They don't want to be quiet anymore," exults Phyllis Berry Myers, recruited to put together the program after her testimony on behalf of Thomas.

America won't be quiet anymore, either. Interactive television is not a new technology;

corporations like Wal-Mart and J. C. Penney as well as TV call-in hosts have used it for several years. But Weyrich & Co. are the first to put its magic behind a political movement. While many will strenuously object to its agenda, National Empowerment Television actually accomplishes something deeper that is altogether healthy: It is reconnecting citizens to each other and to their leaders.

There is a lesson here for left as well as right. Bring together groups of angry Americans, let them talk directly to their public servants, let them share ideas with each other—and soon the discontent so pervasive in the land can turn into direct political action. In an earlier age, a James Madison would have worried about the prospects of mob rule, but in today's fragmented and fractious politics, there is much to be said for building new coalitions and a new sense of community. Can it be long before Common Cause has a channel, too? ■



Empowerers. Alexander, Weyrich and Schwartz

'Weyrich decided to take his meetings out of the back room and into grass-roots America.'

2046979168