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## Sinclair Stations to Boycott 'Nightline' Tribute

By REUTERS

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LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - A major television chain, the Sinclair Broadcast Group, will bar its ABC-affiliated stations from airing a planned "Nightline" tribute to fallen U.S. troops in Iraq, saying the program is a political statement disguised as news.

ABC News plans to devote Friday's entire "Nightline" segment to the tribute, with anchor Ted Koppel reading aloud the names of hundreds of fallen American servicemen and women as their photographs are shown.

The network's intentions drew a denunciation from Sinclair, a Baltimore-based owner of 62 television stations in 39 markets reaching roughly 24 percent of U.S. television households.

Sinclair said the "Nightline" segment "appears to be motivated by a political agenda designed to undermine the efforts of the United States in Iraq."

In a statement posted on its Web site, the broadcast group accused Koppel and his show of seeking to "highlight only one aspect of the war effort and in doing so to influence public opinion against the military action in Iraq."

An ABC News spokeswoman said Sinclair's decision to preempt Friday's "Nightline" on its stations would remove the program in at least seven markets -- St. Louis, Missouri; Columbus, Ohio; Charleston, West Virginia; Pensacola, Florida; Springfield, Massachusetts and Asheville and Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Sticking to its plans, ABC News issued its own statement defending the planned broadcast as "an expression of respect which simply seeks to honor those who have laid down their lives for this country."

In an interview with Internet media report Poynteronline, Koppel himself rejected the notion that he was out to make a political point.

"Just look at these people. Look at their names. And look at their ages. Consider what they've done for you. Honor them," Koppel said. "I truly believe that people will take away from this program the reflection of what they bring to it."

Sinclair's boycott drew a sharp rebuke from U.S. Rep. Maurice Hinchey, a New York Democrat and leading congressional critic of newly relaxed media ownership regulations adopted last year by the Federal Communications Commission.

"The decision by Sinclair ... to keep this program off its stations is being made by a corporation with a political agenda without regard to the wants or needs of its viewers," Hinchey said. "This move may be providing a chilling look into the future if we allow media ownership to be consolidated into fewer and fewer hands."

The Washington-based liberal think tank the Center for American Progress cited campaign contribution reports showing Sinclair executives have donated more than \$130,000 to [President Bush](#) and his political allies since 2000.

The network initially said the 30-minute telecast would be limited acknowledging only the 523 U.S. troops killed in combat since the start of the war in March 2002. But on Thursday, ABC said it would expand the program to 40 minutes to include another 200 or more Americans who died as a result of accidents, friendly fire or suicide.

ABC is a unit of the Walt Disney Co.