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TV Retells the Story

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Over the last two weeks television has marked the 25th anniversary of the assassination of President Kennedy in an wave of programming that is as much a reminder of how large a role television played in reporting the tragedy and its aftermath as it is a re-telling of the event.

Retrospective segments have appeared on virtually all the morning and evening news broadcasts each day. In addition, more than 15 hours of programming were devoted to the assassination last week and an equal amount this week. The story has been approached from numerous angles: from profiles of the slain President to investigations into conspiracy theories to depictions of what life in 1963 was like.

The amount of coverage suggests how strongly television executives believe the event still grips the American population. "He was the first television President and the assassination marked television's almost mandatory presence in American households," said David Halberstam, who wrote, "The Best and The Brightest" about the origins and failure of American policy in Vietnam in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations.

"I think there continues to be a quite surprising interest in him, and anniversaries allow us to define and take stock," Mr. Halberstam added.

Replaying History

One of the more novel approaches to commemoration coverage was conceived by cable television's Arts and Entertainment network. At 1:56 P.M. Eastern standard time, yesterday, the actual time when NBC interrupted its programming 25 years ago with news of the assassination in Dallas, the net-

work replayed the first six hours of NBC's coverage of the tragedy. The Arts and Entertainment network is jointly owned by NBC, ABC and the Hearst Company.

In another slant, at 10 P.M. last night, NBC News scheduled a special narrated by its anchorman, Tom Brokaw, entitled, "JFK: That Day in November," in which a wide range of people talked about the country in 1963. "The program was trying to tell people what the world was doing that day," said Paul Greenberg, the executive producer. "A lot of people remembered what they were doing but not many people remember what the rest of the country was like."

A CBS News documentary, "Four Days in November," appeared Thursday night and condensed into two hours the 56 hours of news coverage from Dallas and Washington that followed the tragedy from the assassination to the burial.

Kennedy's News Conferences

On Monday night Channel 13 presented, "Thank You, Mr. President," an hour excerpts from President Kennedy's press conferences as a means of providing a brief history of his 33 months in office.

A considerable amount of the anniversary coverage was devoted to renewed examinations of the theories behind the assassination. For instance, Channel 11 last night began the first of a two-part show, "On Trial: Lee Harvey Oswald." It is an update of a British production that was presented on Showtime in 1986. Geraldo Rivera replaces Edwin Newman as the narrator.

The coverage may have put television itself in some context. As Mr. Halberstam observed, "In a year in which television has been appalling, the coverage has been a reminder of how good television could be."