

WILLIAM S. MURPHY / Los Angeles Times



J.F.K. (circa 1961) died in November, now sweeps month.

HOWARD ROSENBERG

TV's J.F.K. Remembrance Begins on a Tawdry Note

American Expose: Who Murdered Journalism? The 25th anniversary of President Kennedy's assassination doesn't arrive until Nov. 22. But television's observance of that grim event is almost monthlong, ranging from the appealingly nostalgic "JFK: In His Own Words" at 10 p.m. Sunday on cable's HBO to syndicated columnist Jack Anderson's tawdry and strident "American Expose: Who Killed J.F.K.?" which aired Wednesday night on KCOP-TV Channel 13.

How convenient for some in TV that J.F.K. should have died in November—now a ratings sweeps month when audience totals are especially crucial in setting advertising rates. How ironic, too, that 25 years after his death, this son of enormous wealth should become a posthumous soldier in the battle for TV profits.

The J.F.K. programs include more than the usual run of documentaries. Also coming, Nov. 22-23 on KTLA-TV Channel 5, is a 1986 Showtime special, "On Trial: Lee Harvey Oswald," which has been juiced up with material from Geraldo Rivera. Meanwhile,
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cable's Arts & Entertainment network will rerun 4½ hours of original assassination coverage Nov. 22. And arriving at 8 p.m. Nov. 15 on PBS is a meticulously rendered "Nova" probe titled "Who Shot President Kennedy?"

The onslaught of J.F.K. fare surely will also include the inevitable canonizing, the kind of uncritical worship reflected in Lloyd Bentsen's now-famous crack to Dan Quayle that: "Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy!" What Bentsen neglected to add, of course, was that Jack Kennedy himself was no Jack Kennedy—in other words, that J.F.K. the flawed man and President did not always measure up to J.F.K. the icon.

Better Kennedy the legend, however, than Kennedy as part of the sleaze heaved upon Wednesday's "Who Killed J.F.K.?" One person's sleaze is another person's ratings, however, for Channel 13 repeatedly used the two-hour Anderson program to promote its own "hard look" at the J.F.K. assassination on the 10 p.m. newscast that followed. To air the irresponsible "Who Murdered J.F.K.?" was bad enough. But a newscast trying to ride its coattails? Well, that spoke for itself.

Echoing the raunchy tone of a recent syndicated program on KTTV-TV Channel 11 that purported to reveal the identity of Jack the Ripper, Channel 13 vowed on the air in advance that Anderson was about to "rip the lid off the crime of the century!" And lose his own lid in the process, it seemed from what followed.

"Who Murdered J.F.K.?" was best typified by Anderson's muddled live interview via satellite with Oswald's widow, Marina Oswald Porter. After one of her answers, she looked to the side and asked someone off camera: "Did I make any sense?"

Even worse, the interview began with her telling Anderson: "Good evening to you, whoever you are."

Whoever he was, he wasn't making any sense, either.

Huge doubts linger about the Kennedy assassination, a subject on which reasonable people continue to disagree. Whether his conclusions were true or false, however, Anderson's program was not reasonable.

He promised "compelling evidence" that would refute the Warren Commission's 1964 conclusion that Oswald was the lone Kennedy assassin. (Congressional probes concluded in 1977 that Oswald had had an accomplice).

Instead, his so-called evidence was unclear, unconvincing and untrustworthy.

Intercutting reenactments and actual interviews in a way that blurred reality, Anderson built only a circumstantial case for CIA-Mafia-Castro involvement in Kennedy's death, a case he had previously argued in his columns.

Based on a fuzzy, inconclusive photo, Anderson even raised the specter of involvement by Watergate and former CIA operative E. Howard Hunt, even though Hunt said he had witnesses who could prove he wasn't in Dallas.

Anderson flatly contended—without citing evidence—that the CIA later told Lyndon Johnson that Cuban leader Fidel Castro arranged for Kennedy's murder in response to alleged attempts by Kennedy to have Castro murdered by the Mafia.

Much of Anderson's case rested on what he said he was told years ago by the late mobster John Rosselli, conversations he has written about and which were reenacted Wednesday for the camera, with an actor as Rosselli and Anderson as himself.

If Castro was behind the assassination, as Anderson contended, then how was it—as Anderson also contended—that Jack Ruby was the one who recruited Oswald to shoot Kennedy, and then later shot him on orders from the Mafia (who

had tried to kill Castro)?

To show that Ruby and Oswald knew each other, Anderson relied on hearsay and uncorroborated eyewitness accounts from persons of unsubstantiated credibility (one was identified as a "Dallas businesswoman and L.B.J. mistress").

Anderson resurrected the theory that, in addition to Oswald in the Texas Schoolbook Depository building, a second assassin was deployed on a grassy knoll. Analysis through modern technology "proves beyond a doubt" that the shot that killed the President entered from the front, not the back, Anderson insisted.

In contrast, however, the Nov. 15 "Nova" hour uses scientific technology and testimony from medical authorities to show that the fatal bullet indeed *could* have entered from the rear, lending support to the lone-assassin theory.

Narrated by Walter Cronkite and containing shockingly graphic pictures of the slain Kennedy, "Who Shot President Kennedy?" is as measured in its conclusions as "Who Murdered J.F.K.?" was loose and free-wheeling.

Combining photo enhancement and three-dimensional computer modeling with testimony from supporters and critics of the lone-assassin argument, the hour carefully examines the clashing theories, but is unable to refute the Warren Commission's essential premise.

The Kennedy assassination was the most-photographed murder in history, Cronkite notes. Yet there is one picture here that, in its own way, is more dramatic even than footage of Kennedy being hit or lying motionless. It's a close-up of the bullet said to have ended the President's life, an object so paradoxically small and benign looking that its awesome power is unimaginable.

What a fine program this is, one that sweeps away enigma without making unsupported charges. Just the same, it leaves us where we began—not knowing.