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TV GUIDE

An Oral History. Remembering JFK... Our First TV President

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An Oral History

Remembering JFK... Our First TV President

By John Weisman

Programming this week marking the 25th anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy includes an NBC News special on Tuesday, Nov. 22; "JFK Assassination: As It Happened," a six-hour retelecast on Arts & Entertainment of NBC's 1963 coverage, beginning on Tuesday, Nov. 22, at 1:56 P.M. (ET); and "On Trial: Lee Harvey Oswald," a syndicated special with Geraldo Rivera repackaging a 1986 Showtime telecast. See local listings for times and channels.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was our first television President—or so it seems a quarter-century after his assassination. He was the first to win the Presidency not solely on the basis of whistle stops, stump speeches or back-room politics but largely because of the way he looked and sounded on the TV screens in our living rooms. He was the first to allow his press conferences to be broadcast live, the first President to realize that television could be an electronic megaphone not only to America but to the world.

His mastery of the medium was by most accounts instinctive. As Newton Minow, JFK's chairman of the Federal Com-





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Member of Audit Bureau of Circulation. (ABC)

munications Commission, explains, "He began his [political] career after the war, at the same time television began. They were children of the same age."

David Halberstam, who chronicled JFK's use of television in his book *The Powers That Be*, says: "Into a world of elderly leaders—Truman, Churchill, Eisenhower, De Gaulle—you suddenly get this quantum leap to the young man using a young technology. Here, in 1960, comes John F. Kennedy, with an intuitive sense of 'vigah,' an intuitive sense of movement and an intuitive sense that television likes vigor and movement." Kennedy, says Halberstam, "instinctively gave us the Presidential television bible. . . . I think he viscerally understood that print defines, television amplifies."

Yet, while we may think of JFK as our first TV President, the fact is that we actually saw less of him on TV than we imagine we did. His 64 televised press conferences were mostly held—unlike today's prime-time affairs—in mid-afternoon, when viewership was low. All three nightly news shows were only 15 minutes in length until the last two months of his Presidency—and indeed, their combined viewership was not too much more than the total circulation of such weekly news and picture magazines as *Life*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Look*.

Even in times of crisis, the Presidency was not blitzed by the saturation coverage it is today. ABC's Sander Vanocur, NBC's White House correspondent in 1962, remembers: "The night the Cuban missile crisis broke, we were briefed by [White House press secretary] Pierre Salinger at about a quarter to 8—it was on a

Saturday night—and we rushed to get the story on the air. I did a radio spot, but there weren't any live television cameras [at the White House]."

And yet John F. Kennedy's Presidency and television are inextricably bound together. "It was," says PBS's Robert MacNeil, an NBC correspondent in the '60s, "as though Kennedy created his own climate, his own high-pressure area. The press has a barometer for each politician. . . . For Jack Kennedy there never seemed to be any low-pressure areas. His barometer always read in the heroic range, so all his defeats appeared graceful and his victories magnanimous."

"In many ways," says Newton Minow, "he was better on television than he was in person—the reverse of a lot of political people. He was handsome. He spoke directly. He had humor. I don't think television made him nervous. He was at ease with it." In fact, says Minow, JFK "once told me he never could have been elected without television."

As *60 Minutes* executive producer Don Hewitt, who directed the historic first televised debate between Kennedy and Vice President Richard Nixon, says, "I keep hearing about how Jack Kennedy was the first President who knew how to use television. That's like someone saying Sir Laurence Olivier knows how to use the stage. Sure he knew how to use it—he was a natural. . . . Television had a love affair with Jack Kennedy."

JFK knew the first TV debate would either make or break his candidacy. His close friend and confidant David Powers, now museum curator of the JFK Library and Museum in Boston, says, "He prepared for that first debate . . . like Notre Dame prepares for Alabama. The polls had Nixon at 48 percent, Kennedy at 42 percent and 10 percent undecided. He said to me, 'This is my chance to catch Nixon!'"

Howard K. Smith, then CBS's White House correspondent, was moderator of the event, which was broadcast live →

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from Chicago on Sept. 26, 1960. "I came down in the elevator with Pierre Salinger," Smith recalls, "and he said, 'Are you ready for tonight?' And I said, 'It doesn't matter a damn whether I'm ready. Is your man ready?' And he said, 'Oh, he's been up shadowboxing since daybreak.' And that's just the way Kennedy walked into the studio a few hours later—like a young athlete who had nothing to lose."

Dave Powers says that Kennedy had been rehearsing his answers and working on his eight-minute opening statement for almost two days, right up until 6 P.M. the night of the debate. "I stayed to have dinner with him. He had a New York-cut sirloin steak, medium rare, a baked potato, a salad and a glass of milk. . . . Then he was getting dressed, and he stood in front of the mirror and said, 'I feel like a prize fighter going out into Madison Square Garden.'

"And I said, 'No, Jack'—I called him Jack for 14 years and then it was Mr. President for two years and 10 months and two days—'No, Jack, it's more like the opening-day pitcher in the World Series 'cause you're gonna have to win four of these'."

It was about as exciting as the World Series, too. Writer Larry L. King, who worked in Texas Democratic politics back in 1960, watched it with a friend while sitting at the bar of the Red Man's Club, a saloon in Odessa, Texas. "When we first got to the place it was rowdy in there, everybody drinking and talking, you know. But once it started, things just quieted down and everybody watched as Kennedy, looking vibrant, seized control. For the first time we realized that there was a chance for this young, inexperienced Catholic candidate to become President of the United States."

"There were something like 60 studies done on those debates," says Pierre Salinger, "and about 15 years ago Michigan State University created a study of the studies, which included two points I think are vital to understand Kennedy's role on television. The first is that, even though there were four debates, the only one

that really counted was the first. The great majority of people decided to vote for or against the candidate on the first debate and merely watched the other three to confirm their position. The second point showed that while the great majority of people who watched the debates—and I underline the word watched—believed Kennedy had won, the great majority of people who only heard the debate thought Nixon had won, which shows the impact a television 'image' can have."

Five days after his inaugural, Kennedy held the first of his 64 live televised news conferences. Eisenhower's press secretary, James Hagerly, had allowed the networks to film these but not to go live. Kennedy, confident of his ability to think on his feet, set a new precedent, followed to this day.

"The press conferences," says Dave Powers, "are what people fell in love with. The debates just barely elected him President. And then he said, 'I will use the press conference so the next one won't even be close.'"

Kennedy's preparation for the twice-monthly events was intense, according to his former counsel and speechwriter Theodore C. Sorensen, who says that for a day and a half the President honed answers to all the possible questions he and his staff thought he might get from the press.

The preparation paid off. According to Howard K. Smith, JFK's humor, charm and eloquence made news conferences "quite a show. You wouldn't want to miss one. You learned an awful lot, and also it was amusing. He had a sense of humor, which not many have. [A reporter named] May Craig stood up once and said, 'Mr. President, do you think you're doing enough for women in the armed services?' And Kennedy said, 'Miss Craig, judging from the tone of your voice, I know I'm not doing enough and I'll try to do better.'"

Kennedy's press conferences were held in the huge State Department auditorium. Unlike today's sessions, says Sander Vanocur, they were seldom confronta- →

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tional. "It was a different era back then," he says. "I'm not saying it was better or worse, but we hadn't had Vietnam; we hadn't had Watergate; we were not used to the idea that Government systematically lied. . . . When I came to Washington, there was an element of civility between the press and politicians."

JFK not only used television, he watched it—news programs, prime-time and late-night entertainment and especially movies. He also "watched himself all the time," according to Dave Powers. Jack Kennedy, says Powers, would critique his news conferences, right down to the camera angles. "We'd be watching at the White House," Powers chuckles, "and he'd say, 'Dave, call the chef and tell him no mowah cream soups' if he felt he looked a little jowly."

Newton Minow recalls a surprising Presidential call the day after actor Cliff Robertson, who played young JFK in the movie "PT 109," appeared on *The Jack Paar Show*. There were no VCRs in those days, and Minow was amazed that Kennedy had been up watching late-night television. "He called and said, 'Did you see that?' And I said, 'Yes, Mr. President.' And he said, 'It's cheap—cheap!'"

"And I said, 'What do you mean?'"

"He said, 'Robertson would talk for only two minutes, then there would be commercials. You shouldn't have so many commercials.'"

As President, says Ted Sorensen, Kennedy understood the growing power of television to affect both people and policy. "He watched the evening news regularly in small part to find out what was going on, but in large part to have some understanding of what the American people were seeing and learning."

In the fall of 1963, CBS and NBC went from 15-minute to half-hour nightly newscasts. But all three networks, says Pierre Salinger, "asked for interviews with Kennedy to mark the occasion." The President agreed.

But after ABC's session, White House correspondent Bill Lawrence, says Salinger, "came out and discovered that the camera was broken. And they asked if



there was any way they could do the interview again, and Kennedy said yes, and they shot it a second time, which showed that the President understood television was beginning to have an impact."

Kennedy was able to make effective use of that impact in the area of civil rights. "What made it impossible for [Kennedy] to resist the inevitable any longer," says Robert MacNeil, "were the TV pictures of [Birmingham, Ala., police commissioner] Bull Connor's police dogs snapping at young blacks and the tremendous force of the fire hoses tumbling black teen-agers all head over heels. That outraged everybody—including the Kennedys."

"I was watching with him that night," says David Powers, "and he called Bobby [Kennedy, the Attorney General] right away. He told me, 'I knew that was happening, but now the American people do. . . . That is going to make my task . . . easier.'"

JFK also tried to use television to further his foreign-policy goals. The televised coverage of his foreign trips to Paris, Vienna and Berlin, for example, introduced American viewers to what David Halberstam calls "imperial Presidential pageantry." He also realized that television could be used to help diplomacy. In January 1962, for

Fred Ware Black Star



President Kennedy presides over a 1962 press conference.

example, he secretly dispatched Pierre Salinger to meet with representatives of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and negotiate a series of televised quasi-debates between the two leaders, which would be pretaped and later shown on U.S. and Soviet TV.

"We couldn't do it as a head-to-head thing," Salinger says, so "I suggested [that] each talk for 15 minutes. We would then exchange cassettes and produce a 30-minute show." Within several weeks of the initial meeting, says Salinger, "I was informed that Khrushchev accepted it and that the first debate would take place sometime in May 1962."

Salinger called in representatives of ABC, CBS and NBC and, he recalls, "told them we were going to produce this. There was some unhappiness from the networks that they had not been involved in the discussions in the first place." But within hours, says Salinger, they decided "it was a good idea . . . and said they would give time to it."

The TV shows never took place. "We were about 10 days away from the first debate when the U.S. resumed nuclear testing in the atmosphere," says Salinger. "It was a very tough issue for the Soviets,

and we were notified that Khrushchev had canceled the debates—at least for the time being." According to Salinger, he was negotiating with the Soviets to reschedule them when Kennedy was assassinated.

Indeed, Sander Vanocur believes the coverage of Kennedy's assassination and its bitter aftermath is the primary reason JFK is remembered as our first television President. "It was the period of mourning and the funeral," he says. "Nothing like this had ever happened in the age of television. And you had a lot of very talented people who were set loose to do as best they could to report the event."

During those wrenching days, television, says Vanocur, "happened—not by design—to bind the Nation together."

The first moments of Nov. 22, 1963, were sheer madness. "When the shots were fired," says Robert MacNeil, "I was in the first press bus, seven cars behind the President. I said, 'Geez, those were shots!' and I got the driver to stop. I got out—the only one to get out—and I saw some policemen running up what became known as the grassy knoll, and I ran after them thinking they were chasing the man who'd done the shooting.

"They didn't find anybody, and I ran looking for a phone to call the network. And the first building I came to that looked as if it might have a phone was the Texas School Book Depository.

"I ran up the steps, and as I did a young man came out. I asked him, 'Is there a phone?' And he said, 'Better ask inside.'

"A year and a half later, author William Manchester . . . told me he was convinced that the man I'd spoken to was Lee Harvey Oswald because Oswald told the Secret Service that, as he was leaving the book depository, a crew-cut Secret Service agent ran up to him and asked for a phone. Well, no agent did, and I had short hair and had a badge on."

MacNeil flagged down a car, which actually got him to Parkland Memorial Hospital ahead of the press bus he'd jumped from. He and CBS correspondent Robert Pierpoint each took possession of a →

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pay phone in a waiting room just off the entrance to the emergency room. They would keep the lines open for hours.

"It was lunch time when the first bulletin came in," says CBS's Don Hewitt. "I couldn't reach [CBS News president] Sig Mickelson, so I called [CEO] Frank Stanton. They said he was in a meeting and couldn't be disturbed. I said, 'Disturb him.'

"He came to the phone rather annoyed and asked what was it, and I said, 'The President's just been shot!'

"Stanton said, 'Oh my God!' Then he said, 'Don't go back to regular programming no matter what they tell you.' And we didn't go back to regular programming until after the funeral."

Howard K. Smith was on a transatlantic flight, coming back from interviewing Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser. "The pilot called me to the cockpit," remembers Smith. "He said, 'We're getting a strange radio broadcast.' And I listened, and it said that Kennedy and his wife and Lyndon Johnson had all been killed. . . . I sat there crushed. When I got back to New York, they put me on the air, and I stayed on the air until it was over."

"Dan Rather called from Dallas," says Don Hewitt. "He says, 'There's this Zapruder film—a guy's got 8mm film of the assassination, and what should we do about it? I mean, he's asking for a lot of money.'

"And I said, 'Dan, go over there, take a look at the film, punch the guy in the mouth and run with the film. Take it back to CBS. Put it on tape, then give the guy back his film. Apologize. The most they can do is get you for assault!'

"Rather said, 'I'll do it.' And I hung up. "One minute later I called back, and I said, 'Dan, Dan, thank God I got you. Don't do that!' It was the stupidest thing I ever thought of in my life!"

"Think about the poignancy of that weekend," says Sander Vanocur. "Those special moments on screen. John Jr. saluting. Jacqueline Kennedy and her composure. De Gaulle and the other leaders who came to Washington . . ."

There were also some moments, perhaps equally significant, that never made it onto the screen. Vanocur remembers being in the West Wing of the White House during that weekend of mourning, "and some workmen brought a rocking chair out of one office. And about 10 minutes later, a saddle with six-shooters mounted on the side came in, and I don't know where they went, but talk about symbolism and transition."

Vanocur pauses. "You never report things like that. You just observe and tuck them away in your mind.

"It all becomes a blur. The body lying in state at the White House, and then it went up to the Rotunda. Then you go back to the studio, and you do a round-table discussion. You cover it, but you have no great sense of the thing until it's over."

Sometimes the opposite is true. ABC correspondent Herb Kaplow, who worked for NBC in 1963, was at Arlington National Cemetery the morning of Nov. 25, covering the funeral. "It was gray, and it was cold, and we were out there a long time before the cortege arrived," he remembers.

"It was the ultimate test of taste," says Kaplow. "Our overwhelming attitude was 'This transcends almost everything else we've done, so let's not be huckstering or appear to make drama—it has enough drama already!'"

"Sometimes," says Don Hewitt, "the television set is a theater. Sometimes it's a sports arena. Sometimes it's a newspaper. And sometimes it becomes a chapel. And that's what it was at the time of the Kennedy assassination. Americans went to church in front of their television sets, and the whole country held hands.

"That weekend we got the assignment we never asked for—ministering to the country in times of national trauma. JFK. Martin Luther King. Bobby Kennedy. The shuttle disaster. From that day on, if . . . a plane is taken hostage or there's a baby in a well, the country goes to their televisions. And it started that day in Dallas." (END)

Washington bureau chief John Weisman's latest book is *Blood Cries* (Viking), a novel.