

TV Preview

Reliving an American Nightmare

CBS' Look Back at The JFK Assassination

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Dan Rather tries to find a happy ending for the commemorative CBS News special "Four Days in November" tonight. He says that after the weekend of trauma and mourning over the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, people went back to work and "America continued on course."

Bull. Something went wrong in 1963 that has yet to be, and may never be, put right.

The "CBS Reports" telecast, at 9 on Channel 9, condenses the 56 hours of CBS assassination coverage from November 1963 into two hours of painful memory and pungent imagery—from the first interruption of



Walter Cronkite and Dan Rather on the day of John Kennedy's murder.

the soap opera "As the World Turns" ("Here is a bulletin from CBS News") to the solemn pageantry of the televised funeral. The muffled drums, the riderless horse, the folding of the flag, the lighting of the eternal flame.

So much was changed by this event, more than can be calculated. One of those things was the way we regard media. When Walter Cronkite's voice broke as he read the

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confirmation that Kennedy had died—when he took off his glasses and choked back tears—it established a new intimacy between reporter and viewer. A vestige of formality fell.

Cronkite was the consummate professional and nothing about his unguarded moment detracted from that. But when attention was called to it later, it helped usher in an age of media self-consciousness yet to end. Some anchors and reporters would learn how to fake the emotions that Cronkite had tried to suppress.

It was probably also the first time that the general public got such a prolonged look at the news-gathering process in operation. We learned facts (and pieces of misinformation) as the reporters were learning them, saw live footage and raw, unedited film. Media were being somehow demystified and glamorized at the same time. We were irreversibly a television nation from that time on.

Other CBS correspondents appearing include Charles Collingwood, Harry Reasoner, Mike Wallace, and Rather, then a boyishly aggressive reporter in Dallas. The recalled coverage includes the arrest of Lee Harvey Oswald and his shooting by Jack Ruby, the national days of mourning, the immediate subsequent violence.

On the NBC show "Later, With Bob Costas," Rather recalled recently how he let Abraham Zapruder's film of Kennedy's murder slip through his, and thus CBS', fingers and into the clutches of Time Inc. Rather saw the footage during the bidding and left the screening room.



The Kennedys shortly before the president was shot.

By the time he returned, it had been sold. Don Hewitt, founding producer of "60 Minutes," said later Rather should have stolen it.

The footage is shown tonight, tastelessly divided into two parts (by executive producer Perry Wolff) as if to keep us glued to our sets for the gory part.

Rather's narration is, mostly, dignified and unobtrusive. The program departs, unwisely, from its own format with a consideration of Kennedy's role as a cold warrior (background material that was aired that weekend). This is uninteresting.

Of course there are ironies large and small to be appreciated now. Among those giving reaction to the tragedy is the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who is asked by a reporter about threats that had been made on his own life. King said one has to become immune to such jeopardy.

On Nov. 22, the Arts & Entertainment Channel, a cable network, will air virtually all of the NBC News coverage of the long, dark weekend, in real time, without editing. Those who lived through it then may or may not want to repeat the experience; young people who cannot remember may tune in only to be bored by the slowness of unfolding coverage and the fact that it is in black-and-white.

Rather said at a press conference last week that the assassination of President Kennedy was the kind of story that comes along once in a reporter's lifetime. He was not only irreverent, he was wrong. There were several such stories in the '60s. This one does, however, remain the most wrenching, and CBS recalls it vividly and achingly tonight.