

RICK DU BROW

Reliving the Kennedy

Now, as Then, TV Tries to Make Sense of That November Day

Another world. "60 Minutes" did not yet exist. Johnny Carson had just wound up his first year as host of "The Tonight Show." The prime-time series on the three networks that dominated TV included "Bonanza," "The Ed Sullivan Show," "Sing Along With Mitch," "Wagon Train," "Ben Casey," "77 Sunset Strip" and "The Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet."

It was 30 years ago. And, for many, what would become the most memorable event in the history of TV—even more than the moon landing and other gigantic happenings—was about to unfold.

The assassination of President John F. Kennedy on Nov. 22, 1963, and the days of follow-up coverage had an emotional impact that resounds to this day for those who personally remember it, and even for many of a new generation who instinctively and viscerally understand the legacy of that moment in time.

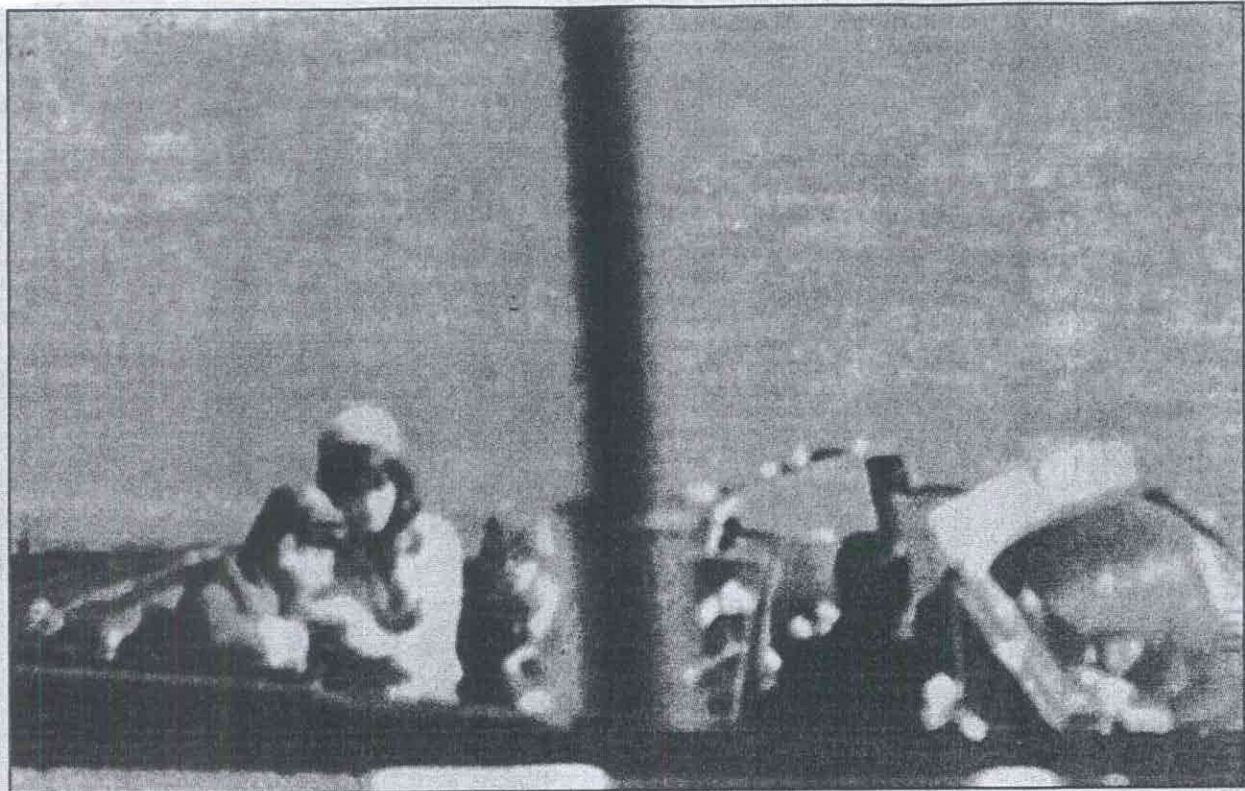
This week and next, the traditional networks and cable—which in 1963 was another far-off development—are recounting in numerous programs the life and times of J.F.K. and others associated with the national nightmare that followed his assassination. On Friday, for instance, CBS will offer "Who Killed JFK? The Final Chapter," hosted by Dan Rather, whose career was enhanced by his coverage of the killing.

On Sunday, meanwhile—the eve of the 30th anniversary of the assassination—television also offers "November 22, 1963: Where Were You? A Larry King TNT Special," in which politicians, celebrities and callers will share their memories.

The memories remain, in all their

Los Angeles Times

Assassination



ABRAHAM ZAPRUDER

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gut-wrenching vividness, despite the revelations, rumors and conjecture that have emerged over the last three decades about J.F.K., his private life, the later years of his widow Jacqueline as an Onassis and the major industry that developed around the conspiracy theory of the killing.

For whatever was—or was not—privately true, then and now, what happened during those four days of historic coverage following the slaying in Dallas was the image of a new idealism, as

represented by the young President, being assassinated as well.

And whatever it was that held Jacqueline Kennedy together as television cameras scrutinized her in the days following the shooting—simple dignity, bearing or other personal forces that drove her—she was utterly majestic and queenly at a time when the nation needed this behavior to help calm its nerves and restore a sense of balance.

For several days following the killing, the networks showed nothing but the

story, suspending commercial broadcasting, entertainment programs and advertising. Even at that time, Jack and Jacqueline had their haters, but for most of us, the devastation of what had happened was unbearable. Walter Cronkite wept as he reported the news. Everything seemed askew and crazy.

On the one hand, the nation—with the TV networks bonding us as never before—seemed to be together in watching J.F.K. lie in state in the Capitol Rotunda.

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On the other hand, the craziness seemed wildly out of control as Jack Ruby shot Lee Harvey Oswald fatally while millions of viewers watched on television.

In these days of talk about 500 TV channels that soon will fractionalize the audience even more, the power of the Big Three to unite and mobilize us quickly and thoroughly speaks of a historic TV era now gone as broadcasting alternatives proliferate.

Many people remember in a flash where they were when J.F.K. was shot. Where were you? I was at home with the TV on when the news broke, and—like many viewers—for four days did nothing but watch, night and day, writing about the network coverage in my job as television columnist for United Press International. The other day, I dug out the columns, and the memories came flooding back vividly. Thirty years? Impossible.

Perusing what had moved me most at the time besides the awful, almost surreal acts of violence, one of the things that came back particularly was the widow Kennedy's behavior on the day of the stately funeral procession.

"With the procession, the church services and the graveside good-byes," I wrote, "it seemed impossible that she would not crack.

Her brother-in-law, Robert Kennedy, held her hand for a while in the procession, but mostly she walked firmly by herself. Her children were in a car. A caisson bore the body. Bells tolled. A band played the funeral march. In the church, Cardinal Cushing of Boston stopped to console her. At the grave in Arlington National Cemetery, a bugler blew taps. Later she held a reception to personally thank the many heads of state and other dignitaries who had come to pay their last respects. She carried on."

It was TV that helped elect J.F.K. in his debates with Richard Nixon. Kennedy's instincts for the small screen were uncanny; he used TV more effectively than any other President (surpassed only by Ronald Reagan); and now we were saying goodby to him on TV. Nixon has probably lived his life out on television more than any other public figure, but J.F.K. was the first to exploit the medium fully, from his own persona to the heavy



Dan Rather, here reporting on the Kennedy assassination, will host the CBS special "Who Killed JFK? The Final Chapter" on Friday.

use of the home screen by members of his Administration.

Nowadays, personal video cameras are so common that ordinary citizens sell footage to TV news organizations. The videotape of Rodney G. King's beating symbolized the impact of the new technology. But three decades ago, the sight of Oswald being fatally shot—on network TV—was like a sudden, horrifying visit to the twilight zone. I remember the strange sensation of feeling nothing at all in the first instant, as if it were just another shooting in a TV show—and then just staring at the screen, hardly breathing.

Three days after J.F.K. was assassinated, John F. Kennedy Jr. marked his third birthday, and in Los Angeles, a great news writer, the late Nate Kaplan, wrote a piece that Ralph Story delivered on his "Human Predicament" segment of "The Big News" on KNXT-TV Channel 2 (now KCBS-TV). There were thousands of requests from viewers for the script. It began like this:

"He is 3 years old and it is his birthday, but it is not like a birthday at all.

"His father is not there, and his mother who is beautiful and laughs a lot and loves colors is dressed in dark clothes and does not laugh and many grownups come and talk

to her and they do not laugh either. The playground where he plays with his sister is quiet, and his sister who plays with him is quiet and she does not laugh either. The other children who play with him in the playground are not there today, though they were supposed to be. Don't they know it's his birthday?"

The script ended like this: "Who can explain to a 3-year-old boy on his birthday that his father is now a flame that burns eternally in the place across the river where the soldiers are?"