

Heady Documentaries In the Season to Be Jolly

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Either there is such a sparsity of news programs on television that we have cause to complain or we are inundated with them. And in this season to be jolly there have been any number of serious subjects given the documentary treatment.

Unfortunately, with last-minute Christmas shopping and gay parties to attend, this is hardly the week one chooses to curl up with a two-parter on "Vietnam Hindsight," which traced in building-block fashion the step-by-step involvement of the U.S. in Indochina during the Kennedy administration. Started Tuesday night, the program, an NBC White Paper produced by Fred Freed, concluded Wednesday night with "The Death of Diem."

Still, the incongruity with the season did not dim the fascination of this ambitious effort, which in scholarly fashion re-created the events augmented by first-hand accounts by participants or eyewitnesses. The first part, "How It Began," covered the period between 1961 and 1963, which started with President Kennedy's initial commitment to aid the South Vietnamese and ended with the Buddhist rebellion against the Diem regime.

Part 2, "The Death of Diem," which implicated the Kennedy administration in the coup plot to kill Diem—a decision made by a military group headed by Gen. Duong Van Minh and his aide-de-camp, Maj. Nguyen Van Nhung, the assassin—was the more interesting of the two segments.

True, we are not an expert on Vietnamese affairs and cannot attest to the accuracy of the program's findings, but the preparation for the two-parter and Floyd Kalber's narration, which placed blame on the Kennedy administration for getting us deeper into the war, smacked of an honest reappraisal of history. For the average viewer, who is not inclined to take mental notes as history unfolds, it was a valuable account.

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