

Saturday, April 19, 1980

Liddy Goes Video: Say Hello

By Tom Shales

We delay the start of tonight's newscast for the G. Gordon Liddy Show "Who's My Target?" In this corner, Mr. Liddy. And in that corner, columnist Jack Anderson, whom Mr. Liddy at one time suggested be rubbed out, scratched, offed and, in a word, murdered.

"First off, Mr. Liddy," said David Hartman on "Good Morning, America" this week, "you wanted this man killed..."

"This man" was Anderson, sitting Thursday morning in the same studio

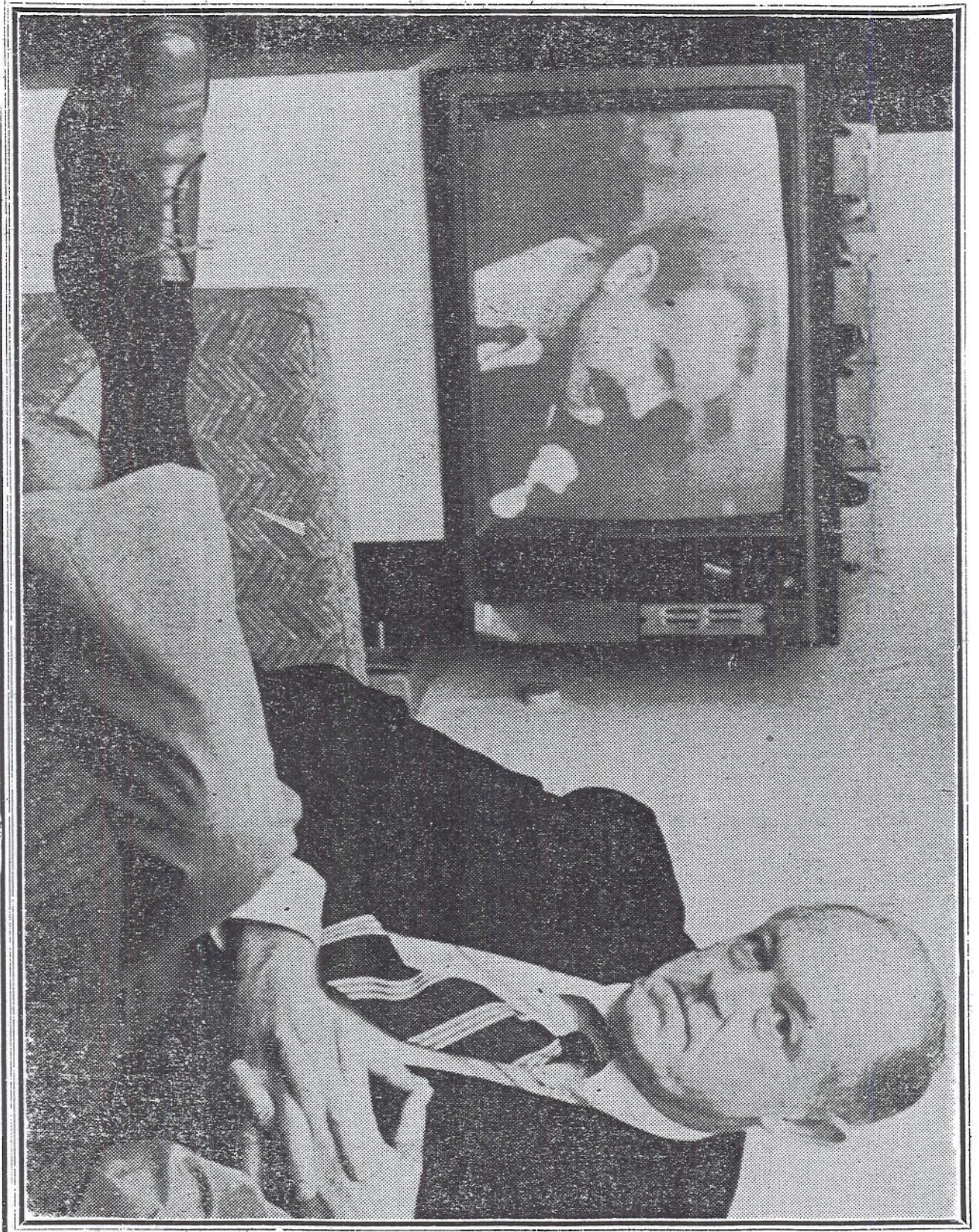


with Liddy and discussing fairly calmly the days when Liddy, the Darth Vader of the Nixon administration, proposed that Anderson be assassinated for allegedly endangering, through a column item, the life of an American agent abroad.

It was just part of a week in which the news, particularly on ABC, went further and further into the realm of Mondo Bizarro. Thursday night, on ABC's news magazine "20/20," reporter Geraldo Rivera could be seen chasing, with his camera crew at full gallop, a man Rivera claimed was a pimp and enforcer, through the streets and garages of Akron, Ohio.

Rivera was screaming accusations at the man as the chase continued on and on and on. It was like a parody of the Mike Wallace confrontation technique on "60 Minutes," but of course much showier and considerably sillier. Nowadays some TV reporters don't just ask intimidating questions: They shout out incriminations.

Perhaps we're looking at this all wrong. We think of TV news as an



to Electronic Vaudeville

electronic extension of journalism. It's not. It's becoming an electronic extension of vaudeville. G. Gordon Liddy was booked like an act to do his thing, and then the bill was sweetened into a duo, with Anderson singing falsetto to Liddy's basso demento.

It sounds like a socko act, all right — something to top, say, the historic night on ABC when William F. Buckley Jr. threatened to "plaster" Gore Vidal — but the performance, while fascinating in a kooky, kinky sort of way, proved surprisingly tame. It had less real spontaneity than "Name That Tune" and was in fact the end result of careful and complicated advance staging.

That is, television was restructuring something insane and outrageous into something palatable and entertaining. A real man working for a real U.S. president had really considered killing a real newspaper columnist in the name of expediency. But it played on the air largely as casual chit-chat and talk-show book-hype.

On Wednesday night, correspondent Ted Koppel sat in his anchor chair on the ABC News "Nightline" show and got to ask a live Jack Anderson what he thought of matter-of-fact statements by a taped Liddy to the effect that Anderson was briefly No. 1 on the hit list. With a bullet, Anderson responded largely with his usual, pompous, righteous indignation.

"Yeah, it struck me as bizarre," Koppel said yesterday. "It was especially bizarre that Anderson was so phlegmatic about the whole thing. It's bizarre that Liddy ended up looking saner than anybody else. As perverse as it is, the man does have a sense of direction. The rest of us are kind of floating around in a—oh, forget it."

See AIR, C5, Col. 2

*Backstage at the "Today" show,
E. Howard Hunt avoided G. Gordon
Liddy's image on the monitor screen*

AIR, From C1

Koppel said he was surprised the confrontation was, while entertaining, also "so bloodless. Here's one guy, Anderson, huffing and puffing, and the other guy is seeing tens of thousands of copies of his book trotting out of the stores."

It was the publication of the long-silent Liddy's new book, "Will," that got him on the air in the first place. In fact, ABC got him as a hand-me-down from "60 Minutes," where executive producer Don Hewitt told the book's publisher, St. Martin's Press to go peddle their papers when they refused to deliver Liddy in time to beat Time magazine's publication of "Will" excerpts.

"Good Morning, America" talent coordinator Amy Hirsch thought up the idea of putting Liddy on with one of his potential victims. In addition, "Nightline" also interviewed E. Howard Hunt, whom Liddy had said he was also willing to kill while he and Hunt were incarcerated.

All this was supposed to appear as a segment of "20/20," but then in-house fighting broke out at ABC. ABC News and Sports President Roone Arledge heard about Liddy's planned appearance on "Good Morning, America" (produced by the entertainment division, not the news division) and tried to get it squelched. There was more of a slugfest behind the scenes than when Liddy and his enemies got on the air together.

When it was over, there were bodies on the floor. At least one "Nightline" producer has now been banned from



G. Gordon Liddy shakes hands with Jack Anderson

the "Good Morning, America" set and will be given the heave-ho should he show up there.

To scoop his own network, Arledge transplanted Liddy to the previous evening's edition of "Nightline." Koppel only found out about the change late that afternoon. But he defends the spectacle that went on the air as legitimate news. Or at least legitimate television news.

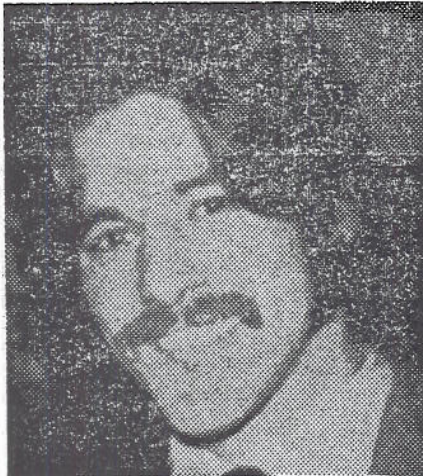
"It's a piece of Americana," Koppel said yesterday. "If there is one confrontation that is made in hell or heaven or wherever, it's the one between the potential murderer and the potential murderee. I, for one, couldn't wait to get up the next morning and see these two go at each other live.

"Was there anything in what Liddy

said that was breathtaking or new? No. He spoke almost verbatim from his article in Time. He really doesn't change his language much. And yet I still found it chilling to watch. A theater of journalism takes place on television which sometimes simply cannot be duplicated in any other medium."

Is it theater, though, or journalism? CBS producer Hewitt, the maestro of magazine shows, didn't watch Liddy Vs. The World on ABC. But he does say, "The trick of doing '60 Minutes' had to do with the fine line that separates show biz from news. You want to walk up to that line and touch it with your toe, but never cross it.

"The trouble with some of these new broadcasts is that they keep crossing that line."



Geraldo Rivera

Liddy arrived at the "Good Morning, America" studios with a publicist and two women reporters who are doing articles about him. ABC gave him a separate dressing room from Anderson so the two — who'd never met previously — would be fresh as fighting cocks when they met, with David Hartman as referee, on the air.

What followed was less theater of journalism than theater of the absurd. Liddy discussed in his lukewarm-blooded way the proposal he submitted for removing Anderson from the planet Earth.

Hartman: "You never did it?"

Liddy: "Obviously I didn't do it. The gentleman is sitting next to me here."

Anderson seemed more preoccupied

with asserting the integrity of his column — denying that he'd ever published anything that would endanger U.S. agents abroad — than in discussing the possibility that he might have been killed.

"You were prepared to kill me because of a wild rumor," Anderson said to Liddy. "Did you ever try to check it out?" Presumably if the rumor had proved correct, even Anderson would have supported the decision to eliminate with extreme prejudice no less a guardian of the republic than himself.

Liddy said later to Anderson that in the view of the Nixon administration, "You were a pain in the butt, but you were a lot more than that."

Before the program, and before meeting Liddy, Anderson asked an ABC staff member, "I don't have to shake this guy's hand, do I?" But when the two met in the studio, and photographers came forward to record the event, Anderson returned Liddy's handshake.

Throughout the program, Liddy referred to Anderson casually as "Jack," but Anderson referred to his former potential assassin only as "Mr. Liddy."

Of the Liddy-Anderson *tete-a-tete*, an ABC spokesman said, "We enterprised this particular thing." Enterprised indeed. "Hoked up" as well. The same spirit that sent Gerald Rivera off on a wild pimp chase also brought Liddy and Anderson together for a game of celebrity snipers.

Koppel may have put his finger on the only positive aspect of the whole nutty blitz. "All the fascination with G. Gordon Liddy," he says, "was exhausted within 24 hours."