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TV: 'Hard News' Documentaries on Home Screen

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

You want news specials? You'll get news specials until you cry "I Love Lucy"—at least during this week, which, as even television executives concede, traditionally loses viewers to the bustling activities of the holidays.

Among the more familiar types of news special is the "hard news" production. This can involve either the creation of an editorial context for events in current news or extensive research into events of the past. Treatment demands a point of view or conclusion, and success generally depends on the strength of that point of view or conclusion.

Last Saturday, for instance, at 7:30 P.M., the Columbia Broadcasting System presented a Special Report on "The Two-Week War: Whose Victory?" Essentially the half-hour provided a review of recent events in India and Pakistan. But, with Ernest Leiser as executive producer, John Hart, the correspondent, was able to pose some thoughtful questions:

"So whose victory is it, the 10 million refugees who can now go back to a country as poor as they? The new Bengal nation, which is mortgaged to India? India, which wanted to lose 10 million dependents and has gained a dependent nation of 75 million and in addition brought Russia's hand into Asia? Russia, who chose the winning side and irritated its Moslem friends elsewhere? China, which gave words and little more to the losers? The United States, which wanted to go neutral and instead went limp?"

Reasonable questions can add up to some valuable perspective.

This week the National Broadcasting Company is presenting a two-part White Paper called "Vietnam Hindsight." The first hour, "How

It Began," was shown last night at 8:30; the second, "The Death of Diem," is on tonight at 10.

[A review of the program appears on the facing page.]

Another type of news special is a sort of television essay, similar to the newspaper or magazine feature. The major problem is that by the time the particular subject makes it to the TV screen, it usually has been covered rather thoroughly in the print media.

The essays are standard ingredients of TV's "magazine" formats—"60 Minutes" or "Chronolog"—but occasionally they get an hour of their own. C.B.S. is offering two this week. Last night at 7:30 it was "What's Happened to the Army?" Thursday evening at 10 it will be "Under Surveillance," a look at the problem of people watching other people.

Examining the Army's much-publicized problems with discipline, drugs, race and the memory of Mylai, John Hart concludes on the obvious note that "what we need in this imperfect world is a good Army, but we don't have one, not now." For its surveillance study, C.B.S. News concentrated on the city of Philadelphia and discovered extensive evidence of files and wiretaps not only on the politically suspect but also on the ordinary person buying insurance or applying for credit.

The study does manage to end on a strong note. Suggesting that the practice of surveillance is "apolitical or at least bipartisan," David Schoumacher, the correspondent, observes that the true subject of the program "may have been about what happens to a city, and a country, when its people stop trusting one another."

Finally there is the type of news special that neatly eludes categorization. Consider last night's "December 6, 1971: A Day in the Presi-

dency," shown on N.B.C. at 7:30. With the very capable John Chancellor as correspondent, N.B.C. cameras spent a day with President Nixon, his family, his advisers and his various visitors. One catch: Whenever the conversations became confidential, N.B.C. was locked out.

The result, of course, is completely manipulated by Mr. Nixon, and the script, complete with the fadeout of the President working on late into the night while listening to "Swan Lake,"* could have been written by the Republican National Committee.

There are a few memorable tidbits. The President earnestly advising his daughter Julie about TV appearances: "The

moment you begin to act, the moment you begin to put on a show, then it kills it." The President dictating a letter to Jackie Gleason, regretting he won't be able to attend a golf tournament in February: "I wish you would extend my best wishes to all the big money winners at the tournament (pause with apparent afterthought) and also to the losers."

In the same category, C.B.S. will present a half-hour "Christmas at the White House" at 10:30 P.M. on Christmas Eve. Perhaps the label should imply be "Standard Profile." Or perhaps it should be "The Selling of the President 1972—Phase I."

The moment you begin to examine it, then it kills it.

* See NYTimes 15 Jan 72, "Notes on People," filed Nixon