

Dear Dave,

3/31/81

Rather than keeping a file on the attempted Reagan assassination I'll send you what I see. Except for what may be sent me, this will be limited to the Wash. Post and the AP's Maryland wire, in the local paper. I don't expect much to be sent to me, from the little that is known about Hinkley.

I'd had the TV's on when CBS interrupted for the initial announcement. In a surprisingly short time they had excellent videotape on, so I stayed with CBS for a while. They they got repetitious, which is inevitable, I switched to other nets. My impression is that NBC was not performing well and that while ABC was much better than NBC, it was not as good as CBS. Of course it is likely that before long any net could have an individual item that was its alone. But my overall impression is that CBS was both better and quite good.

I'd, probably reflecting her dismay, grew intolerant of the repetition and complained about it but I believe it was correct to repeat for the information of those just picking the coverage up and so that those who had caught it earlier could see it again. When it could present its footage in slow motion and then isolate a Hinkley frame I thought the reporting was good. Can't apply print-press standards to TV coverage, which has to be continuous and does have viewers coming in and leaving.

Overall I'd say it was excellent, cautious and responsible TV journalism. The one criticism I'd make, without having reflected on it, is that Rathaz wanted to be the star too much. He may have thought he was just being an in-control anchor, but he dominated too much when it wasn't necessary. Some of it did result in tedium. He also overdid some and could not shut his mouth when the camera picked up a reporter with something to say. An example is when he had a reporter actually waving to him as it was aired to get his attention when he ignored her and kept spouting what had no meaning at all, for all the world as though because he'd started to express some ideas there was no alternative to completing them. And she did have hard news, when she finally got to talk.

Rose Simpson, a middle-aged and experience Mutual Radio reporter, got onto the floor of the hospital where Reagan was and got some doctors to talk to him. He acted as a one-man pool and held an instant press conference at the hospital and informed all his competitors and by TV, the country. He was clear, lucid and responsible.

The hospital's briefing was excellent. The doctor was expressive, informative and clearly sought to impart all information possible. But after a while, although he was still being questioned, Kather cut that live coverage off for his own medical expert in New York.

CBS had a black reporter who happened to be covering the Reagan speech and was only a few feet away when the shooting occurred. He was good, slow and cautious. ABC had a black photographer who also was good in his eyewitness account.

When I tuned to NBC @ and this may not be an accurate reflection of its overall performance because I caught so little of it - it was always some sterile talking head on the NBC staff.

Little was known about Hinkley yesterday and it is too early today for there to be anything except what may have turned up late at night. I'm awaiting an early morning ride to DC for a 9 a.m. appointment to have my newest obst supports examined for further correction. But his picture was shown last night, several of them. Two, particularly in expression and around the eyes, suggested some shots of Bremer, and all I can think of is that anyone who would think of killing a Reagan has to be some kind of Bremer.

Early in the coverage there was a single mention of the FBI's saying that it was in charge. It was quite late before it was reported that the FBI had an arrest record on Hinkley, at Nashville last October, when Carter was there and when Hinkley tried to take three handguns onto a plane in his luggage. So you know he's nuts, to try that.

The Secret Service reacted instantly, and CBS's footage is quite clear on this. There may be criticism but if there is it will be unreasonable. You can't keep a President hidden when he moves around and all political people have to move around and show themselves. One agent, who was behind Reagan, was on him immediately, pushed his head down and pushed him into the car. It was very fast and yet carefully done. He got Reagan's head down without wasting any time. I doubt if either knew that Reagan had been hit then. I got the impression, as I watched the reruns, that the first bullet hit him because he paused ever so slightly, but I think faster than he would if his reaction was only from hearing.

I counted seven noises that I think were shots. I believe that the man was shooting when the police got to him. They were that fast, very fast.

CBS's footage showed an impact on the rear right door and its glass, which was up. If these were not shots that transitted a victim and if each victim was hit by a separate bullet, there were thus six shots.

For all the attention to experts, CBS never once had any explanation of what a .22 is or what a "long rifle" .22 bullet is. I suspect that those without knowledge were misled by Rather's repetition of "long rifle." It is neither the longest nor the most powerful .22 ammo, meaning normal .22 ammo. There is also high-velocity .22 ammo. I've not kept up on this but year ago the Hornet .22s were pretty powerful stuff. They also showed a larger caliber revolver that I suppose was dropped by a policeman or SS agent and referred to it as the .22 revolver. I say "they" but it was always Rather.

The individual CBS reporters were good and they got around fast, as did ABC's. While I saw no footage of Reagan's arrival at the hospital, there was coverage of his wife's arrival. They also picked up a lucid black man who just happened to have been in the emergency room when the SS got there in advance of Reagan.

I don't know when the other nets discontinued their initial coverage. CBS did at 9. I then tuned to the other nets and they also had discontinued. NBC had the basketball championship game on and ABC had a commercial, which signaled that it had discontinued. I saw no commercial from the time of the first break for the announcement until then. The first announcement was about 2:30 EST. CBS went back to its soap operas for a few minutes and they stayed with the story, when it had enough. It began with two reporters in the Washington studio and it would have been better, I think, without Rather trying to sat that he is Cronkite without the grey hair and with a blue background.

The confusion was no greater than should be expected when the White House depended on others for its information and when news could be aired faster than it could be repeated by the White House.

Haig started what may become a real flap and I think should, by his taking the camera with a White House appearance in which he volunteered, with a strange grimace, "I'm in charge here." He wasn't. He also gave an incorrect account of the succession, which placed him right after the VP, which hasn't been true since the 25th amendment. State tried to cover that for him but it was unpersuasive. Why Haig was impelled to do such a thing is not apparent. It is probably a reflection of the man and his lusts. I think the Reagan people won't like it. Nobody should, either. It was bad, by a bad man. Who looked bad when he did it. And had that little self-control.

Nofziger moved in and took over for the White House people and was thoroughly professional in it. His field is now political but he was the real press spokesman and appears to have made the p.r arrangements, which were quite good, under the circumstances.

Rather was under some tension. He couldn't get address he knew well straight. Like where the hospital is when it is 5 blocks for the CBS DC building.

In haste,