

TV: Useful View of Warren Report

C.B.S. Programs Are Antidote for Critics

By JACK GOULD

THE Columbia Broadcasting System's four-part analysis of the Warren report on the assassination of President Kennedy has been a thoroughly valuable social service. Taking up a controversy befogged by much confusing detail, the program has not only reminded the lay viewer of what actually was in the Warren report, something that badly needed doing, but also, through its own initiative and resourcefulness, C.B.C. independently established that the document's central conclusions remain far more impressive than the bulk of criticisms of the Warren commission's findings.

Richard S. Salant, president of C.B.S. News, is to be commended for recognizing that the controversy over the assassination called for the unusual step of investigating the soundness of the original investigation. In the unpredictable shifts of public opinion there had indeed arisen a situation where the assassination buffs and the full-time strident critics were penetrating the national consciousness to a point where the negative versions of events at

Dallas were enjoying more extensive circulation than the initial report.

The C.B.S. news inquiry, which ran from Sunday evening through last night, admittedly did not produce any earthshaking revelations. What the network program did show was that in certain particulars the Warren report may have understated its deductions, and that the evidence involving Lee Harvey Oswald as the lone assassin was possibly stronger, not weaker, than was originally believed.

From the tone and the attitude of the program, Leslie Midgley, the executive producer, had another objective in mind. It was to invoke the resources of an impartial news organization, virtually the only instrument capable of doing the job, to restore a sense of much-needed balance to the controversy over the assassination, to make clear that the criticism of the Warren report by such persons as Mark Lane, author of "Rush to Judgment," should not be left to stand by itself. Since the Warren commission as a body could not be expected to respond to every passing challenge, there had been created an unhealthy void, where increasingly only one side of history was being relentlessly ventilated. C.B.S. wisely appreciated that the nation needed the application of a sense of perspective.

No amount of printed material nor visual reportage can be expected to result in a consensus on the Kennedy assassination. Indeed, the critics may have won a new lease on further controversy, trying to pick holes in the C.B.S. effort.

Given the dimensions and difficulties of the assignment, C.B.S. achieved a remarkable degree of clarity in setting forth why it believed the essence of the Warren report was correct or at least reasonable. Its costly reconstruction of the setting of the assassination, and its pursuit of scientific detail, were in refreshing contrast to television's previous flood of oral harangues that defied ready digestion by the layman. Four consecutive hours of documentation of detail may have been a little long, but cumulatively there is no gainsaying that the total effort was illuminating in its dedication to as much precision as possible.

Walter Cronkite was at his best in reading the complicated narrative of the inquiry and invoking the right touch of inflection where C.B.S. News elected to stay clear of flat declarations, and indi-

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cated that it rested upon the apparent reasonableness of circumstantial conclusions.

A still developing aspect of the Kennedy assassination is the series of extraordinarily bizarre goings-on in New Orleans, where District Attorney Jim Garrison is conducting his own investigation. Neither C.B.S. nor for that matter the National Broadcasting Company, which appears to have jumped into the story in anticipation of the rival four-part series, has succeeded as yet in unraveling those proceedings. Competitive rating considerations invite a measure of repertorial haste, but such is the cast of characters in the Louisiana episode that a viewer is bound to wonder about the credibility of claims and counter-claims. That Mr. Garrison should complain about the rôle of the news media is anything but persuasive; on the screen, at least, he has not appeared adverse to milking publicity out of his legal sortie.

The C.B.S. inquiry, extending over nine months and obviously involving the employment of a large staff, almost certainly is going to lead to a rise in investigative TV reporting. The trend could be beneficial, because one of the blights of electronic journalism has been the overly tardy photographic reprises of material appearing weeks or months earlier in other media. Original reporting, confined not merely to a sensational crime but to all other areas of national interest, is what TV needs to capture the sense of journalistic excitement that in recent years has been largely lost in hasty exercises in blandness.