

TV Served Nixon Well At the End

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On Thursday night, perhaps the largest television audience ever in this country had watched President Nixon make his farewell address. But yesterday at 3 p.m. when private citizen Richard Nixon landed in California, only NBC bothered to carry the first 12 minutes of his homecoming.

"We figured there wasn't anything that different, new or newsworthy about it, after doing him this morning," a CBS spokesman explained.

"We didn't feel it added anything to the story," said an ABC official. The king was dead.

But former President Nixon gave TV viewers something to remember earlier in the day, perhaps the image that most will remember from all these last months ("our long national nightmare," President Ford would call it three hours later).

The medium that all through his political life had somehow served him badly so often was there at his leave-taking from the White House, serving Mr. Nixon well.

The pool cameras caught the tension, the struggle for control and quick, gutsy walk to the helicopter, fixing firmly in viewers' minds a final picture of a complex man nobody ever came to know.

After two days of coverage of a national tragedy, TV had finally closed in on the subject and in doing so extended to both Mr. Nixon and the country something of a parting grace note.

Then came the short, even refreshing drama of Mr. Ford's swearing-in. Once again TV conveyed that suggestion of purposeful people "coming together" that no other medium can quite match.

After the long Thursday night of too many meaningless crowd scenes and too many "talking heads" discussing, in effect, the unknown, it showed what TV is capable of doing.

Although the Public Broadcasting Service aired a four-hour program last night on "America in Transition," and NBC had a one-hour special on the "Five Days," network TV had pretty much packed it in on the resignation story.

Meanwhile, CBS yesterday claimed a win in the ratings race, based on a "projection" of the overnight Nielsen count in New York during the long hours of the resignation night.

The network also projected a nationwide total of 110 million viewers of Mr. Nixon's 16-minute farewell address Thursday night.

However, NBC was sticking with its 130-million-viewers projection, which would have been the largest audience ever to watch TV in this country, and 5 million more than watched Neil Armstrong first walk on the moon July 20, 1969.

According to CBS, that network had a commanding lead all during the 5½ hours they shared with ABC and NBC on prime time as Mr. Nixon resigned.

Its projections showed NBC and ABC trailing, in that order, from hour-to-hour all Thursday night.

Locally, Channel 9 had figures to indicate a clear lead all evening over Channel 4 (WRC) and Channel 7 (WMAL) in their ratings race.

The World Football League match on Channel 20 (WDCA), incidentally, drew 8 per cent of the late night TV audience here.