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ABSTRACT

This critique of "A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy," a television program produced by CBS following completion of the White House restoration project to show the changes made, begins by discussing the relationships of the President and Mrs. Kennedy with the media, and the First Lady's involvement in the restoration project. Additional background information is provided in descriptions of the pre-production planning; the on-location video production of the program itself; the President's appearance on the tour and his reaction to the unedited tapes; and the simultaneous telecast of the program by CBS and NBC--without commercial interruption--to about 46 million Americans on February 14, 1962. The rebroadcast of the program by some 14 foreign countries and requests for permission to service a print of the show by 34 other countries are noted, as well as the reactions of the U.S. media critics, some of whom were less than enchanted with the First Lady's performance although the program was well received by the public. The critique concludes by placing the program in its historical perspective, commenting that, while the restored White House stands as an enduring legacy to the American people, the program which officially presented it to the public remains a monochrome memento of the New Frontier. (28 end notes). (CGD)

"A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy": An International Special Event

by

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Paper Presented to the 1986 International Television Studies Conference

For most of us who remember him, memories of John Kennedy come back as monochrome images. His administration stands out in American history a conspicuously unique period bracketed by TV milestones. In the years between the "Great Debates" and the network coverage of President Kennedy's assassination and funeral, television assumed a truly central position in American life. In the early 1960s traditions were being established in the young medium. Our broadcast heritage blossomed as the presidency was being transformed.

The symbiotic bond between television and the occupant of the Oval Office was forever sealed during the Kennedy years. The telegenic new president's affinity for the medium altered the nature of the relationship between the public and the Chief Executive. Live press conferences and conversational interviews bred an unprecedented sense of familiarity. As White House correspondent Hugh Sidey wrote of Kennedy's first year in office, "No official face has ever become so much a part of American consciousness."[1]

The President, gifted with persuasiveness of speech and splendid self-assurance, was masterful in dealing with television. His formidable charm was easily projected. He was at ease in front of the cameras. His wife was not.

The enigmatic Jacqueline Kennedy, hard as she tried, could not avoid the glare of publicity. The First Lady was tenacious in safeguarding the privacy of her children and no one could find fault with her in this regard. Her reluctance, however, to accept dutifully for herself the role of a public figure was often a source of criticism from men and women of the press. Her reticence only fueled the curiosity of the hoi polloi.

The worldwide fascination with Mrs. Kennedy reached its zenith in the spring of 1961 when she became the woman whom John Kennedy accompanied

to Paris. The minutiae of her wardrobe and grooming captivated the public and news gatherers alike.

As part of the Eyewitness to History series CBS aired "Jackie's Journey," a 30-minute program devoted to her dazzling impact on Europe. With surprisingly saccharine language, Walter Cronkite and Eric Sevareid attempted to put the Jackie phenomenon into perspective.

The show included an interview with Mrs. Kennedy's Parisian hairdresser, Alexander, who described his selection by Mrs. Kennedy as a "great honor." "At the same time," he added, "burdened me with a heavy responsibility." Using a model, the hairdresser explained his "great problem" was "to elongate the head." "Before putting the chignon (artificial hairpiece) into place," he continued, "I lacquered the hairdo, thereby stabilizing it."[2] Such tawdry coverage stiffened the First Lady's resolve in what was called her "war of independence from the press."[3]

Jacqueline Kennedy's regal inwardness was not simply a reaction to the fishbowl existence of the White House. It was an integral part of her character. As a young girl, her father Jack Bouvier instilled in her the importance of reserve. She came to believe that aloofness, properly handled, was a highly desirable trait. One of Mrs. Kennedy's biographers writes of the prep school she attended, "An unwritten rule at Miss Porter's school was 'keep to yourself.'"[4] Her college years, too, were marked by an enchanting mysteriousness. Long before she became Mrs. John F. Kennedy, the First Lady had learned to wield inaccessability skillfully.

Mrs. Kennedy's famed White House Restoration Project took root on December 9, 1960, when Mrs. Eisenhower hosted an inspection tour for the soon-to-be tenant of the White House. It was the same day the President-

elect's wife was released from Georgetown Hospital after the birth of John F. Kennedy, Jr. Mrs. Kennedy reportedly cried upon leaving the mansion, distraught by what she had seen. United Press International (UPI) correspondent Helen Thomas recalled, "An aide told me later that Jackie thought the White House looked like a hotel that had been decorated by a wholesale furniture store during a January clearance."[5]

Jacqueline Kennedy's plan to make the White House a living symbol reflecting the presidency of the United States was "no frivolous whim."[6] After convincing her reluctant husband "by sheer dint of will"[7] the worthiness of the project, she undertook the restoration with competent determination. A Fine Arts Committee was appointed to guide the work. A curator was hired. And the First Lady herself took charge of an expedition through fifty-four rooms in the White House and sixteen baths in search of forsaken historical treasures.

The aristocratic Mrs. Kennedy was doing what she truly loved to do. Shortly before his death Charles Collingwood, the CBS newsman who was selected to host the TV Tour of the White House, reflected on the First Lady's mission. It was an endeavor, he recalled, to which "she brought great taste, extensive expertise, a wide acquaintance among prospective donors and a highly developed capacity for persuasion. I cannot emphasize enough how central this idea was among her concerns or how diligently and imaginatively she set to work on it."[8]

Jacqueline Kennedy was justifiably proud of what she had accomplished. As the one-year, $2 million project drew to a close she edited the Historic Guide to the White House with photographs provided by the National Geographic Society. The souvenir guidebook, which sold for one dollar, generated even more public interest in her enterprise. A television program about the project was something simply waiting to happen.

"I cannot remember whose specific idea the broadcast was," wrote Collingwood, "...but whosever inspiration it was, it was immediately seized upon by everyone at CBS..." In The Powers That Be David Halberstam writes that the President himself suggested the idea and "easily talked CBS into doing a show with Jackie at the White House."[9] The eventual producer of the "Tour," distinguished CBS documentarian Perry Wolff, remembered that NBC, too, was interested in producing such a program and was offering to shoot it in color, something CBS was not yet equipped to do.[10] But the program idea was presented to the First Lady by Blair Clark, the Vice-President of CBS News whose friendship with the President went back to their Harvard days when Clark was Chairman of the Crimson.

During the six months of pre-production planning for the program Perry Wolff and director Franklin Schaffner had, said the producer, "almost no face to face contact with the President or Mrs. Kennedy." Four drafts of the program were prepared by Wolff. They were extensive outlines written in consultation with the Project staff. It was understood, however, that Mrs. Kennedy would put the information into her own words.

The Kennedys spent the weekend before the January 15, 1962 video-taping at Glen Ora, the family retreat in Virginia, during which time nine tons of lights, cameras and cables were moved into the Executive Mansion and put into place by 54 technicians. Great pains were taken not to involve Mrs. Kennedy in the tedious logistical tasks of television production. The initial blocking for the various segments was worked out with the help of a model approximately the First Lady's size and coiffed in a "Jackie hairdo."[11]

Program material not involving Mrs. Kennedy and cutaway shots were videotaped in advance. The principal taping with the First Lady began around 11:00 a.m. on Monday and was finished a little after 7:00 in the evening. The time was planned and used efficiently. "She was nervous," producer Wolff recalled about that production day, "It was exhausting. She drank a couple of scotches and was smoking Marlboros."

In the early 1960's, on-location video production still involved the awkward use of heavy studio cameras. Lightweight electronic news-gathering equipment was yet a decade away. This cumbersome process was somewhat simplified, though, by the use of a battery-operated, wireless microphone. Mrs. Kennedy's young press secretary, Pamela Turnure, was shown how to adjust the mike and battery pack, which were hidden under Mrs. Kennedy's suit jacket. If a problem were to arise, Collingwood explained at the time, "We couldn't have a technician fiddling with the First Lady's person."[12]

President Kennedy's first press conference of 1962 was being held on the same afternoon. Among the issues on which he fielded questions were segregation in federally assisted housing, the Berlin Wall, nuclear testing, Cuba, and the prospects for war in Southeast Asia. The burden of the presidency weighed heavily on him that day.

Kennedy agreed to make an appearance on the television tour and the taping was scheduled to take place immediately after the press conference. At about 4:30 he caught up with his wife and the CBS production team. During the brief delay needed to position lights and cameras in the Treaty Room the President reviewed the gist of his remarks. Still in the press conference mode, Kennedy's answers to Collingwood's questions were "sharp and pointed."[13]

After all the taping had been completed, the President and Mrs. Kennedy viewed the unedited tapes in the White House theater. "They asked me to join them," Collingwood remembered, "but I thought my presence might inhibit their discussion of how things had gone, so I begged off."

Perry Wolff was present at the screening. "I sat right behind the two of them," he said of the President and Mrs. Kennedy. "He was very proud of her. They were very cuddly." Despite the strains their marriage was purportedly suffering under, Wolff had no doubt "they cared deeply about each other." "I know," he said remembering the scene, "because I observed it."

The President was not happy with the tone of his delivery. He felt it needed to be softer. He turned and asked the producer,"Is it possible for me to redo it?" The cameras, remembered Wolff with a laugh, were scheduled to be in another city the next day to shoot the "Pillsbury Bake-Off," but the request from Kennedy was "unrefusable." They would, of course, allow the President to rerecord his segment in the morning. Mrs. Kennedy could not be there the next day, so Mrs. Perry Wolff sat next to Charles Collingwood in order for the President to make proper eye contact. His wife's assignment of looking into the eyes of John F. Kennedy, Wolff remembers, did unnerve her slightly.

With warm sincerity the President commented on the importance of preserving the history of the White House, especially for children. "I have always felt that American history is a sometimes dull subject. There's so much emphasis on dates." The President could not know how quaint and telling his next statement would soon become, "But I think if they can come here and see--alive--this building and in a sense touch the people who have been here then they'll go home more interested and I think that they'll become better Americans and some of them may want to

someday live here themselves which I think would be good--" and then with a chuckle he added the afterthought, "even the girls."[14] John Kennedy would not live to know the monumental impact of the Women's Movement on American life.

Public anticipation about the event was great. It was not the story of the President's house that compelled viewers, of course. It was the possibility his wife would reveal something more about herself during the sixty-minutes in which she willingly took her place on America's center stage. The cover of TV Guide the week of the broadcast, a close-up shot of Mrs. Kennedy with slightly tousled hair and direct gaze, suggested the TV tour would be a more intimate, candid affair than it turned out to be.

"A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy" was telecast, without commercial interruption, simultaneously on CBS and NBC at 10:00 p.m. on Wednesday, February 14. The following Sunday it aired on the ABC network at 6:30 p.m. Though the program was completely produced by CBS, the other networks contributed to the production cost for the privilege of broadcasting the tape. This highly irregular arrangement also satisfied the White House tradition of not giving exclusive access to any one news organization.

On the evening of Valentine's Day the President and Mrs. Kennedy had dinner at the White House with Benjamin Bradlee, Washington editor of Newsweek, and his wife Tony. The other two guests were Max Freedman, American correspondent of the Manchester Guardian, and Mrs. John Randolph Fell, a society hostess from New York. After dinner, the group retired to the small sitting room next to the Lincoln Room. In his memoirs Conversations with Kennedy, Bradlee recalled, "There had been a lot

of talk at dinner about how good CBS was, what a good director they had in Frank Schaffner (director of the 'Tour'), but ironically the president's TV set wouldn't bring in the CBS channel, and we watched the show on NBC, and we watched it in virtual silence."[15]

About 46 million other people, three out of every four Americans watching TV at that time, were tuned to "The Jackie Kennedy Show."[16] What they saw was an inhibited First Lady and a somewhat fawning network correspondent tiptoe through panoply of treasurable historical artifacts. The intriguing substance of the White House Tour was bogged down by the weight of the event itself. Mrs. Kennedy's three strands of pearls, the simple cut of her neckline, and her low-heeled shoes were vivid long after the beautiful paintings of great American artists faded from viewers' memories.

Watching the program all these years later, the awkwardness is palpable. The 1962 audience overlooked the program's shortcomings, however. Most viewers were just as smitten as the Chicago Daily News critic who wrote with unintended hyperbole, "Here was an example of television at its best."

Bradlee remembered, "As soon as the broadcast was over the telephone started ringing..." One call was from the President's sister Eunice Shriver. After speaking with her brother, she asked for Jacqueline, "But Jackie shook her head," the evening's guest remembered, "and the president said she had gone off to bed--in tears."

"We teased Kennedy about calling his wife 'Jackie'," Bradlee continued, "...and in that quizzical way of his, almost like a child looking for approval, he asked us whether we thought 'the first lady' would have

been more appropriate." How odd his concern seems today in a world in which the mass media have put Americans on a first name basis with presidential parents, siblings, spouses and progeny--and acquaint us with their most personal tribulations.

The President was still not happy with his part in the program, but apparently realized the public relations value of his wife. "Terrific," he congratulated her on her performance, "can we show it in 1964?"[17]

The morning after the broadcast, The New York Herald Tribune suggested in a front page story that Mrs. Kennedy was amenable to participating in the television program because of an understanding the three networks would contribute handsomely to the Fine Arts Committee Fund. The President was reportedly "angered" by the story.[18] The monetary incentive theory was denied by Pierre Salinger and CBS Chairman William Paley who called the charge "sheer nonsense." The head of ABC News, James Hagerty, however, said that he understood a donation to the Fine Arts Committee was "expected to be included in the bill for the show," and protested the arrangement, saying, "under no conditions will ABC make a donation to a government."[19] Twenty-three years after the broadcast Charles Collingwood took umbrage at the question. "I have no idea whether we made a sizeable contribution or not. I rather hope we did for it was certainly a worthwhile cause. But I can assure you that any such contribution would in no way have influenced her decision to agree to the broadcast and participate in it."

"A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy" was an international event as well. A brief introduction to the program was recorded by the First Lady in French and Spanish for foreign distribution.

In the early summer of 1962, the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, Newton Minow, sent the following memo to Kennedy's special assistant Kenneth P. O'Donnell:

> Some time ago the President asked for a list of the countries which broadcast the television program (A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy). I now have a fairly complete list, which is attached herewith. As you can see, the White House is becoming familiar territory all over the world.[20]

The attached list was remarkable. Countries that had purchased and broadcast the program included Japan, Australia, the United Kingdom, Ireland, the Phillippines, Switzerland, Sweden, New Zealand, Puerto Rico, Finland, Denmark and Norway. Belgium and Italy had received prints and scheduled broadcasts for future dates. Thirty-four other countries, including Communist China, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, requested permission from the United States Information Agency (USIA) to service a print of the show.

Not everyone was enchanted with the First Lady's performance, however. The July 1962 issue of Esquire magazine carried a Norman Mailer piece entitled "An Evening with Jackie Kennedy." He was not afflicted with the generous blindspots of most other critics. Rather, the Mailer essay displayed a savage insight that Mrs. Kennedy would find hard to forgive.

"Do you remember the girl with the magnificent sweater who used to give the weather reports on television in a swarmy singsong tone?" he asked his readers in describing the First Lady's "public voice." He had heard better voices "selling gadgets to the grim" in Macy's at Christmastime than the "manufactured voice Jackie Kennedy chose to

arrive at." She walked through the tour, according to Mailer, "like a starlet who is utterly without talent."

"Mrs. Kennedy moved," he wrote, "like a wooden horse." The progra. gave us precisely no sense of the past," Mailer felt, but "it inflicted the past upon us, pummeled us with it, depressed us with facts." With paradoxical compassion, the author concluded that Jacqueline Kennedy was "a royal phony." "She was trying, I suppose, to be a proper First Lady and . was her mistake."[21]

Time has not diminished the lure of Mrs. Kennedy in our popular imagination or the compulsion by social critics to put the brief era into perspective. In Norman Mailer's 1984 essay "Jackie, the Prisoner of Celebrity," he muses, "...in retrospect we can say that once we had a romantic heroine and she was married to one of the most handsome men in America, and they were President and First Lady, and so our dream life thrived."[22]

In a televised address on the evening of October 22, 1962 President Kennedy told the American people of the presence of offensive nuclear missiles in Cuba and his decision to impose a naval blockade of the island. On the very day his most grim announcement was made, a troupe of comic performers, led by impressionist Vaughn Meader, was recording a collection of irreverent sketches in a New York City studio. "The First Family" album became a bonafide popular culture phenomenon. Over one million copies were sold in the first two weeks of release. "The demand exceeds our supply by the thousands," a Miami record store owner told a Time magazine reporter. "I don't mean hundreds, I mean thousands!"[23]

The longest sketch on the album is a seven-minute parody entitled "The Tour." A stiff sounding newsman, Charles Collingsworth, walks through the White House with a breathy, not too bright First Lady. She points out the various paintings on the wall by saying, "There's this one and this one and that great big one over there and this little teeny one down here." No changes were made in the Blue Room she mews, because "we decided to leave it just the way President Blue had it originally."

The satire hits hard on one of the program's most vulnerable points--the unsubtle way in which Mrs. Kennedy plugged the donations of notable antiques and paintings throughout the tour. The audience was informed, for instance, a painting of Benjamin Franklin was "a gift of Mr. and Mrs. Walter Annenberg of Philadelphia" and John Trumbull's portrait of Alexander Hamilton was a "gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Ford of Grosse Pointe, Michigan." On the "First Family" album, correspondent Collingsworth notices a good deal of dust on the furniture in the Grant Drawing Room. "Yes," the First Lady sighs, just as Mrs. Kennedy did in the program, "and that dust was a gift from Mrs. B. P. Landon of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania." The studio audience is convulsed. Mrs. Kennedy's personal secretary, Mary Barelli Gallagher, recalled "it infuriated her to hear or even see the Vaughn Meader record... There were very few things that got Jackie as excited as the subject of Vaughn Meader."[24]

The President's sister-in-law Ethel Kennedy came up with her own "parody of the White House tour" and presented it to him for his forty-sixth birthday in May 1963. It was a scrapbook depicting Hickory

Hill, home of the Robert F. Kennedy family in Virginia, as a "madhouse filled with children and dogs and cats and turtles." It "seemed to be," wrote Kitty Kelly in her sensational biography Jackie Oh! "his favorite present."[26]

Mrs. Kennedy's tour of the White House is a program that lingers in the memory of its viewers because it was a major television event of the era In his poignant memoir, Station Identification: Confessions of a Video Kid, author Donald Bowie recalls his high school Social Studies teacher who suffered from "media infection." His condition "became noticeably worse on the Sunday in 1962 when Jackie Kennedy's 'Tour of the White House' was aired," wrote Bowie. "The Monday after the tour, Mr. Marcus entered the classroom in a near delirium." "Did you all see it?" the teacher asked, "Did you all see it?" A cynical female classmate who never watched television whispered to Bowie, "I don't know what kind of a house tour that was--to make Mr. Marcus so insuffereable. Look at him. Why he's like a proud father passing out cigars. Who ever heard of a reaction like this from just looking at somebody else's chintzes?"[26]

Since mid-century a new kind of Americana has flourished. Television programming, ostensibly ephemeral, preserved on celluloid or magnetic tape can reveal, in some measure, the temper of the times. The producer of Mrs. Kennedy's tour, Perry Wolff, believes the tone of the show was unique to the period. It was created and produced with "absolutely no adversarial position," he says. Mrs. Kennedy's restoration of the White House was a project not entirely without controversy, yet not a hint of it surfaced in the program. "Especially since Watergate," Wolff relfects, "there's just no longer that unquestioning admiration..."

Charles Collingwood looked back at the historical significance of the broadcast with greater sentimentality. A young person today, born after the death of John Kennedy, could learn, he felt, that "those American Presidents who have a distinctive impact on their times usually are catalysts for a sense of renewa--renewed national pride and a sense of tradition. Certainly the rehabilitation of the White House was a prime factor in both." "The program," he continued, "should help us understand the enormous sense of shock and loss that followed the President's assassination. Here we see the Kennedys in full possession of the mystique which surrounded them, full of grace and charm, concerned with the full sweep of American history... Rightly or wrongly, that is still how many remember them..."

Those who have assessed the tenures of American First Ladies have concluded the contributions made by Jacqueline Kennedy were indeed significant. While the restored White House stands as an "enduring legacy to the American people,"[28] the program which officially presented it to us, "A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy." remains a monochrome memento of the New Frontier... a national souvenir evocative and bittersweet.

# # #

* ("A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy" is available for viewing at the Museum of Broadcasting in New York City, The John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, and at the UCLA Television Archives.)

Footnotes:

1. Hugh Sidey, John F. Kennedy, President, (NY: Atheneum, 1963), p. 383.

2. Eyewitness to History, "Jackie's Journey," program transcript as broadcast over the CBS Television Network, Friday, June 9, 1961, 10:30-11:00 p.m., DST.

3. Helen Thomas, Dateline: White House, (NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1975), p. 9.

4. Stephen Birmingham, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis, (NY: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), p. 476.

5. Helen Thomas, Dateline: White House, p. 4.

6. John H. Davis, The Kennedys: Dynasty and Disaster 1848-1984, (NY: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1984), p. 476.

7. Ibid., p. 475.

8. Letter, C. Collingwood to M. A. Watson, July 26, 1985. (Unless otherwise noted, all quotations attributed to Charles Collingwood are from this correspondence.)

9. David Halberstam, The Powers That Be, (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), p. 387.

10. Telephone interview, Perry Wolff by M. A. Watson, October 2, 1985. (Unless otherwise noted, all quotations attributed to Perry Wolff are from this conversation.)

11. Mary Barelli Gallagher, My Life with Jacqueline Kennedy, (NY: Paperback Library, 1969), p. 192.

12. "The Presidency: Simply Everywhere," Time, February 23, 1962, p. 25.

13. Perry Wolff, A Tour of the White House With Mrs. John F. Kennedy, (NY: Dell, 1962), p. 233.

14. "A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy," program transcript was broadcast over the CBS Television Network, Wednesday, February 14, 1962, 10:00-11:00 p.m., EST.

15. Benjamin C. Bradlee, Conversations With Kennedy, (NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 1975), p. 57.

16. "The White House: That TV Tour," Newsweek, February 26, 1962, p. 23.

17. Ralph G. Martin, A Hero For Our Time, (NY: Fawcett Crest, 1983), p. 368.

18. "White House Tour a Memorable TV Event; Quid Pro Quo Sequel," Variety, Wednesday, February 21, 1962, p. 31.

19. Ibid.

20. Memo, N. N. Minow to K. P. O'Donnell, June 26, 1962, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Archives, Minow File, Box 24.

21. "An Evening With Jackie Kennedy," Norman Mailer, Esquire, July 1962, pp. 57-61.

22. Norman Mailer, "Jackie, the Prisoner of Celebrity," in Esquire's Fifty Who Made the Difference, (NY: Esquire Press, 1984), p. 127.

23. "The First Family," Time, November 30, 1962, p. 20.

24. "The Tour," The First Family Album, (NY: Cadence Records, Inc., 1962).

25. Mary Barelli Gallagher, My Life with Jacqueline Kennedy, p. 177.

26. Kitty Kelly, Jackie Oh! (Secaucus, NJ: Lyle Stuart, Inc., 1978), p. 127.

27. Donald Bowie, Station Identification: Confessions of a Video Kid, (NY: M. Evans and Company, Inc., 1980), p. 89-90.

28. John H. Davis, The Kennedy's: Dynasty and Disaster, p. 479.