

'Thousands of letters' prompted Kennedy show

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"We got thousands of letters, I mean like 6,000 letters which is an incredibly large amount of letters for a segment that went on the air, in most places, at 20 minutes to one," he says.

"That interest and the fact that there are so many unanswered questions—as a public service we had to do what we did. To just hit the topic and then run away from it would have been really unconscionable and certainly a violation of every sound journalistic principle. Once we raised the issue we were really bound, duty bound, to follow up on it and try to answer some of these questions."

Because he plans only one show at a time, Rivera says, he is not sure if he is going to devote another show to the assassination.

"I don't want to be a morbid harpie," he says. "I want to do something that is valuable and valuable to society. I think people want that issue reopened and I think that the Good Night America show is a vehicle for getting that, for achieving that result."

Concrete evidence

Rivera says he just wants to wait and see what happens. If any new evidence is found, he may plan a sequel, but he will not show any evidence that is not concrete. That is why he did not show two frames in the Zapruder film—one that supposedly shows a man with a gun, the other supposedly showing a man hiding behind a fence. The images, which are hard to see in these two frames, have been used to suggest that more than one man was involved in the assassination.

"That is very speculative," he says. "I don't think that you have to get into speculative areas to make the point that the Warren Commission didn't do their job. That was our point. There is so much hard evidence, forensic evidence, physical evidence, that I didn't want to get into speculative areas. I didn't

think it was necessary. I think we clearly established on that program that Lee Harvey Oswald was not acting alone and we did it in a prudent, reasonable and responsible way that nobody could deny, not even Arlen Specter, who was the chief counsel of the Warren Commission."

Denials

In preparing for the program, Rivera says, his staff asked every living member of the Warren Commission to appear in defense of the report. All refused.

Although he faced the possibility of being sued by the Zapruder family for using the films, Rivera says he had an easier time convincing ABC that he should use them than Tom Snyder of the Tomorrow Show did in trying to convince NBC.

Shortly after Snyder announced he was going to get the films, Rivera says he talked to Snyder and urged him to show the films, but the NBC lawyers prevented him. The difference, Rivera says, lies in the fact that Tomorrow is a network-produced show, while Good Night America is produced by his own company.

In that sense, he says, the risk, the liability for law suits and damages in that kind of situation rests, in Good Night America's case, with Rivera and in Tomorrow's case, with NBC.

"With Tom," he says, "the lawyers are in a position to say 'it's our responsibility and we're not willing to take the risk no matter what you say.' ABC and their lawyers are not in that solid a position with me. 'I don't want to make their lawyers sound like henchmen either—they've got a job to do and I think I can understand that. I mean, they're more conservative than I am, but I think everyone at ABC is more conservative than I am.'"

Victorian overlord

That conservatism perhaps is seen in the way

ABC "very strictly construes" the fairness doctrine: In ABC's "Victorian kind of overlord in the continuity and the Standards and Practices Department."

In the size of the Good Night America's budget, which "circumscribes the amount of the world" Rivera and his staff can cover.

Rivera says he can understand the guiding principle that led to the enactment of the fairness doctrine: the need for the presentation of all points of view.

"But sometimes," he says, "they really strain and almost artificially create another point of view just to have the appearance of balance and that's something I really object to."

He also objects to the standards and practices he has to follow, he says.

'50s salute

"For instance," he says, "we can't say ass or none of our guests can say ass unless it's referring to a donkey. And I think that society and general societal mores have run far past that now. It's kind of a silly salute to the '50s."

But, given these three confines, Rivera says, he and his staff try to do an activist job.

An activist job in devoting much time and energy to a particular topic to "get a kind of comprehensive overview of it and to present that idea to the American people: what we're trying to do, the problems we're trying to show."

An activist job in discovering the truth.

An activist job as journalists, because activism is the main philosophy behind Rivera's journalism.

Advocacy and objectivity no longer are viable words for describing journalism, he says—they have been used so much they have lost their meanings.

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