

This view of the 1939 Fair's Theme Symbols, the Trylon and the Perisphere, was the first image broadcast on the first regular television broadcast in America on April 30, 1939.

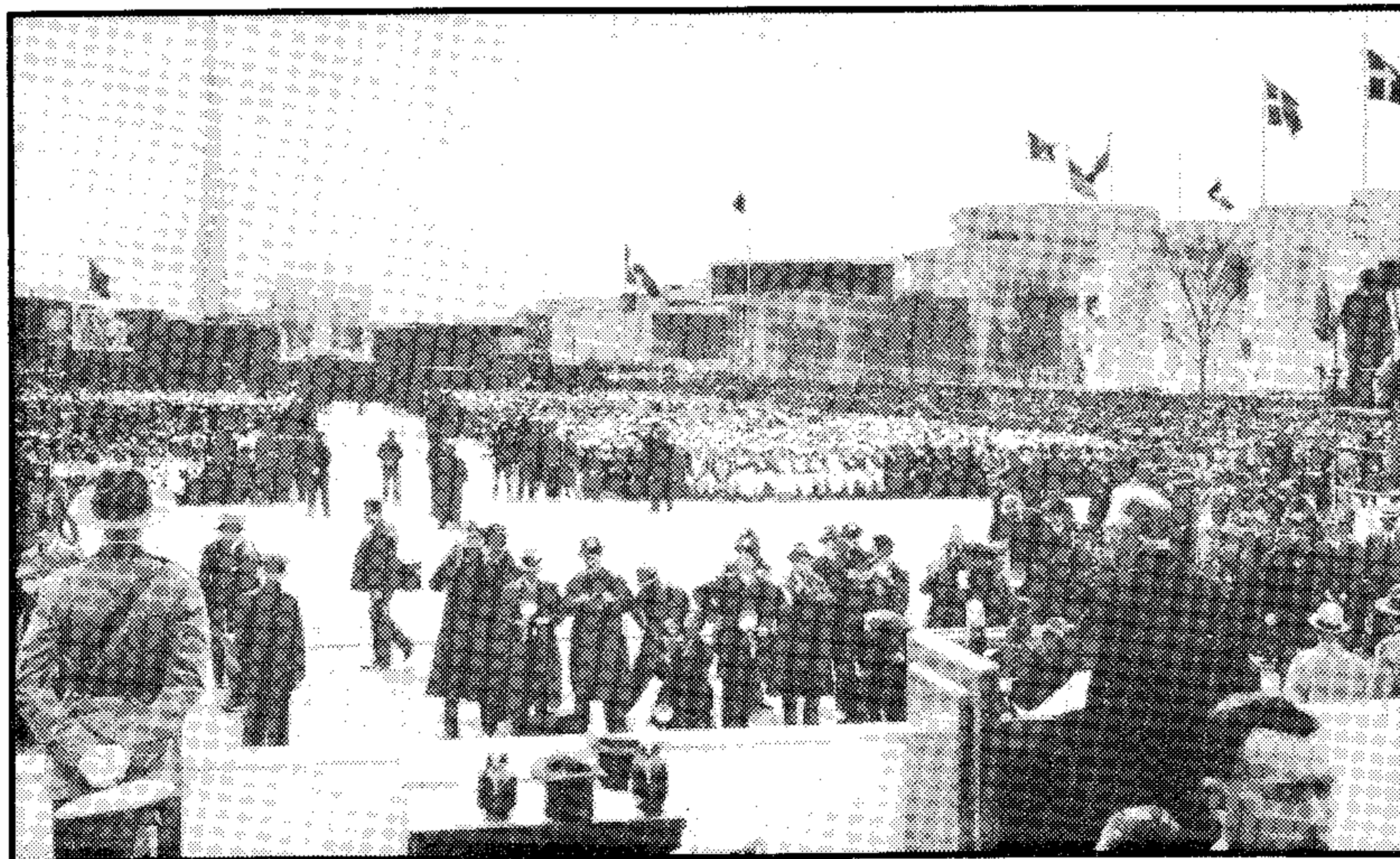
Section 1.2

1939- Live From New York- Television!

Hundreds of thousands of visitors assembled in the Court of Peace to witness the opening of the New York World's Fair. The fair's theme was "The World of Tomorrow" and, although few at the time realized it, the event they were about to see was indeed a harbinger of the future; the beginning of a new Revolution.

On Sunday, April 30th, 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt stepped up to the rostrum to officially open the great exposition. In front of him was the usual battery of radio microphones. In front of the speaker's platform was the familiar crowd of newspaper photographers and newreel cameras. Off to one side there was a conspicuous intruder—a television camera. That device would carry the President's opening remarks via pictures to thousands of persons within a 50 mile radius of the Empire State Building who could get a glimpse of one of the receivers which the Radio Corporation of America had set up in demonstration points throughout the Metropolitan Area.

The National Broadcasting Company, under the auspices of its parent company, RCA, was telecasting the ceremonies to inaugurate the first regular television service in the United States.



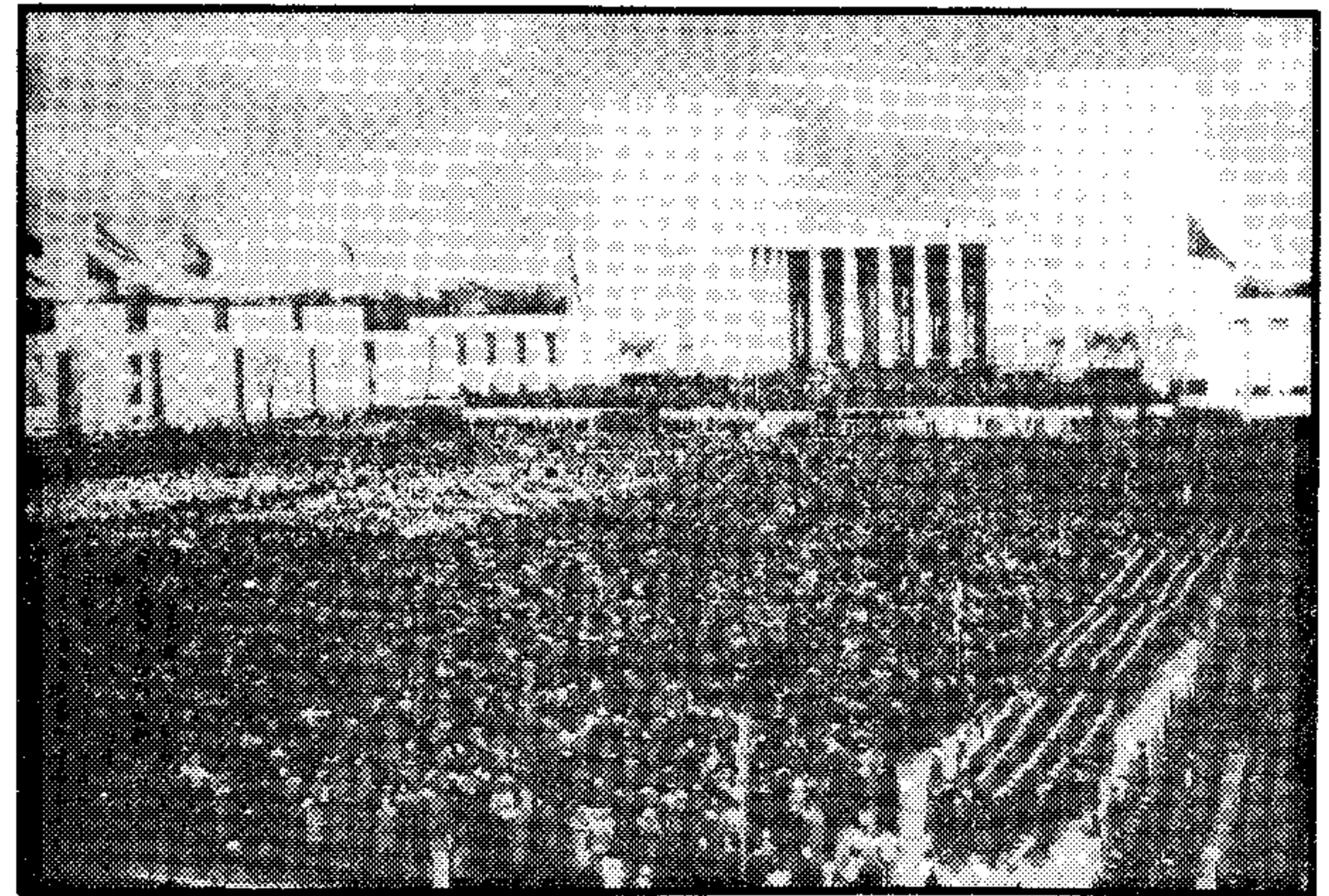
President Franklin D. Roosevelt facing the Court of Peace and Theme Center at the opening of the 1939 Fair. In addition to the usual battery of photographers and radio microphones was a television camera.

"The eyes of the United States are fixed on the future. Yes, our wagon is still hitched to a star. But it is a star of friendship, a star of progress for mankind. A star of international goodwill and above all a star of peace. May the months to come at the fair carry us forward in the rays of that eternal hope."

—President Franklin D. Roosevelt
Address at opening of 1939 N.Y. World's Fair
April 30, 1934

That broadcast opened a new age in the history of communications and the world would never be the same again. In the United States radio had taken two generations to become a household necessity; television became seemingly indispensable in less than one generation following five year hiatus during World War II. To Marshall McLuhan, the oracle of modern communications media, the television screen has become an extension of the viewer, putting him in immediate and intimate touch with events all over the earth. "Ours is a brand new allatonceness," wrote McLuhan. "'Time' has ceased, 'space' has vanished. We now live in a global village...a simultaneous happening." Others, however, disagree, saying the TV screen has become a kind of barrier to community experience; that it provides vicarious living at the expense of actual contact with other people and places.

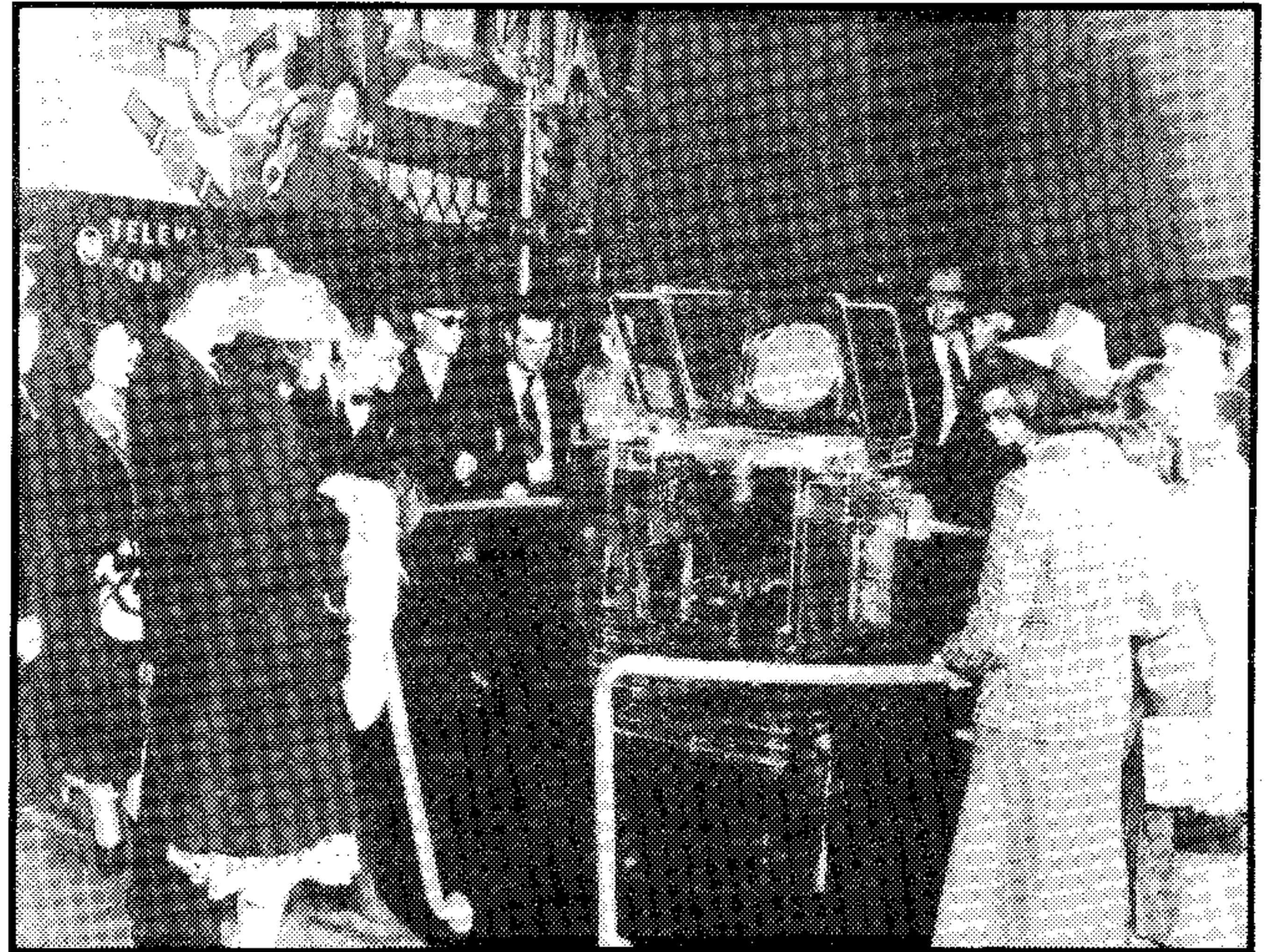
But it cannot be denied that television has changed social patterns. On the spot coverage of political conventions and congressional hearings, United Nations sessions and local town meetings has opened to public scrutiny a realm of activity formerly reserved for a privileged few. Political careers have been made, destroyed, and resurrected through television. Horrors of all kinds-battle footage from Vietnam, riots in the South Bronx, and starvation in Africa; assassinations against Presidents, Popes and even other assassins-have literally been brought home, to shock or numb the conscience of millions of viewers while a relentless parade of advertisements drum out the doctrine of consumption in between entertainments both high and low. It has brought moments of hope and grandeur, and on July 4th, 1976 it tied a nation together on the occasion of its 200th birthday.



Nearly one million persons attended the Opening Ceremonies for the New York World's Fair on April 30, 1939. Scene shows the Court of Peace facing the rostrum of the Federal Building where President Roosevelt delivered the opening address.

In one sense, network television has benefitted democracy. By offering the country the semblance of a national culture and norms, it provides a consensus indispensable to national unity. Benjamin Barber, a professor of political science at Rutgers University and author of **Strong Democracy** (Univ. of California Press, 1982) has said that "National debates such as the Kennedy-Nixon exchanges, national media personalities such as Ed Sullivan, Johnny Carson, and Walter Cronkite, and such national rituals as the Kennedy funeral, the moon walk, and the mourning for Martin Luther King — all these bestowed upon the country a legacy of national symbols and myths that cut across our divisive regions, sects, interest groups, parties, races, ethnic communities, and political constituencies.

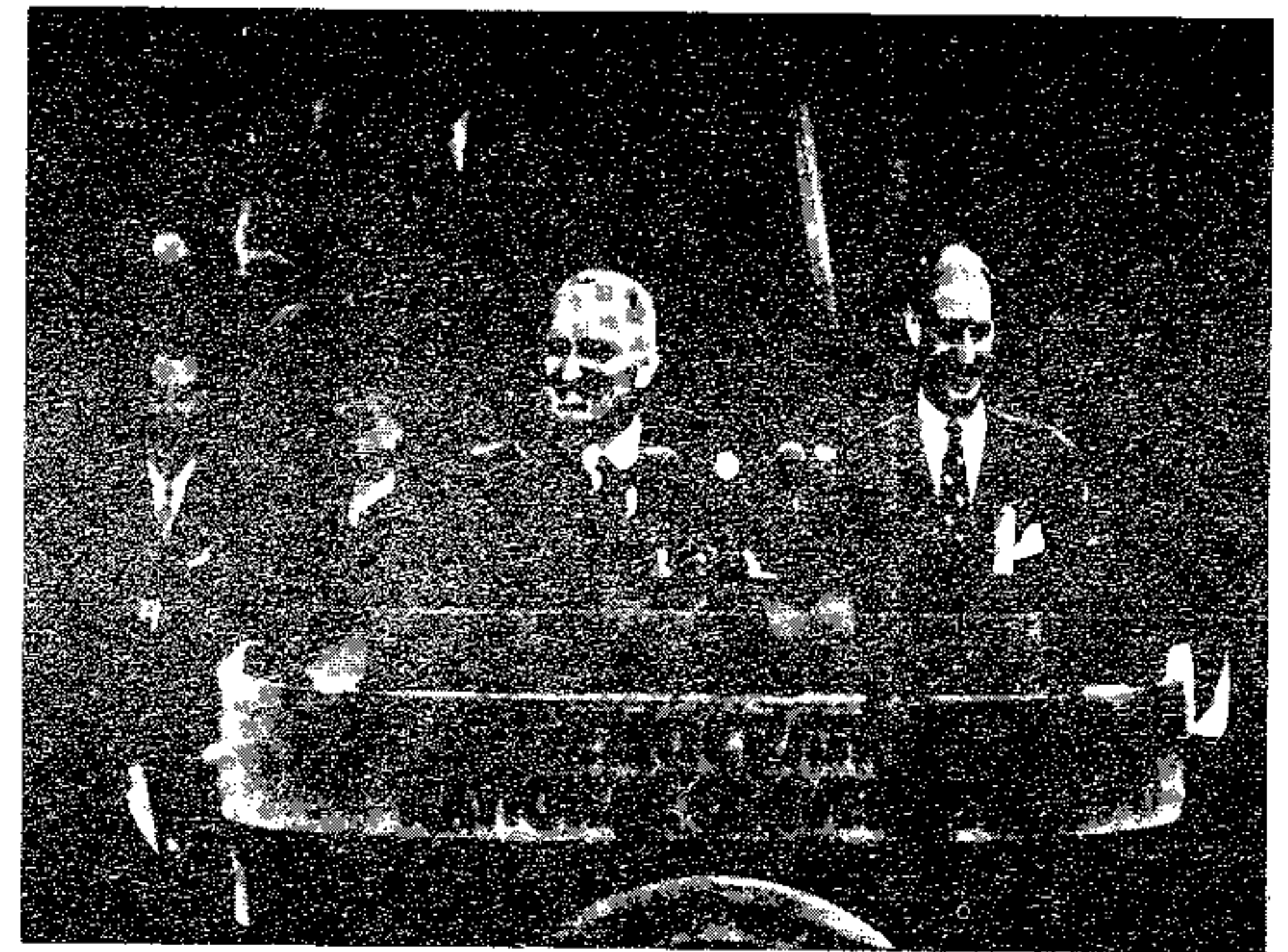
In a nation as fragmented and pluralistic as ours, where from the very beginning—in the Federalist Papers—the "specter of faction" loomed as the greatest peril, television has offered perhaps the only truly common vision we can have. If there is an American melting pot, it is fired nowadays primarily by electronic means. How else than in front of the communal fires of television could Americans have mourned together their fallen leaders? If **Roots** had not been screened in prime time on eight consecutive evenings, would the meaning of being black in America ever have touched so many non-black Americans? **Roots** is a celebration not only of being black but of being American. Network television, both at its best and its worst—**Roots** and **Holocaust** as much as **General Hospital** and **Family Feud**—has helped us subscribe to common values and to identify with a single national community. It is difficult to image the "Kennedy Generation," the "Sixties," Watergate, the Woodstock Generation, or even the Moral Majority, in the absence of national television. Who we are in common is what we see in common."



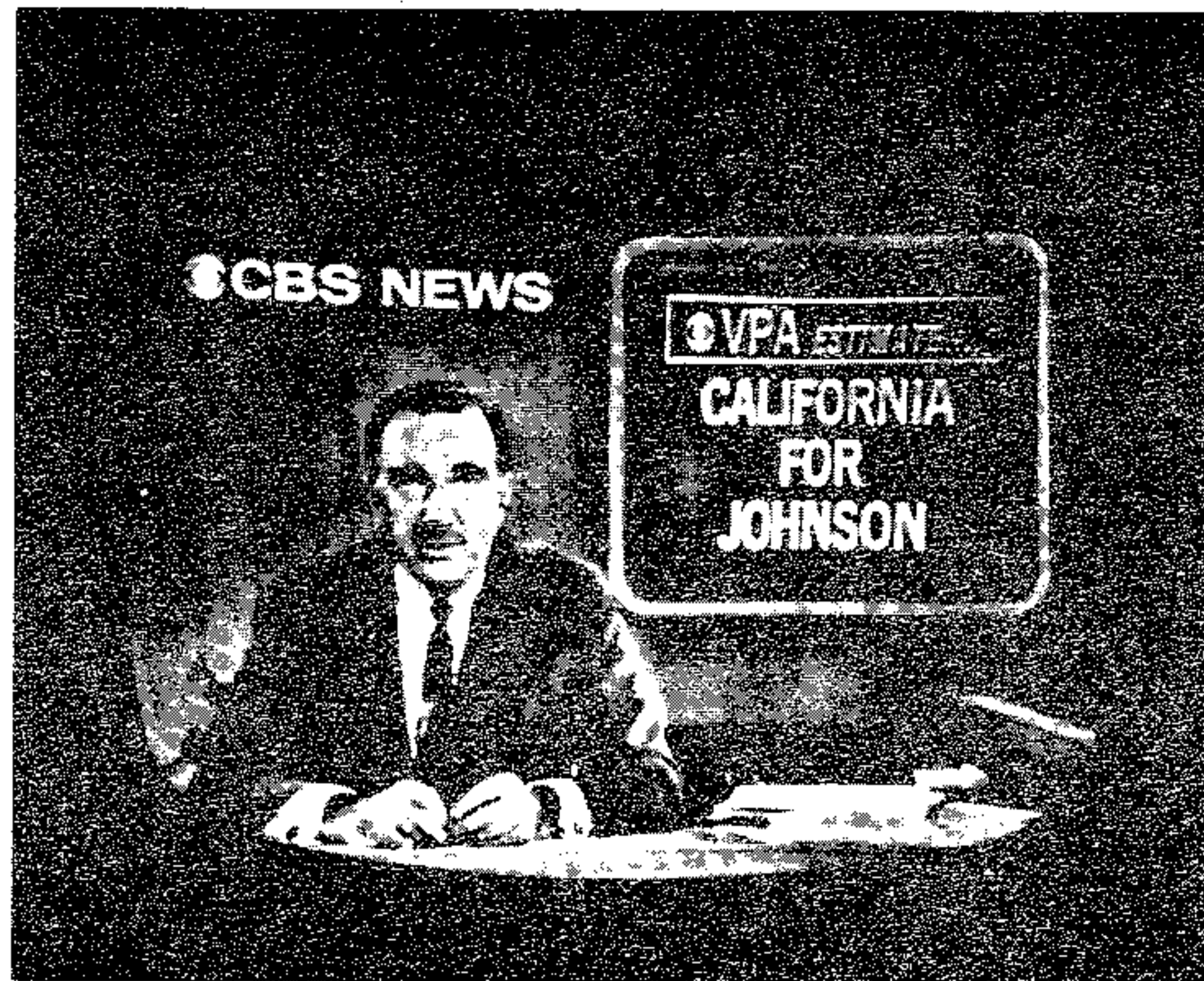
Crowds massed at one of the first television receivers on display at the RCA Pavilion. This model used a mirror to reverse the television image.



Vice presidential candidate Richard Nixon's Checkers speech in 1952 saved his position on the national ticket.



The 1952 conventions opened the political process to the scrutiny of the viewers at home.



Election results are now instantaneously reported by the mass media.



The Watergate hearings were telecast to the nation and brought down a Presidency.

Television has had a significant impact on the life of our nation, sometimes making and breaking political careers and bringing national events directly to the American public.

Television commentator Jeff Greenfield has said that "With the single exception of the workplace, television is the dominant force in American life today. It is our marketplace, our political forum, our playground, and our school; it is our theater, our recreation, our link to reality, and our escape from it. It is the device through which our assumptions are reflected and a means of assaulting those assumptions."

Most starkly, television is the pervasive American pastime; cutting through geographic, ethnic, class and cultural diversity, it is the single binding thread of this country, the one experience that touches young and old, rich and poor, learned and illiterate. A country too big for homogeneity, filled by people from all over the globe, without any set of core values, America never had a central unifying bond. Now we do. Now it is possible to the question, "**What does America do?**" We watch television."

Television's slow, complex evolution began in the 1920's when a Russian immigrant to the U. S., Vladimir Zworykin developed an electronic scanning system called the Iconoscope. Philo T. Farnsworth and Allen B. DuMont had also begun work in the 20's that perfected the device.

Most people at the time dismissed the idea as impracticable and impossible. "It can never be mass produced or marketed" they said. It was generally considered a novelty that would soon die quickly. Despite some success in England with the televising of certain events, the invention languished.

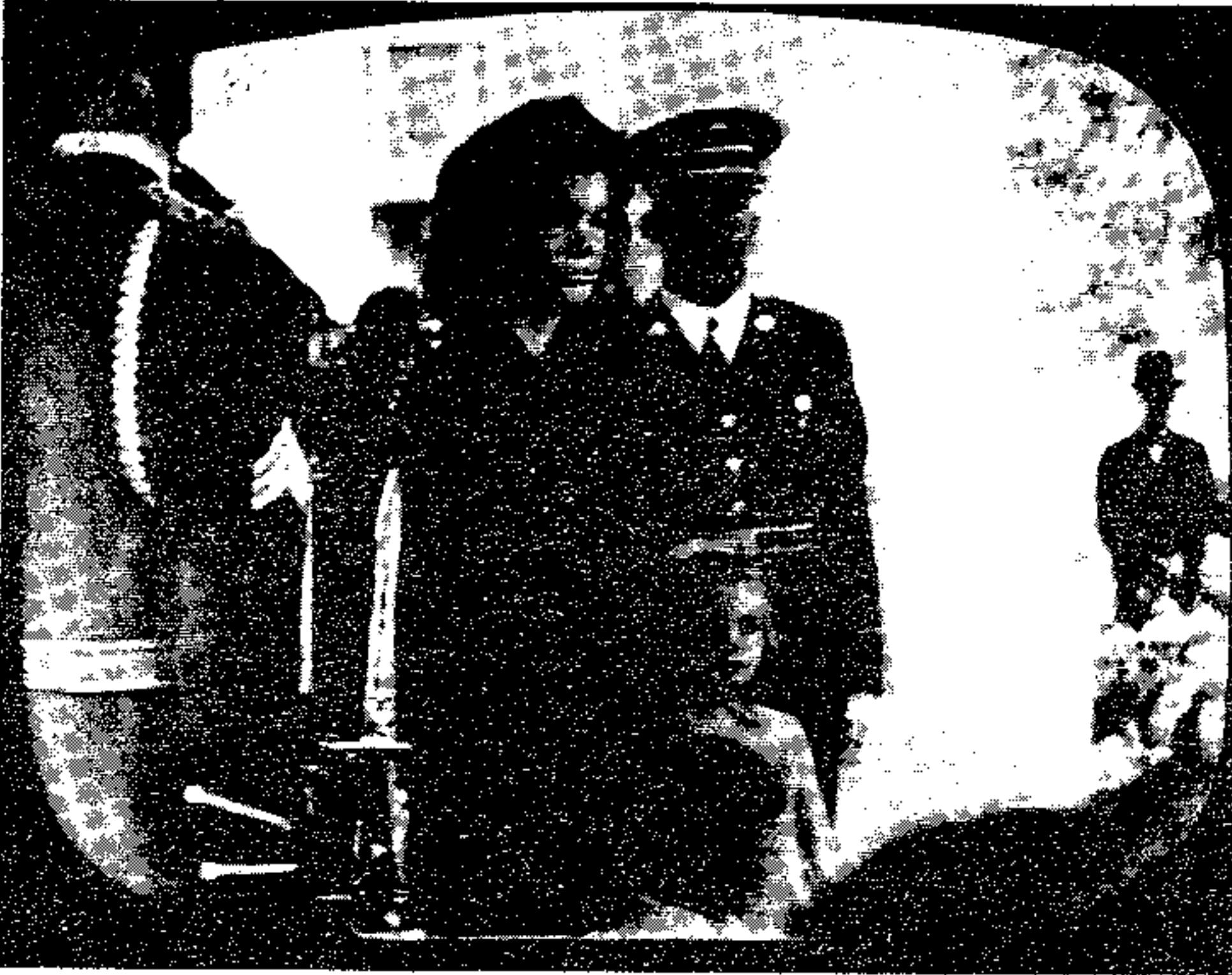
However, David Sarnoff, founder and president of RCA had believed in the potential of television. But it was not until the Theme of the New York World's Fair of 1939, with its emphasis on "Building the World of Tomorrow with the Tools of Today," that the visionary executive was provided with the forum for producing the result.

Television brought Hollywood and Washington personalities into every living room. Here Edward R. Morrow's 'Person to Person' interviews Mike Todd and Elizabeth Taylor in their Los Angeles home.



The reality of war was brought to the home front in living color during the Vietnam War.

The trauma of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy brought television news to a new importance as a stunned nation stood transfixed to their screens for four days in November, 1963.



The murder of accused Presidential assassin Lee Harvey Oswald was telecast live from Dallas on November 24, 1963.

Sarnoff put the scientific, engineering and marketing genius of his company behind a crash program to perfect the device and prove its viability in time for its public debut on a world stage. A few days before the Fair's official opening, Sarnoff personally stood before a television camera in the courtyard of the RCA pavillion at Flushing Meadows and, in the first news event ever covered by the new medium, proclaimed the "Birth of an Industry."

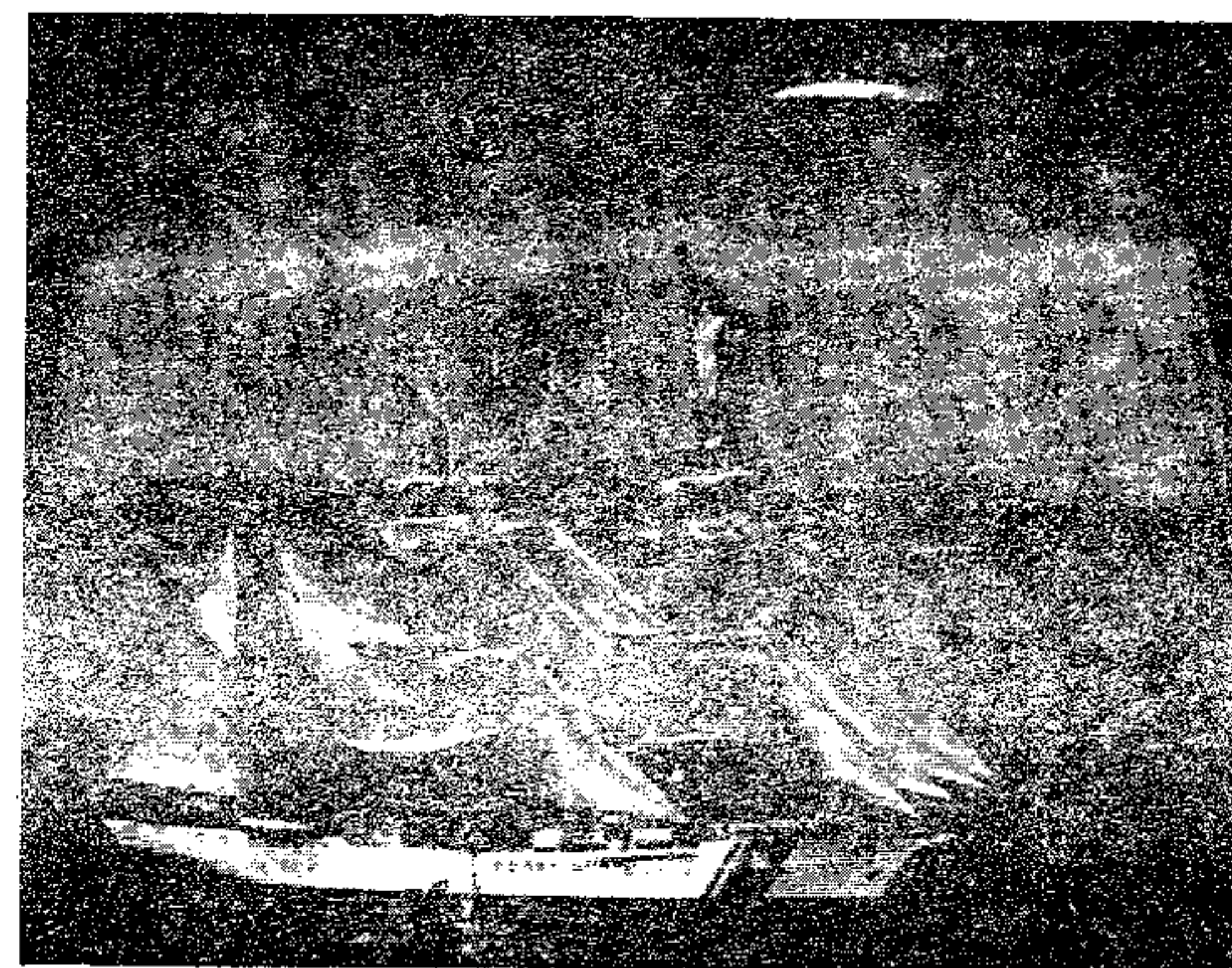
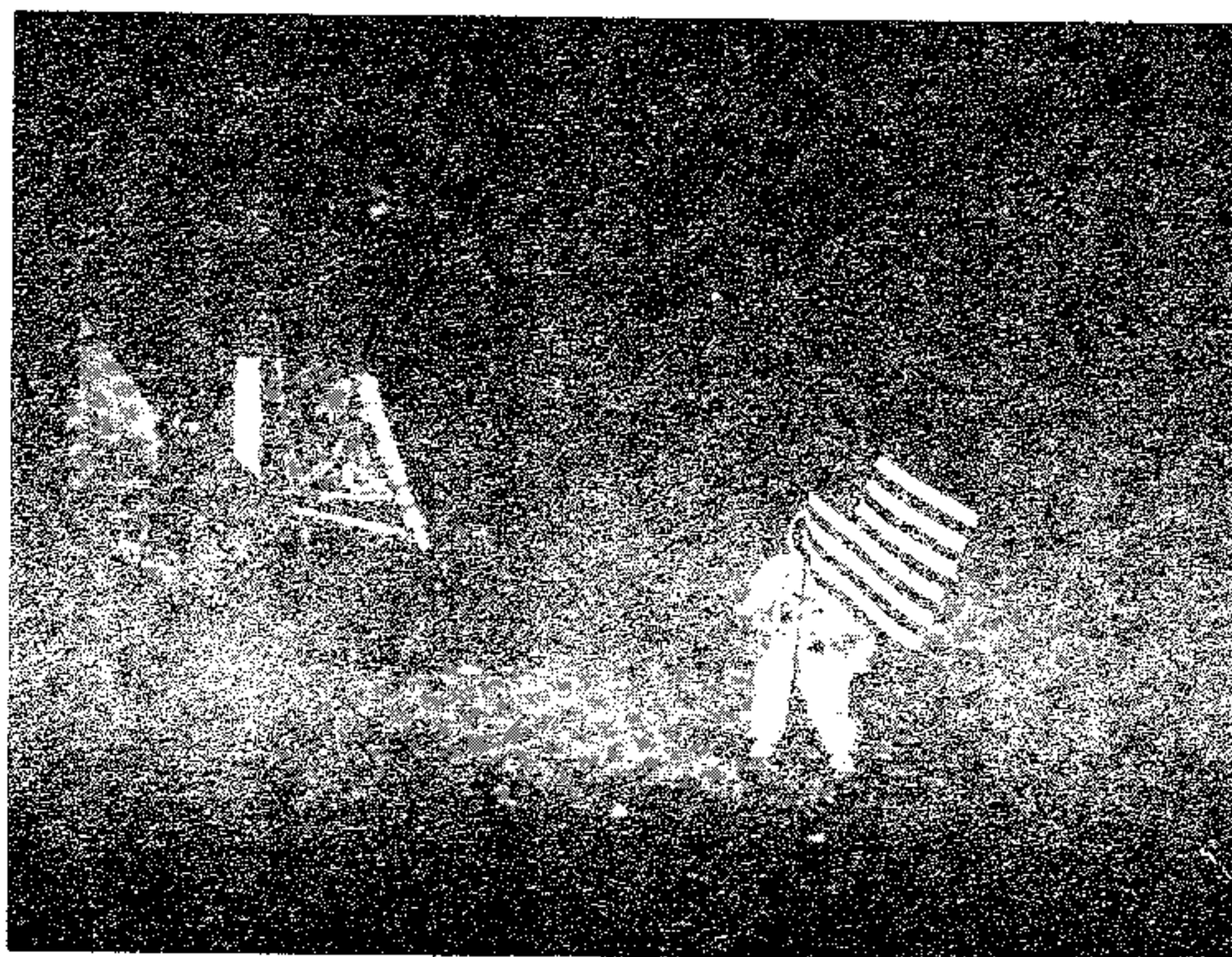
On opening day of the fair, the first regular television broadcast began at 12:30 p. m. with a view of the fair's already famous symbols, the Trylon and Perisphere. The camera panned across the Court of Peace for a panorama of the crowds, fountains and flags, then focused on the approaching parade of U. S. Servicemen, foreign delegations in native dress, and thousands of fairground workmen decked out in gleaming white overall and caps. The huge procession was led by Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia, who startled N. B. C.'s personnel by walking right up to the camera and smiling into the lens. After the parade was over, President Roosevelt arrived and the camera remained fixed on the podium until a few minutes after 3 p. m. when Roosevelt declared the fair "open to all mankind."

The Herald Tribune reported the reaction of the public broadcast in the following way: "At several department stores and radio shops in the metropolitan area, where television receivers had been installed, thousands stood by to watch the ceremonies and to see and hear the President deliver his address.

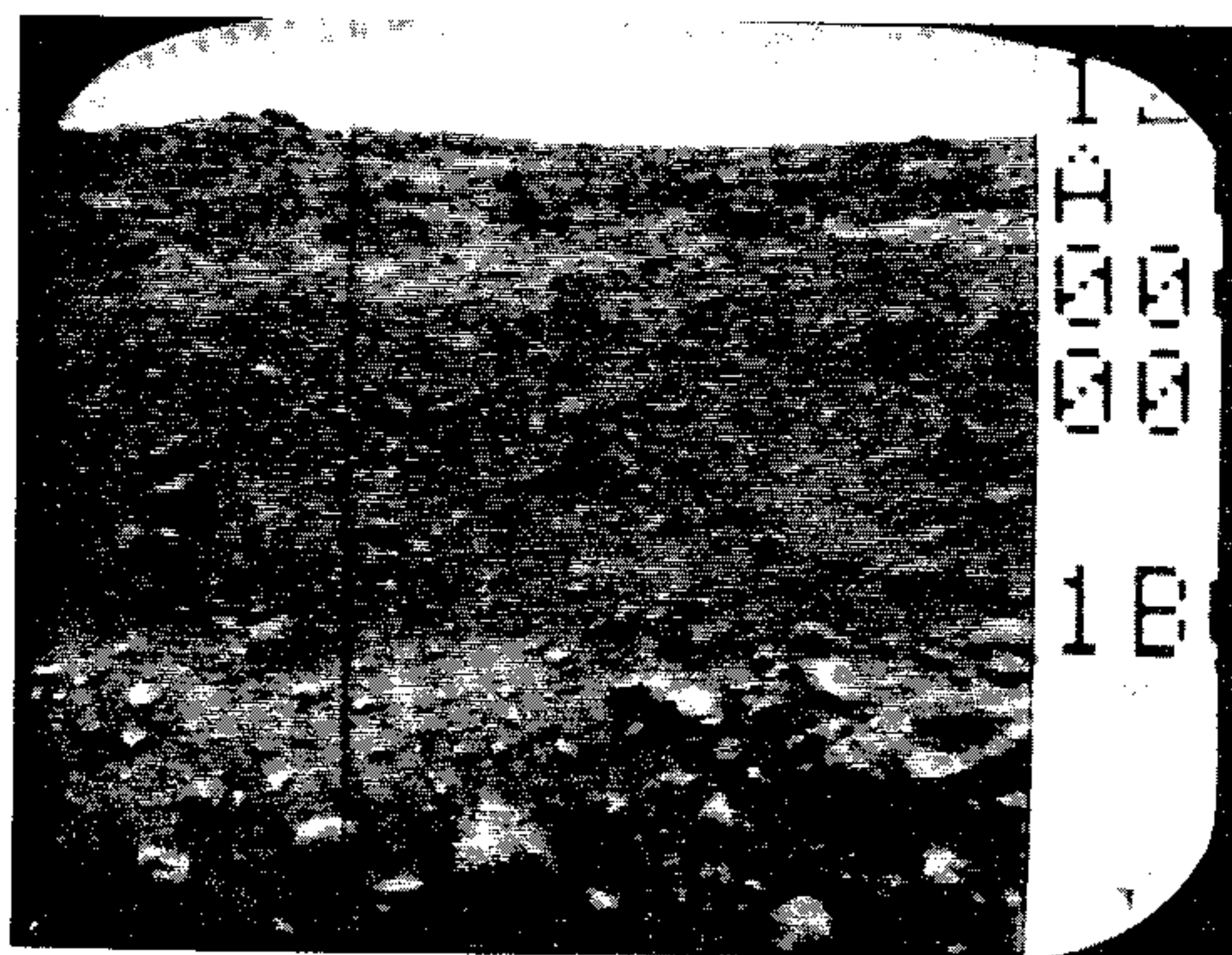
The remarks of some of those who were admitted to the preview in the RCA building along with the press were undoubtedly typical of the average man's reaction. Two patrolmen stood by one of the thirteen large-size receivers in the hall and discussed it. "It's quite the thing," one said, and the other remarked: "It'll be wonderful for ball games and fights."

Two sailors from the cruiser Salina, John Pavlic, of Youngston, Ohio, and James Vogt, of Omaha, watched the screen of another receiver, "I can't believe it," Pavlic said. "I must be dreaming." Vogt just stared.

Mrs. Beatrice Minn, of Minneapolis, exclaimed: "I read about it, but I never thought it would be like this. Why, it's beyond conception, and here it is." Ida Schreiber, of Hartford, Conn., said "It's uncanny."



Moments of triumph have also brought the nation together through television as in the first landing of a man on the moon in July, 1969 and the celebration of America's Revolutionary Bicentennial in 1976.



The television camera has traveled to the far reaches of the planets as seen here in this view of the surface of Mars telecast in 1976.

The magical quality of that first broadcast has given way to the reality of today. But television and telecommunications are now on the brink of altering our patterns of living and again revolutionizing our society. Whether we like it or not, the tiny screen that first began to glow for the American public at the 1939 World's Fair is already providing much of the light by which we lead our lives. Nearly fifty years later that "World of Tomorrow" has arrived. It is a world profoundly changed by the medium that has beamed out billions of images, profound and inane, tragic and joyous, from Hollywood to the rings of Saturn; a world that was launched by that first view of the Trylon and Perisphere in New York on April 30th, 1939.

