



PRIME TIME VET: EVOLUTION OF THE VIETNAM VETERAN ON TELEVISION

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Television shows provide a never-ending cycle of heroes and villains. The symbiotic relation between these two sides becomes both necessary and at times frustrating. Necessary for the connection within the viewing public, and frustrating, in recent years, are the defined roles of hero and villain. Which in contemporary shows, can veer into one another. The recent archetype of the villain-as-protagonist, seen in shows such as *The Sopranos*, *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*, leads the viewer to become increasingly unsure of the morality of main characters. Since the 1960's one of the strongest critiques of morality in television characters is found in the television depiction of Vietnam Veterans. The Vietnam veteran, as portrayed on television, has gone through a long metamorphosis. This transformation has seen the veteran depicted as both hero and villain. A path from damaged soul, to suspect criminal, to avenging hero, to mournful fighter, to honored and respected hero. It's telling that this transition, as seen within the realm of fictional television, in many ways mirrors the transitional acceptance experienced by the actual Vietnam veteran. It also mirrors and encapsulates the processing of the war, morality, and all, by the American populace. In looking at this transition, step by step, it becomes a mirror to the transition, or socio-cultural acceptance, for the actual Vietnam veteran.

SETTING THE PRIME-TIME STAGE

In their most recent documentary miniseries, *The Vietnam War*, Directors Ken Burns and Lynn Novick explore the Vietnam War from all sides of the conflict. Written by Geoffrey C. Ward, narration in the final episode notes that “More than four decades after the war ended, the divisions it created between Americans have not yet wholly healed. Lessons were learned and then forgotten. Divides were bridged and then widened” (The Vietnam War 2017). One of these divides can be found in how Vietnam



veterans were portrayed in episodic television. In the early depictions of Vietnam Veterans in American society, the main role they played was either as antagonist or victim, essentially becoming a person to be feared or pitied. Early portrayals of these veterans were used as plot devices that provided specific episodes with a victim or a villain. Writer Peter Rollins notes the various motifs that these characters represented “A number of Vietnam-related personal narratives and autobiographical fictions use the motif of a corruption of innocence, a traditional staple for American authors” (Rollins 1984, 422). While Rollins literary comparison is apt, these motifs were not depicted on page, but within an audio/visual medium. The audio/visual medium had the power to sear into the minds of the viewer a pre-conceived idea of a broken man (in later iterations, women as well) who is consumed by trauma, guilt, and anger over their experience in Vietnam. These early portrayals, characterized by motifs full of inconsistencies and falsehoods, were influential on the viewing public of the 1960s and 1970s. This contributed to “a “Heritage of Division” that overtook Post-Vietnam America” (Isaacs 2000, 42). Compounding on the idea of motif, Rollins adds that “the motif provides a formula in which the protagonist leaves a healthy civilian environment to become immersed in a war that leaves him physically or psychically wounded” (Rollins 1984, 422). The use of the word formula is apt as Rollins’ motif becomes imbedded in the minds of Post-war American citizenry.

THE WARTIME/POST-WAR PERSONIFICATION — THE 1960’s/1970’s

Television’s earliest depiction of the Vietnam Veteran utilized a dramatized version of the truth in their portrayal. During the later run of the television anthology series *Route 66*. Which ran from 1960 to 1964, we find the earliest depiction of the Vietnam Veteran. Lincoln Case, portrayed by Glenn Corbett, appeared in the third season as a replacement for one of the two leads. Case, a recently discharged veteran of the war, in the early 1960’s was an intense, and at times angry man. Several episodes found Case encountering fellow veterans and dealing with events that happened to him, during the war. Including intense combat, loss of friends, and guilt. The character of Lincoln Case represents an early mirage in depictions of Vietnam veterans, one that if adopted by other shows, could have gone a long way in demystifying the veteran by portraying veterans as less of a caricature and more relatable to the viewer. As the show was very topical with its episodes, Lincoln Case could have provided the viewers with a real time exemplification of the Vietnam conflict in President Kennedy’s America. Potential inspiring other shows to feature characters that served in Vietnam and were struggling to fit back into civilian life. However, it must be noted that the experience of the early Vietnam veteran, as seen in *Route 66*, is vastly different from the experience of the Vietnam Vet in the middle and end of the war.

Within the decades following the end of the Vietnam conflict, there were shows in which a main character’s service was secondary to their main role. Fictional characters



such as pilot Steve Austen from *The Six Million Dollar Man* (1973-1978) and oil tycoon J.R. Ewing on *Dallas* (1978-1991) had served in Vietnam, but their service was rarely mentioned, and never served as a plotline. However, most shows of the late 1960's and all throughout the 1970's had at least one episode where the villain of an episode, was a veteran who was either mentally unstable, drug crazed, despondent, angry, combative, criminally active, or outright maniacal. Shows such as *The Mod Squad*, *Mannix*, *Cannon*, *Barnaby Jones*, *S.W.A.T*, *Hawaii Five-O*, to name a few, were shows that had the motif of the angry, criminal, Vietnam Veteran. In their book *The Vietnam Veteran: A History of Neglect*, authors David Bonior, David Champlin, and Steve Kelly criticized the writers and networks for helping to create and perpetuate the motif. As a plot device "The psychotic Vietnam Veteran meant that writers did not have to develop a motive for bizarre behavior" (Bonior, Champlin, and Kolly 1986, 21). Change would come in this depiction, but not until the end of the decade.

The *Lou Grant* episode "Vet", from January 1979 presented both the trauma of the war suffered by the returning veteran and spoke directly to the debate of whether the discussion of the war should be addressed in the press. One of main characters, asks the main protagonist, Newspaper editor Lou Grant:

Charlie: Lou, we had the Vietnam war on the front page for over seven years. You think there's really something more to be said that hasn't already been chewed over?

Lou: Well, yeah. We had the war on the front page, but I'm not talking about the war. I'm talking about the veteran. And I don't think their story's been told.

Charlie: The question occurs to me—is anyone interested anymore?

Lou: Is that the question, or is that the problem? (Lou Grant 1979)

The question that Lou poses to Charlie involves addressing the question of when do we, as a nation, confront the problematic acceptance of the Vietnam Conflict? As this episode aired in 1979, there is the release of three important and engaging films on the Vietnam war, *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Coming Home* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979), the dialogue about Vietnam veterans, their care, and the larger historical issues of the conflict, begins to move front and center of the national discussion, keeping in mind what Robert Jay Lifton would call "a dialectic between the specificity of the Vietnam War and its relationship to all war" (Lifton 2005, 21). While the Vietnam veteran, or at least television's motif of what the viewing audience felt that they were like, was changing, there is, albeit falsely, an untrue narrative forming. In many ways television unified, but also magnified, the images and voices of division and, by its sheer power to transmit directly to the emotions of the viewer, often seemed to, as Isaacs remarks, "destroy patience, thought, and the capacity for compromise that had been essential in American life" (Isaacs 2000, 42).



PORTRAYALS IN THE TIME OF REAGAN—EARLY TO LATE 1980'S

With the advent of the 1980's and the election of former California governor Ronald Reagan to the American presidency (1981-1989), television portrayals of Vietnam Veterans evolved alongside the political changes within the national discourse and politics. Reagan, with his strong conservative agenda, represented a change from the Carter administration (1977-1981), whose agenda embraced liberal politics. The portrayal of Vietnam Veterans as lonely, tortured souls gave way to depiction more in tune with the 1980's era of action adventure, and for increased depictions of masculinity related to bravado, adventure, and machismo. (Willoquet-Maricondi 1994) These new television portrayals showed Vietnam Veterans now either working on the fringes of society or, wholly outside the system. A system that they viewed not only as suspect, but in some cases utterly corrupt. These new shows, and characters “seldom deal in any direct way with the Vietnam War or its aftermath” (Marchetti 1987, 25). Instead, television writers created a characterization of the Vietnam Veteran as tough but charismatic heroes, and in some instances, avenging forces that help the oppressed, and go from a person of unchecked anger and frustration to a heroic figure that dually represents America, but has the temerity to question its decisions, current and past (Marchetti 1987, 26).

In focusing on two shows, CBS's *Magnum P.I.* (1980-1989) and NBC's *The A-Team*, 1983-1988) we see both the reclamation of the veteran and his service, and the transformation of the motifs previously seen in shows, into myths. By turning the vet from the suspect/victim/criminal archetype, into the ingenious, tough, and if need be suave hero, shows like these “domesticate the vet for home consumption” (Marchetti 1987, 26).

Magnum P.I. follows the adventures of Private Investigator Thomas Magnum (played by Tom Selleck), a former Navy officer who serves as an investigator, for reclusive (and never seen) writer Robin Masters. Set in tropical Hawaii, Magnum and his fellow Vietnam veterans, pilot T.C. (Roger Mosely) and mischief-maker Rick (Larry Manetti), aid those in need, solve crimes, and try to keep out of harm's way themselves. *Magnum P.I.*, premiering in 1980, begins what writer Fred Turner calls “Rescue Fables” (Turner 2001, 113). These narratives “offered their viewers a mirror image—within the distorted but always viable—of their nation's failures in Vietnam” (Turner 2001, 113). Magnum, while dealing with certain aspects of war in his civilian life, fellow vets in trouble, old lovers from wartime, skirts the deeper issues, drug abuse, homelessness, that plagued vets at the time depicted. In exploring the subject of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Magnum “suffers flashbacks, but these rarely bother him for more than a moment” (Turner 2001, 65). Magnum helped create and push the myth of the Vietnam Veteran by imagining “that the fighting in Southeast Asia had not only failed to rupture American myths but had in fact conformed to them” (Turner 2001, 113). That the issues born from the war that Thomas Magnum



faced (PTSD, old enemies) were simply episodic. Finished at the end of a particular episode and not addressed, or mentioned, in future episodes.

While the hero of *Magnum P.I.* was one man, NBC's *The A-Team* revolved around a team of four Vietnam Veterans, framed for a crime they actually committed under false pretenses. After escaping from military custody, they survive as soldiers of fortune, helping the oppressed and helpless, of course for a fee. While *Magnum P.I.* was popular and high in the Nielson ratings, *The A-Team*, with its tough, and charismatic leads (Including breakout star and all-around tough guy Mr. T as B.A. "Bad-Ass" Barucus) coupled with its car crashes, shoot outs, and all-around action was a massive hit. So why this massive growth, both in viewership, and acceptance of these "outlaws?" The television viewer is invested in this team. A team that was fighting against the corrupt nature of a nation (and in season five, on a global scale) that turn its back on them. As defined by Bonior, Champlin and Kolly, The A-Team are "heroes who were victimized by their own government. permanently defamed, they are actually men of honor" (Bonior, Champlin and Kolly 1986, 272). Marchetti second's this definition, noting that "the vet comes home to the popular imagination, to chauvinistically reaffirm American might and right, while simultaneously expressing anger and hostility towards the government that created the war" (Marchetti 1987, 26). This view aligned with the Reagan administration's idea of government accountability, as well as the conservative ethos of distrusting the larger government bureaucracy. Similar to *Magnum*, when paired with T.C and Rick, *The A-Team's*, Hannibal (George Peppard), Face (Dirk Benedict), B.A. (Mr. T) and "Howling Mad" Murdoch (Dwight Schultz), wear their service and their cohesiveness as a unit proudly. As writer Daniel Hallin notes, "These characters drew their strength from their Vietnam experience, including a preserved war-time camaraderie which enabled them to act as a team" (Hallin 2017).

Shows like *The A-Team*, *Magnum P.I.*, as well as other shows featuring Vietnam Veterans as detectives and rule benders such as NBC's *Riptide* (1984-1986), and CBS's *Simon and Simon* (1981-1989) helped destroy the motif of the Vietnam veteran as emotionally broken criminal or beleaguered victims. While Bonior, Champlin and Kolly remark that these shows "may not have done much to redeem the Vietnam War, but it was part of a broad cultural effort to replace the memory of America's destruction of Vietnam with celebrations of aggressive masculinity" (Bonior, Champlin, Kolly 1986, 272). And while it might be a few years before real life veterans came forward to seek a proper homecoming, Rollins states that, at least on television, "Vietnam Veterans have stepped forward to demand a modicum of restitution for their decade-long pains as scapegoats" (Rollins 1984, 432).

A NEW DAY, NEWER DEPICTIONS—LATE 1980'S TO 2000'S



As the 1980's were ending, the cinematic depiction of the Vietnam came to the screen full force and with no apologies regarding the realism portrayed. Films such as Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986), Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) provided cinematic windows into the Vietnam war, and the veteran who fought in it. As the cinematic portrayal evolved, so did the televised one. Two shows, ABC's *China Beach* (1988-1992), and CBS's *Tour of Duty* (1987-1990), provided new depictions of Vietnam veterans with positive results, and both of these shows provided a level of melodrama that still was a staple of shows that depicted war. Understanding that, to entice and hold audiences, there must be a level of drama. Yet, shows tended to amplify it to compensate. As writer John O'Connor notes "In the rush to compensate for past treatment of Vietnam veterans, there is a temptation to sanctify their experiences. Going sanctimonious has its limitations" (O'Connor 1987).

Tour of Duty and *China Beach* were not broadcasted for long. CBS's *Tour of Duty* had three seasons spanning from 1987 to 1990 while ABC's *China Beach* ran from 1988 to 1991 spanning four seasons. As with all shows, both had their fair share of praise and were not without their critics. *Tour of Duty* was the most obvious example of television trying to tap into the cinematic pulse of Stone's *Platoon*, and Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. The show followed the exploits of the fictional Bravo Company Second Platoon serving in Vietnam from 1967-1968. The show began as "an earnest attempt at both realism and depth in its characterizations" (Dolan Brown 1989, 71). However, as seasons went on, the show lost any critical praise. The second, and third, seasons, victim to budget cuts and cast cuts, were markedly different from the first. Critical praise was replaced by outright criticism of characterization, plotting, and pacing. Looking back on the series, author Robert Schulzinger remarked that "as the series went forward the characters became angrier and more cynical, and the depictions of rules and injuries turned more graphic" (Schulzinger 2006, 170), also noting that "The ordinariness of *Tour of Duty* irritated critics looking forward to an edgier confrontation with the politics of the war" (Schulzinger 2006, 171). The latter observation is interesting, for it shows that possibly the American public might have been ready to have a deeper emotional and critical discussion about the political aspect of the war.

China Beach, created by writers John Sacret Young and William Broyles Jr (Who is a Vietnam veteran himself) told the stories of not only the soldiers that fought the war, but also the doctors and nurses that served in the war. Told primarily through Nurse Colleen McMurphy (played with critical acclaim by actress Dana Delany) *China Beach*, set in the real field hospital/ R&R center/Beach club complex, earned equal amounts of praise and criticism. Writer Carolyn Reed Vartanian praised the show noting that it "contributes to a larger attempt to recoup or reconstruct the meaning of heroism and hence offers its audience a referent in the "real" discourse of the U. S.- Vietnam War" (Vartanian 1991, 190). Echoing Vartanian, Historian Fred Turner remarked that "the inhabitants of *China Beach* aim to restore social meaning and moral value to acts of



horrific violence and suffering that, when they actually occurred in history, often seemed pointless and immoral” (Turner 2001, 140-141). The show became a favorite of television critics, albeit one that languished in the Nielsen ratings for its entire run. Criticism for the show, which emerged during the shows run and years after, took issue with its depictions of the era, of the characters, and of the larger themes born of the war. Harsher criticism came from critic M. Elaine Dolan Brown who commented during its premier year. “Efforts are to be applauded but until the writers abandon the predictable (and saleable) format, the show is doomed to be dismissed as a typical sexploitation series” (Dolan Brown 1989, 73). In their article in the winter 1989 issue of the *Journal of Film and Video* David James and Rick Berg argue that *China Beach* rewrites Vietnam as a soap-opera, with all political and historical issues redacted in hyper-intense nurses; all the GI could do was die, and all the nurse could do was “be there for him while he did it” (James and Berg 1989, 74). Vartanian, who gave praise to the show, also provided criticism. Speaking to the larger views of nostalgia and generalities of gender roles, she remarked that (*China Beach*) “seems to displace the entirety of the Vietnam nightmare into the realm of romanticized fantasy, one in which historical, political, and social implications are all but erased. Instead, one is offered the stuff of which nostalgia is made, in which roles are defined by gender alone and ultimately the heroics of previous war genres are evoked in place of any constructive criticism” (Vartanian 1991, 190). Vartanian provides an interesting, and appropriate criticism here. History, politics, and social issues are muted for maximum emotional experience. This amplifies the visual of the wounded and dying patients, along with the immediate emotionally the characters face. However, it can be argued that the fourth season, jumping around in time, and delving into the post-war lives of the characters, addresses the missing history, politics, and social issues of the war.

As the 1990s progressed, the televised Vietnam Veteran continued to evolve, becoming lawmen, (*Homicide: Life on the Street*'s Stuart Gharety, *Law and Order*'s Donald Cragen and Lennie Briscoe) high-ranking military men, (*JAG*'s A.J. Chegwidden, and *Quantum Leap*'s Al Calavicci), and comedic characters, both live action, and animated, who work in education (*Saved by the Bell*'s Principal Belding, and *The Simpsons* Principal Skinner) As the 2000's approached, the metamorphosis would continue, and old depictions would give way to new ones, with representations that would bring veneration where there was once scorn.

EVOLUTION AND RESOLUTION — 2000'S TO PRESENT

In the 21st Century television landscape, the portrayal of the Vietnam Veteran has been given a strong measure of respect and presence. Vietnam Veterans are no longer portrayed as the crazed villain or sullen victim of the week. Today's televised Vietnam veterans are given the due respect and attention that eluded them in the years following the immediate end of the conflict. In the early 2000's, several television



characters served in Vietnam and while mention of their service was made, it did not define the character or drive their respective character arcs. Notably these new depictions departed from the Anti-establishment avenger of the 1980s or noble hero archetype seen in the 1990s. Vietnam Veterans are spies, both good and evil (Jack Bristow and Arvin Sloane in *Alias*) Cunning and dangerous prisoners (Burr Redding, *OZ*) and in the realm of fantasy, demon fighting patriarchs (John Winchester, *Supernatural*) As writer Daniel Hallin notes, these characters “tended to stand apart from dominant social institutions, reflecting the confidence in these institutions produced by Vietnam, without requiring extensive discussion of the politics of the war” (Hallin 2017). Shows such as *Mad Men* (2007-2015), a show that takes place in New York City during the 1960’s, do not make Vietnam, nor its veterans the focal point. Rather, the war is talked about, but only used sparingly to move the larger plot of an episode and exists not as a boogeyman but as a reality for the characters, albeit for many, a detached reality.

As late as 2010, Vietnam Veterans were characters on popular shows such as *Breaking Bad* (Former cop, now criminal Mike Ehrmantraut), *Scrubs* (Doctor Bob Kelso), and *Sons of Anarchy* (Biker gang members Clay Morrow, Piney Winston, and police Chief Wayne Unser) In these depictions, the characters served in the war, but their wartime exploits do not effect on the larger plots of specific episodes, the series at large, or bring any major personal drama to the respective characters. If anything, the war, and their time in it, provides nuance but does not shape the character. Whether law enforcement (the eponymous Longmire, Col. Beckman in *Chuck*, Jim Brass in *CSI*) or criminals such as the SAMCRO motorcycle gang of *Sons of Anarchy*, the ending of broad representations of Vietnam Vets opens the door to imbue stories surrounding Vietnam, and all sides involved, with honesty and pathos. This would help to continue the evolution of the depiction of Vietnam Veterans, while promoting the real need for further reconciliation between Americans still divided today over the war.

CONCLUSION

Not unlike the actual Vietnam Veterans and their struggles in and out of combat, those that wrote and acted the portrayals of those that served in Vietnam have had to fight to hear their voices heard. The evolution of the Vietnam Veteran has not reached a completion, nor will it ever in a historical sense. As discussion on the war hopefully becomes more robust, and these men and women progress into their 80’s and 90’s, depictions of them on television will continue to be presented in a respectful but not overly mawkish or jingoistic manner. In the fifty-plus years since the conflict was waged, too much healing, both by Vietnam Veterans and the citizens of the United States has occurred. The viewing public will not accept false or demeaning portrayals of Vietnam Veterans in the medium of television. Burns and Novick’s 2017 miniseries on the Vietnam War concludes with a truthful and heartfelt coda. Written by series



writer Geoffrey Ward, the documentary miniseries ends with the statement that the Vietnam War was “a tragedy, immeasurable and irredeemable. But meaning can be found in the individual stories of those who lived through it. Stories of courage, and comradeship, and perseverance, and understanding, and forgiveness, and ultimately.... Reconciliation” (The Vietnam War 2017). This reconciliation can be achieved. However, we, as a viewing audience must always be cognizant of the possibility of mythicizing the war, and those who fought both for and against it. As noted by *China Beach* character SSgt Bob Pepper, (played by real life Vietnam Veteran Troy Evans) he spoke for both his character and for himself. “All the movies, books, and TV shows...they’re becoming my memories now. Pushing out the old ones. Pretty soon all we’ll have left is the clichés” (China Beach 1991).

As the fictional depiction of the Vietnam Veteran on television has evolved, so must the viewers. If possible, the viewer must put aside pre-conceived notions of both Vietnam Veterans and the War itself and contemplate the larger issues that were born from the conflict. To continue with the dialogue, no matter how hard, painful, or confrontational it might get. To make sure that, no matter how hard the reflection might be, to stand and look at the Vietnam Veteran as honorable, but complex. As brave, but full of fear. And to recognize that both the real-life veteran and their fictional counterparts are, as all of us are, a work in progress. As television continues to produce shows that feature characters who are Vietnam Veterans, the transition continues. In many ways, the transitions take on a deeper historical relevance. The ability to teach in deeper and more meaningful ways, the plight of the Vietnam Vet.

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