Images of the 60s in the 80s:
Memories of Social Unrest in US TV Series

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American society was shaken to its very foundations in the massive social unrest of the 1960s. As that decade unfolded, peaceful protests against racial and sexual discrimination and against the Vietnam War turned into increasingly bitter and violent confrontations. Questioning that began in response to particular injustices swelled into a critique of the whole system and into open rebellion against the whole American way. No corner of American life could have been untouched by it. American society would never be the same again.

Nevertheless, much of the television drama then and since has projected a fantasy of American life virtually untouched by it, of an American society that could be the same again. Much of it has proceeded as if the 1970s and 1980s followed on in a straight line evolution from the 1950s. The world constructed by DALLAS and DYNASTY is a world in which all this social turbulence never happened.

On the whole, sixties references have been most notable by their absence in the television series of the eighties. On such occasions when sixties references have surfaced, it has generally been in the form of superficial co-optation or glib dismissal.

Nevertheless, the tv drama of post-Vietnam, post-Watergate America has not been homogeneous, as it is the product of a society no longer so sure of itself, no longer at one with itself. Other productions have generated a wider range of responses to the reverberations still beaking through from the sixties. Certain genres have emerged as arena, even if severely truncated ones, for airing the tensions and settling the scores still smouldering from that decade.

The eighties versions of the crime, adventure and spy genres, for example, such as MIAMI VICE, MAC GYVER and COVER UP, have generally either glossed over the problems or registered a backlash response to them. At the same time, the crime genre has still provided space for liberal values and has even broken new ground in post-liberal exploration in CAGNEY & LACEY and HILL STREET BLUES.

Other prime-time series have represented quite disparate responses. There have been, on the one hand, the born-again believer's idea of wholesome family entertainment in series like HIGHWAY TO HEAVEN, filtering selected psychological and social problems through sloshy sentimentality and supernatural intervention and transforming modern America into an evangelical theme park. On the other hand, there have been medical series like ST. ELSEWHERE and KAY O'BRIEN, SURGEON, dealing with difficult problems of contemporary life by exploring credible characters in the process of actually struggling to deal with them.

Most productions in most genre, however, have veered to a bland middle ground, in which all sharp edges have been blunted and all hard truths softened, so as to penetrate nothing and to offend no one. A whole array of long-standing and well-established conventions have operated, often at a subconscious and unexamined level, to ensure this.

Even in responding to the pressure of anti-sexist and anti-racist currents; even in registering the disintegration of military discipline in Vietnam and the demoralisation over the well of corruption opened by Watergate; even in reflecting the breakdown of the nuclear family and traditional mores and the dissolution of traditional communities and institutions, complex mechanisms of co-optation have been at work, systematically defusing anything with a potentially explosive charge and habitually bringing deep problems to superficial and spurious resolution.

The fundamental concept of FAMILY TIES, for example, is one that is potentially highly charged and ideologically subversive, ie, the contrasting values of the sixties generation and the eighties generation. The treatment, however, has simultaneously both played on this potential and dissipated it.

The opening sequence used in the first year set the tone. The entire family were positioned watching home movies of the parents at sixties protests. The son asked sarcastically:

> "What are you protesting ?...good grooming ?"

The younger daughter then took issue:

> "Mommy, you look so pretty...like an Indian princess."

To which the mother replied:

> "That's your father, dear."

The difference between then and now was a matter for constant commentary:

"How long ago was that ?" "Very long ago, in a galaxy far, far away..."

Indeed, lest the difference be forgotten, the point must be re-asserted in no uncertain terms:

> "The sixties are over, Dad."

The parents, Steve and Elise Keaton, represent the sixties generation. They were in the Peace Corps. They marched against the Vietnam War. They dressed like flower children and sang protest songs. They have retained their social consciences into the eighties. They are played off against the generations

preceding and succeeding them, occasionally against their parents, but primarily against their children.

Alex, the oldest of their children, is not only the strongest character in the series, but perhaps the prototypical sitcom character of the eighties, every bit the equivalent of Archie Bunker in the seventies. Alex Keaton, a hard-driving, highly articulate, get-on-in-the-world representative of the New Right, applauded the election of Ronald Reagan. He regularly reads the Wall Street Journal and Milton Friedman is his favourite economist.

The two daughters are quite different, both from Alex and from each other. Mallory, another typical product of the eighties, is dim, shallow and narcissistic. She couldn't care less what was happening in the wider world. Jennifer, originally the youngest, in contrast, is bright, warm and open to her parents' values, embodying the hope that things would turn full circle again. A late arrival is another son, Andy, an unknown quantity, although Alex is determined to cultivate him as an ally, even buying him a *Wall Street Journal* colouring book.

The series is cleverly written. There are always some good one liners and some excellent touches in the way it expresses and explores contrasting values. In one scene, Jennifer was reading *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, provoking Alex to express his disgust at her going on about

> "things that should only be discussed in men's locker rooms."

In another scene, Jennifer was full of concern about the planet dying and about re-cycling products in the interests of environmental protection. Alex's attitude was that it was unnatural:

> "When a man wants something, he goes out and buys it.
> When he gets tired of it, he throws it away and buys another one.
> That's natural."

The problem with the series is that the politics of it have been constantly compromised by formulaic resolution, which always softens the impact of ideological positioning and reduces it to light-hearted bantering that fades into insignificance when superceded by what is of real significance, ie, family ties.

In an episode dealing with the ideological gap between Steve and his father, Elise remembered that they didn't speak for ages after the Cuban Missile Crisis. In fact, she reminisced:

> "Kennedy and Khrushev made up sooner."

A gruff, old-fashioned, highly opinionated man, Steve's father supported US foreign policy, enjoyed hunting and thought wine was only for women and interior decorators. Anticipating his annual visit, Steve made up a list of safe subjects to get them through it:

> "The printing press: a step forward for mankind...?
> Crab grass: friend or foe...?
> Felt tip pens..."

When the subject of Alex's book report on Nixon surfaced, Elise quickly changed the subject to daylight savings time. When Steve's father repeated his motto:

"Less learnin'...more earnin'..."

Steve apologised for getting his master's degree. However, this episode ended as all episodes in a facile and sentimental resolution, in which Steve and his father expressed their love for each other despite their political differences.

In many other episodes, Steve and Alex have done the same, constantly re-asserting the supremacy of family ties over political ideologies. Whatever issues have arisen, the constant implication is that the political differences are of secondary importance and could not be allowed to get in the way of what is of primary importance, ie, the family and its unity in the face of whatever threatens it from the ouside.

There is no recognition of ideological commitments running deeper and creating rifts too wide and too deep for such easy bridging. There is even less recognition of family ties that are neurotic and repressive and not amenable to such comfortable construction.

FAMILY TIES has constantly subjected the collective memory of the sixties protest movement to trivialised and frivolous treatment. The whole phenomenon of the New Left has been portrayed in its mildest form.

The Keatons are basically well meaning, but wimpish, liberals. They are concerned citizens who opposed the Vietnam War and supported the equal rights amendment. They worry about environmental pollution, nuclear war, population control, zoning regulations, pets without partners and a host of other causes. They do not, however, question the fundamental assumptions of the American Dream. They did not challenge the underlying structures of power.

Steve and Elise Keaton constantly evoke the sixties in a soft, nostalgic sort of way. They do not analyse it, assess it or probe its significance. They come nowhere near articulating the cutting edge of it. They bask in the glow of its songs and symbols, but they never raised uncomfortable questions. Elise would simply ask:

"Does anybody out there remember the sixties ?"

and sing *This Land Is Your Land, Cum Ba Ya* and *The Times They Are A'Changin'*. An eighties audience which did not want to know looked at her as if he had come from another planet. But Elise was soft and sincere and won them over to listen. Superficial resolution undercut any further exploration of the disparity. The bottom line on it all was:

"You can't go home again."

modified by:

"You can go home again...You mightn't like the changes in the neighbourhood, but you can go back."

It was the soft targets and the soft forces that occupied the front line of this watered-down folk memory:

"That was before Sesame Street, consciousness raising and *Ms* magazine."

It made it all more palatable, of course, than talking about Marxism, the Black Panthers, WITCH or Weatherman, but it did not constitute a genuine coming to terms.

While no other series has made such sustained reference to the sixties as FAMILY TIES, others have made occasional references to the contemporary streams flowing from that decade. It has not happened as often as it should, given the significance of the forces involved, but, given the dominant trends in eighties television, it has stood out in sharp relief whenever it has.

Several of the shows set in schools have tended to evoke a sense of the sixties in liberal teachers being played off against both principals and pupils positioned to the right of them. Mr Moore in HEAD OF THE CLASS and Miss Sherwood in FAME have represented the lingering loyalties of the sixties in conflict with the values of both the older establishment and the younger generation. The students in both have tended to fall into the same three categories as the Keaton offspring: the cynical, the apathetic and the hopeful.

One of the most explicit confrontations with the legacy of the sixties in prime-time series was in a particular episode of FAME, which re-created a sixties scenario in an eighties context. Tomorrow's Children opened on a Career's Day presentation at the New York School for the Performing Arts, which included a talk on the option of a career in the armed forces and an announcement of the introduction of Junior ROTC to the school.

In an atmosphere of mixed reaction to the marching and drilling, Miss Sherwood introduced the topic of 'the poetry of the sixties' to her English class through a discussion of the songs of Bob Dylan. At first, the students reacted in the same way as the younger Keatons to the same record:

> "Wow, that's a tough one to dance to..."
> "He sounds like he's in pain...It's depressing."
> "Why are you laying all this sixties stuff on us ? It's boring."

In the cynicism of inexperience, they spoke of looking after Number One and argued that protest couldn't change anything. Addressing their feelings of powerlessness in the face of their sense of overwhelming power stacked against them, Miss Sherwood argued that her generation believed in taking responsibility for the world and did manage to change the world in some measure.

The students thereupon decided to put on a benefit show for a nuclear freeze in the form of a sixties revue. Soon the whole school, staff, students, and indeed much of the city, were divided: for or against ROTC and for or against nuclear freeze. The principal decided that the show could not go on. Miss Sherwood put her job on the line. Students left the ROTC and organised a sit in for the nuclear freeze show. It ended with Joan Baez, who had seen them on the news, coming to join them and singing *Blowin'in the Wind*.

In the midst of the protest, a student asked Miss Sherwood:

> "Was this what it was like in the sixties?"

To which she replied:

> "A little bit."

It was still not the cutting edge of what 'the movement' was all about, but it did convey something of the sincerity, the sense of common purpose and concern for a wider world that pervaded the protests of the period.

The episode was full of songs that evoked the spirit of the times: *Sounds of Silence, Age of Aquarius, Eve of Destruction, On the Dock of the Bay, Let the Sun Shine In*, etc. Amidst pickets and placards came the strain of the once familiar: "All we are saying is give peace a chance..."

The discourse tended to be vague enough stuff about 'taking a stand' and 'changing the world'. The causes were vaguely enough defined as 'peace' and 'civil rights'. The issues, like stopping the war and de-segregating buses, were liberal issues. The sexual attraction between Miss Sherwood and Master Sgt. Garver was dealt with in terms of such liberal platitudes as:

> "I like you very much...I just don't like what you stand for..."
>
> "There is only one thing that could destroy a perfect evening..."
>
> "I understand...No politics."

More than a bit facile, to be sure, but not so compromised as FAMILY TIES. As this particular storyline developed, both parties were too ideological to refrain from breaking into political argument. They had to recognise that the sparks of sexual attraction could not cancel out their ideological incompatibility and went their separate ways.

On the whole, the episode carried conviction and credibility. It gave a compelling characterisation to the sixties activist and gave a sense of a generation that had not altogether sold out or caved in. It moreover raised hopes that the tide would turn again. It aired the possibility that sixties activists, now in their forties and far from dead, would rise again and perhaps find allies in the most hopeful elements of the next generation.

However, for most of the time, in most of the series on prime-time television, the impact of social ferment has been registered more indirectly, if at all. The genre standing out in giving both direct and indirect expression to its continuing effects has been the crime genre.

HILL STREET BLUES has presented perhaps the starkest and most sustained picture of the extreme dislocation, fragmentation and alienation of American society today. Not only through its storylines, its characterisation and its dialogue, but also through its very methods of production, it broke new ground in giving expression to the edginess, the intricacy and the turbulence of contemporary urban life.

Set in an inner city police station, it depicted the poverty, the decay and the discontent seething on the underside of the American Dream. Through Hill Street station streamed all the wicked and wounded that a dissolute social order could produce. Crossing their paths were those responsible for enforcing the law, for maintaining some semblence of order amidst the teeming chaos, struggling like Sisyphus rolling the rock up the hill to achieve what was at best a holding operation, coping with problems they knew could not be solved, amidst the ruins of a collapsed social contract. Individually and collectively, they reached points of crisis and accomodation in their own efforts to come to terms. They probed the meaning of their experience in a way that was sometimes quite poignant:

"So much pain out there. So much madness."

Joyce Davenport to Frank Furillo

Other times it was quite cynical:

"We both work for the same waste management project."

District Attorney to Public Defender

Sometimes they felt that they were losing their way, that they no longer knew the topography of the territory and could find no maps to guide them:

Lt Goldblume to Capt Furillo

They asked big questions:

"What is happening in our society, Sergeant?"

Grace Gardiner to Sgt Esterhaus

But they had no answers:

"It seems like life is just one gigantic crap shoot...
We live...We die...We know not why..."

Fay Furillo

Those who claimed to know had only spurious answers, floating far above the nitty gritty of the empirical world:

"Let me clue you into the other side of oneness...
Oneness is what it's all about...not twoness or threeness...
Disharmony is all I see anymore."

Buddhist to Belcher

Those who offered global prescriptions were seen to be imposing simplistic formulae on a complex world:

"All this talk about 'freedom'...
What people really want is: miracle, mystery and authority."

Judge who had read *The Brothers Karamazov*

The best had more modest prescriptions. The acknowledged the big questions, but they could offer only small answers:

"You've had a taste of the despair that comes with the territory here.
It's where the job starts. It doesn't have to be where it ends."

Frank to Fay Furillo

"It's a big, cumbersome, imperfect system...
If you leave it, it will be a little worse."

Frank Furillo to Henry Goldblume

The men and women of Hill Street, described by Sgt Esterhaus as

> "a tenuously balanced social microcosm,
> composed of highly diverse and competitive individuals"

rubbed up against each other in many ways. They had come from varying cultural, racial and class backgrounds. They were of opposite sexes. They held conflicting political opinions. There were often artful ironies in the ways they were played off against each other. In the ongoing battle between the social worker methods of the liberal Lt Goldblume and the SWAT physical force methods of the conservative Lt Hunter, Hunter referred to the locals as 'those little cockroaches', bringing Goldblume to ask sardonically:

> "Why not use napalm ?"

In the quite interesting bonding built up between the redneck Andy Renko and his black partner Bobby Hill, Renko could enjoin Hill in a crisis:

"I'll take the white man and you take the third world..."

The battle of the sexes was something else. Male mystification in the face of female sexuality and men's utter incomprehension of professional women was given ample treatment and strong expression:

> "Chicks today...zero sense of humour..."
>
> La Rue after a rebuff
>
> "A lot of distempored tuna..."
>
> Chief Daniels giving out about Joyce and Fay
>
> "You know how these menopausal matrons get..."

Chief Daniels on his wife's participation in a political demonstration
For the men and women of Hill Street, memories of the sixties lingered on fitfully and full of contradictions. They were decisively marked by the years of social change. They had an eighties specificity about them. They were not fifties men and women wearing eighties clothes and using eighties technology as were the populations of other series.

They gathered into themselves so much that had happened in the preceding decades and in a way that was internal to their characters and not externally tacked on. They were inconceivable in another time and place. They referred to the flux of social change in a way that was organic to their very struggle to be and to do. Although they actively strove to come to terms with it all, none of them felt able to speak the bottom line on it all. Even Hunter, who seemed to have a fairly unambiguously right wing interpretation of it, sometimes expressed surprisingly ambivalent views on various issues, even about the Vietnan War. Giving a speech expressing his pride in his profession, he compared it to:

> "the sort of pride I felt in Mekong rice paddies during service in
> Vietnam... pride in fellowship...despite that conflict's inscrutibility."

In an extremely astute analysis of the success and significance of HILL STREET BLUES, Todd Gitlin has seen it as having caught the undertow of cultural change:

> "it spoke to, and for, a particular cultural and political moment. Hill Street worked in part because it immersed itself in major popular cross-currents, far more than the other law and order shows that hit the airwaves at the same moment. The energy swarming through Hill Street was the energy of American liberal middle class ideology turned on itself, at a loss for direction." [1]

Gitlin called it 'the first post-liberal cop show'. He believed that, in putting the basic elements of the programme together in the way that they did at the time that they did it, Bochco and Kozoll floated into a maelstrom point of popular consciousness. Like many other one time liberals, they came to a point in the eighties when they threw up their hands, when they no longer saw a clear path to social change in a system that was so complex, in a world that seemed to have lost its rhyme and reason.

The strengths and weaknesses of HILL STREET BLUES were the strengths and weaknesses of liberalism, or, to accept Gitlin's terms, post-liberalism. Those who made it eschewed an issue-based approach, arguing that it was not about issues, but set among them. HILL STREET BLUES tended to be a tight focus on consequences that did not reach out to probe causes. This sort of emphasis on the particularities of experience, without pushing through to the larger patterns making the particularities what they were, constantly bordered on classical liberal cop-out.

The most credible characters made do with a provisional one-day-at-a-time modus operandi, in which the highest achievement was to preserve individual integrity and to provide the best service to the public that difficult circumstances would allow. This, most fully embodied in Furillo, was taken to be the highest wisdom. Anyone who believed that a more global perspective was possible and was committed to radical social change was made to seem deluded and unable to deal with the world in the way Furillo was.

Amidst the rich and various array of characters to come and go and speak their piece, there was never an articulate embodiment of Marxism or of any section of the old or new left. All of human life was not there, despite the impression given that it was.

Nevertheless, short of allowing for the possibility of a higher wisdom, of a more coherent world view, of an alternative social order, it has shown much of what would have to be taken into consideration in arriving at such a perspective, certainly more than any other prime-time American series before or since.

Certainly it has stood in sharp contrast to most of the rest of the prime-time crime shows in running counter to the spirit of the Reagan era and refusing to give simple answers to complex questions. It was not inclined to swamp the verbal and visual exploration of the terrain of contemporary experience with flashy images and trendy soundtrack.

There have been other exceptions to the rule, to be sure, but none with the same density or drive. The closest would be CAGNEY & LACEY, which would also fall into Gitlin's category of 'post-liberal cop show' in that it has continued to weigh up liberal values in a world in which they appeared to have lost their efficacy. Both series have pushed this to a point of examining the

contradictions of liberal policies and the unintended negative effects of reforms liberal had fought for and won, such as equal opportunity employment, affirmative action and freedom of information.

The stance taken in the series overall has been far from the kind of reactionary attack on the progress made in the area of civil liberties that has been evident in other TV crime series, but a serious post-liberal critique of liberal reform. It has particularly stood over the impressive gains made in the way of rights for women and racial minorities, particularly as manifested in the composition of the workforce, while refusing to back away from the problems.

Overt discussions of politics have been rare, but when they have arisen, they have been far from glib. A domestic row over one of the Lacey boys getting into a fight led into an argument on US foreign policy. Harve, Mary Beth's husband, gave his opinion on what America was up to in the world. Whatever its proclamations of democratic ideals, it was when US oil interests in Southeast Asia or US fruit interests in Latin America were threatened that the troops were sent in.

Such political discussion stepped up considerably in a later series when Harve Junior began to find his heroes in Rambo, Ronald Reagan and Oliver North and to set himself on a path culminating in the decision not to go to college but join the Marines instead. There ensued a series of angry and highly polemical confrontations between father and son, as each defined his basic values and outlined alternative views of American political history, interspersed with softer appeals between mother and son.

Mary Beth Lacey, although not very politically articulate, has been seen to be capable of political development in a situation in which she began to see the impact of political forces on her children's future and moved outward from there. So strongly did she feel about the issue of nuclear waste that she found herself on the other side of the law after being arrested in a demonstration. Before this, by her own admission, she didn't read the newspapers and she

"didn't even vote Democrat."

Dealing first with the 'Rambo-rookie' who arrested her and then with his superior, who asked her:

> "What's the problem, Lacey ?...mid-life crisis ?...
> afraid to miss the revolution ?"

she entered into a more political discourse that she resented being reduced to something else and spoke in a way that took responsibility for policy matters that had previously been beyond her ken.

There have been other crime series that could be considered to be liberal, although the liberalism was most often of a less critical and more superficial sort.

SPENSER FOR HIRE, for example, was constructed around the character of the private detective of Robert B Parker's novels. Spenser was supposed to be a university educated, soulful, liberated male, who had assimilated many of the progressive developments of the sixties and seventies into the eighties. He had read books. He had views on politics, psychology, history and art. He had an enlightened attitude to racial minorities. He took feminism seriously.

The problem was that the intellectual personna amounted to nothing more than a thin overlay on top of the standard TV detective personna and it just didn't mesh.

The voice-over, articulating his reflections on life and on the case in hand, was laced with quotations from Wordsworth, Spenser, Yeats, Sartre and Kirkegaard, which came across as extremely pretentious and utterly external to the narrative. All the bits and pieces of references to the 1916 Easter Rising, existentialism, feminism or whatever were juxtaposed with formulaic shoot outs, car chases and romantic interest, with all the coherence of the answers to Trivial Pursuits tacked on to stunts from Thrillseekers.

The liberalism it articulated was of the blandest sort. Spenser believed the notion of the sanctity of marriage was an abstraction. What was real was individual people. He was against instant and irresponsible sex. He was supportive of women leaving sheltered marriages and learning to stand on their own.

In one episode, he took issue with feminists, who had robbed a bank to buy guns to fight oppression wherever it existed. Against highly caricatured opponents and a half-baked formulation of the problem, he argued that running guns wasn't the solution to oppression in Northern Ireland or Latin America or anywhere else. What the solution was, he didn't say. He simply said that he parted way with zealots. Zeal, according to the pseudo-wisdom of Spenser, distorted people, made them heedless, loveless and 'finally not human'.

It was a surface liberalism, and a fairly bland one at that, sitting on the fence and dropping references to more things on the one side or the other than was common in other action-adventure series, but it did not really struggle with the contradictions of liberalism or of anything else, as did HILL STREET BLUES and CAGNEY & LACEY.

STINGRAY brought the most stylish production values to expositions of such issues as exploitation of chicano migrant workers, environmental pollution and devastation of Indian culture. However, such realities were overshadowed by the unreality of the scenarios, in which the shadowy hero, surrounded by a semi-mystical aura, set all to rights.

Most series in the action-adventure genre have been high flying fantasies born out of other high flying fantasies, floating far above the material with which they have purported to deal. Most series have been formulaic mutations, relating far more to other series inside the Hollywood television industry than to the wider social process outside.

Nevertheless, the images coming out of this convoluted process, astutely analysed by Gitlin, have been far from arbitrary. In their own strange way, they

> "did seem to track some version of social reality." [2]

The composite picture of the contemporary world emerging from US action-adventure series has been a perspective through a glass darkly, in fact through a very shattered glass very darkly.

Reagan's America, with all of its glittering images of itself, with all of its unfulfilled longings and darkest fears, has been there in all its macho brawn, its shoulder-padded nymphomania, its patriarchal sentimentality, its commercial ruthlessness, its vigilante paranoia, its intellectual barrenness, its emotional

emptiness, its aesthetic tackiness, its moral hypocrisy, its pseudo-sophisticated grasping at high culture, its late bourgeois longing for aristocracy.

There have been cycles within genre, throwing up variations and re-combinations of standardised characters, plots and settings, with new aesthetic and ideological features infused, throwing up a confused, but very revealing picture of the preoccupations of a given period.

Perhaps the most striking thread running through the eighties variants has been the fact that all of the sudden nearly every male cop, private investigator or freelance vigilante has been a Vietnam veteran. Among major characters, whose back stories have included combat in Vietnam, were: Sonny Crockett in MIAMI VICE, Thomas Magnum in MAGNUM PI, Matt Houston in MATT HOUSTON, TJ Hooker in TJ HOOKER, Rick Simon in SIMON & SIMON, Rick Hunter in HUNTER, Mike Hammer in THE NEW MIKE HAMMER, Stringfellow Hawke in AIRWOLF, Mac Harper then Jack Striker in COVER UP, Howard Hunter and Joe Coffey in HILL STREET BLUES, Tom Mallory in EMERALD POINT, Nick and Cody in RIPTIDE, Hannibal Smith, BA Baracus, Murdock and Face in THE A TEAM.

Nearly all male characters, major or minor, have been Vietnam vets. Those who were not were either older and veterans of previous wars, like Milton Hardcastle, or younger and veterans of post-Vietnam adventures, like Mac Gyver. Much more exceptional were those who opposed the Vietnam War, like AJ Simon or Henry Goldblume.

The Vietnam vet appeared increasingly to occupy the hero role, though in some series the representation of the vet was more ambiguous and less flattering. In any case, a host of characters in a host of series were identified as Vietnam vets, whether on the one side of the law or the other, whether as cops, PIs, vigilanties, criminals or crazies.

A parallel trend in many series has been a tendency toward an increasing discordance, in which the elements of sound / image / story / character simply do not cohere. It has been a trend stemming, less from any avant-garde challenge to narrative coherence than from the sheer opportunism and incoherence of the powers-that-be in prime-time television.

One feature of this has been an evocation of a sixties aura for eighties purposes in a crude juxtaposition, which was sometimes simply inappropriate and other times blatantly contradictory.

The HUNTER pilot, for example, opened with a slick, fast-cutting sequence, featuring the standard images of the crime genre: knives, guns, cars, bedrooms, bathtubs, etc, over a soundtrack featuring Creedence Clearwater Revival's *Bad Moon Rising*. This was followed by a scene in which Hunter, a plain clothes detective, and a uniformed cop exchanged the particular handshake that set sixties radicals apart from the rest American society. However, there was nothing in Hunter's back story (a mobster's son turned cop) or in the episide itself to indicate any connection with sixties radicalism.

In similar fashion, in the episode of MAGNUM in which he was doing his Rambo number in Southeast Asia, Magnum and armed cohorts made their way up the river in a mise en scene heavily laden with ripped-off APOCALYPE NOW references, while the soundtrack weighed in with Creedence Clearwater Revival's *Proud Mary*, however incongruously.

Such forays as there have been into this arena have not been noteworthy for their honesty, insight or courage. Indeed, many have been clumsy and cowardly, if not blatanly dishonest.

One episode of HARDCASTLE & MC CORMICK, for example, re-united a group of erstwhile revolutionaries from the sixties, friends of Mark Mc Cormick. For a start, Mark Mc Cormick, a corny ex-con male-bonded with a right-wing judge turned vigilante, was in no sense a credible ex-radical. Of the others, one was the assistant manager of a bank where they had once protested. Another was a writer, who had turned away from writing serious plays, because there was no money in it, and had become a corrupted tv writer instead(!). Another was an anachronistic revolutionary, frozen as if in a time warp, contriving to get money to buy guns for the revolution and food for the needy.

Despite references to the past like:

"I ended up in jail with the Chicago 7..."

there was no authentic sense of the texture of the times.

It simply hawked the standard cliches by which mainsteam America has disposed of the New Left: either as having sold out their principles for power, respectability and money, which was seen as synonymous with simply growing up and seeing the error of their youthful ways, or as

"holding on to all that anger from the sixties"

which was seen as utterly irrelevant to the eighties, as if all the problems had been solved or were never really there.

The bottom line of the episode was:

"The revolution is over. Your side lost."

It was such a gross caricature of what the side was that any of the audience, who did not already know better, could not be blamed for not regretting that it lost. Surely even a sold-out ex-radical of a corrupted TV writer could have made a better job of it.

Not quite so objectionable was an episode of SIMON & SIMON entitled Who Killed the 60s?, which also set out a similiar scenario to films like RETURN OF THE SECAUCAS 7 and THE BIG CHILL. An old girlfriend of AJ Simon's returned, which was the occasion of reminiscence of college days and student radicalism.

There was a nostalgic touching of totems in references to Woodstock and Chicago 68. There was a tv commercial coming on to the television in the room advertising a sixties hits album and referring to: "that bold and passionate generation of young Americans".

There were songs like *Blowin' in the Wind* and *California Dream* on the soundtrack. There was a marking of the contrast between sixties parents and eighties teenage offspring.

It was a respectful look at the sixties generation and their beliefs. It represented the activists of the time as sane and sincere people, people who cared about the world, people who changed things. It also presented them as

having retained their principles, as having been involved in a long list of causes in the years since and as

> "still worried about this country..."

The bottom line, however, was:

> "Nothing can ever be the way it used to be...
> We've all changed too much."

It was a fair enough representation of a left liberal point of view and it was obviously written with a strain of sincerity and social concern that was rare enough in the genre. It lacked the clarity of vision and strength of purpose, however, to grapple with the questions it raised. It never did tell us: who killed the sixties ? or how and why everything had changed so much. The message still was that it was all over.

However, most of the time it was never even mentioned, even more effectively giving the impression that it was well and truly over, if indeed there was any awareness that it had ever happened.

Even LA LAW, the series into which Steve Bochco channelled his talents after leaving HILL STREET BLUES, barely took passing notice. In a scene giving profiles of prototypical citizens in the composition of a prospective jury, one was the ex-radical. The type was described as someone whose previously held anti-establishment views had been modified by domestic resposibilities, professional prospects and a sense of betrayal by former friends. Even though the profile was given by a corporate executive, who was all razzle-dazzle pr and image-enhancement hype, one was still left with the impression that political radicalism was a thing of the past, and a fairly marginal thing at that.

Where LA LAW was a cut above the rest was in its constant implicit critique of the social force that has come into the ascendancy in the eighties, the most grasping yuppie element, which it did play off against those whose sensibilities had been shaped by the reformist compromises emerging from the social upheavals of the previous decades.

All series have reflected such sensibilities to some extent, at least in the racial, ethnic, sexual and generational mix of the cast, but rarely contrasted them any way effectively with contradictory sensibilities. Rather, they generally glossed over the contradictions.

The Vietnam War was, of course, the biggest issue dividing the country in the late sixties and early seventies, but it was only in the mid-eighties when the aftershocks of it really made their presence felt in prime-time series, primarily in action-adventure series.

Most of the time, only the one side of the divide was really represented, that was the side of those who fought the war and still stood over it. The anti-war movement was either ignored or misrepresented.

An episode of MAGNUM, PI depicted a former anti-war activist as a latter day candidate for political office, now espousing all the old-fashioned American values. Not to let him off too lightly, it turned out that he was linked to organised crime as well. Moreover, it was intimated that there was some basic weakness in him, linking his anti-war stance to his susceptibility to intimidation from organised crime.

SIMON & SIMON was one of the few to speak a sympathetic word about the other side, though perhaps it effected a reconciliation of the two sides too glibly in the genial partnership of the two brothers, who always pulled together in the end, despite much scrapping and many differences dividing them along the way. The Vietnam War, in which one brother fought and the other brother protested, was reduced to one among many matters on which they agreed to differ.
In one episode, one ex-marine turned on AJ Simon:

> "You were worrying about whether you could carry 21 hours a semester... but we were worried about whether we could get through the next 24 hours..."

He was answered by another ex-marine, who said that he was glad that people like AJ and the rest fought in the way that they did and didn't go to Vietnam and sorry that others didn't stay home instead of coming home in boxes.

Although the action-adventure genre was the principal site of such debate when it did sporadically surface on prime-time, it did come into other genre as well.

ST ELSEWHERE gave much more serious and searching expression to the unresolved tensions still seething from Vietnam in the post-Vietnam era. The admission of a patient from the Vietnamese community now in the US, a high government official in South Vietnam, bitter over America's conduct of the war and anxious over the potential effects of exposure to agent orange on his own health, served as a catalyst for sparking off conflicting ideological positions on US involvement in Vietnam among the hospital staff.

When a young black doctor, who still hadn't come to terms with the death of his brother in Vietnam, was brought in for a consultation, he eruped at hearing the patient going on about their allies burning their villages, napalming their children and forcing them to evacuate their homes and lose all their possessions. Unable to take any more of it, he burst out:

> "We fought your battles. We came to the rescue.
> We tried to give you freedom...You got what you deserved."

Explaining himself to the other resident, he exclaimed:

> "It just galls me that this rice face is living the great life in the suburbs, while my brother went to Vietnam and came home in a box."

In an extended argument with the other doctor, who had been involved in the anti-war movement, the experiences of many Americans on both sides were given strong fictional expression:

> "Nathan didn't get drafted. He volunteered. My old man said:
> ‘The country's at war. You go. That's it. No questions asked.’
>
> "Vietnam was a mistake..."
>
> "Only because our soldiers got a raw deal...being spit on here at home..."
>
> "It was a war without morals..."
>
> "You protestors...You pressure Congress to limit military spending...
> Mid-way through the trapeze act, they pulled out the net..."

Going back to whether they should have been in Vietnam in the first place, the one referred to the whole state of Southeast Asia, arguing that it was a mess. To which the other replied:

> "That's no justification. What divine law says that the United States has the right to determine how other countries run their governments? What makes us so righteous?"
>
> "I got a letter from my brother talking about why he went. He said this country was built on a single foundation. There's nothing this country can't do...but after Nam, we went into a national tailspin...self-disgust...defeatism... It's people like you that suck out the morals..."
>
> "America learned that it has limits. The war was senseless." "Don't tell me my brother died for no reason..."

Each of these two doctors in turn were taken to task by their superior, Dr Craig. With the more liberal of the two, he gave a reactionary knee-jerk re-iteration of the domino theory, the same principle he had fought for in Korea. He then attacked the protestors as:

> "shaggy-haired college brats...too scared to defend their country."

To which the former protestor rejoined:

> "After Kent State, it took as much courage to go out and protest as to fight. Now we're putting up memorials to Vietnam veterans. I say that we ought to honour the protestors as well."

With the other, Dr.Craig started off reprimanding him for his

> "unprofessional conduct with that commie patient of Morrison's"

giving passing indication, if one were needed, of his political level.

Interestingly, in confronting something they didn't like in somebody else on the same side, they both modified their positions somewhat. Craig admitted:

> "Vietnam made us all take a hard look at how this country functions...but America has an uncanny ability to correct itself when it starts making mistakes..."

More disturbed than ever, the other asked:

> "Who pays for the mistakes? The veteran.
> They returned home disgraced. The deed was dirty, but they did it.
> So let's blame them. Now they're being honoured.
> By honouring them, we are absolved of our own guilt."

Going back to his personal need to come to terms with both his personal bereavement and its political context:

> "I should have done something. I should have protested.
> I should have gone to his funeral."

Such strong and honest confrontation, giving scope for full-blooded expression on both sides, was not the rule. It was very much the exception in the whole process of settling accounts. Most treatments of the topic have been most illiberal or evasive. They have also been very skimpy, given the importance of the matter.

Although a Vietnam series has been a long time coming, various genre, especially the crime and spy genres, have registered a new stage in the cultural process of the society's settling of accounts over the Vietnam War. The new breed of public law enforcers and private enterprise adventurers, Magnum, Crockett, Houston, Striker, Hawke and the rest, who became the up-standing men they were in the burning and bombing of the villages of Vietnam, were part of a larger cultural effort to rehabilitate the image of the Vietnam veteran, and indeed to reshape the whole public perception of the Vietnam War. It was an aggressive fight back against the popular revulsion it engendered and the disillusion in the face of the negative national self image resulting from it.

MAGNUM, MATT HOUSTON, AIRWOLF, COVER UP, EMERALD POINT, MIAMI VICE and a host of other series have routinely referred back to Vietnam as a just war, in which good men fought honourably, achieved real manhood, died bravely in the cause of righteousness or else came back to continue fighting for it on the home front. There was barely a single episode of MAGNUM not making some reference to Vietnam. Thomas Magnum's relationship with his buddies, Rick and TC, was a bonding rooted in the fraternity of combat. Their friend, Jonathan Higgins, a stage Englishman, who was ex-British Army, shared their military ethos and indeed seemed obsessed with matters military.

They still got a high on the action, even in reverie. They played war games as recreation. They constantly evoked 'Nam', Malaya and other imperialist conflicts, in a way that gave the impression that war was good, clean, healthy fun and a necessary ritual in male rites of passage. The tragic details of death and devastation were dissipated in the genial horseplay of the buddy ethic.

Indeed, they lamented the lack of such essential experience for the post-Vietnam generation of military men coming after them. Indeed, they missed the action themselves. When they contrasted their image of the men they were then, when they were in the thick of it, with the men they were now, in time of peace, they felt they came out the worse.

What to do ?

Like many another Vietnam vet in the action-adventure mould during the 1984-85 season, they re-enacted the RAMBO scenario and went back to Vietnam to kick some butt and rescue some POWs officially listed as MIAs. Naturally, Higgins had to get in on the action as well.

MATT HOUSTON did the RAMBO number as well. Houston also brought along a black buddy, who was a fellow Vietnam vet, and an elderly uncle figure, who couldn't resist the action. In this case, they went in to rescue Matt Houston's cousin (and the uncle's son), who was a prisoner of war listed as missing in action.

Stringfellow Hawke did it too, in this instance to rescue his brother, another POW listed as MIA. He also went with an uncle figure, so as to encompass the macho fantasies of males of more than one generation. It was possible to be reactionary without being ageist as well.

According to this scenario, the government was full of bureaucrats, who were good for nothing but pushing papers. The situation required bold men of action, using their macho brawn and whatever private means at their disposal (which seemed to be no problem), to do on their own what the government couldn't.

Ironically, those whose excuse for going and laying waste to another land and its people was that they had done so on orders from their government, had come to hold their government's orders in contempt, and now wanted to return to fight the same country, even against their government's orders.

The RAMBO syndrome had struck a nerve in the American people, still smarting from the open wound left from their defeat in Southeast Asia and from the feeling of impotence in the face of the hostage crisis in the Middle East. So spectacularly did RAMBO express the frustration and aggression that had been festering from below and focus the backlash response that had been building up as to become instant myth. So effectively did the absurd figure of Rambo capture the popular imagination and achieve immediate mythological status that the word Rambo entered the language as a symbol for a whole set of values and ways of acting on them.

Everyday speech became laced with word like Rambomania and Ramboesque as a shorthand way of referring to a whole set of perceptions of the state of play in the world and set of prescriptions for dealing with it.

RAMBO symbolised the fantasy of fighting the Vietnam War over again and this time winning it. It was the lone imperialist hero, the macho man of action, dispensing with all the liberal moralising, the government bureaucracy, the mercenary double-dealing and the foreigner's sovereignty and indeed his very right to life, and taking matters into his own hands, who captured the mood of the moment. Singlehandedly rescuing POWs listed as MIAs from Vietnam and desimating the local population in the process, RAMBO brought US cinema audiences to their feet in primal blood lust, shouting:

"Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill!"

President Reagan was reported to have said:

"Now I know how to deal with the next hostage crisis."

RAMBO topped box offices the world over, appealing to baser instincts that American cultural exports were doing their share to nurture. There was a whole spin-off industry, marketing products like Rambo dolls, as tribal totems for the initiation of those coming of age.

The reading of the public mood was that the country wanted heroes and Hollywood was going to give them to them. There had been too much negativism, it was said. People were tired of anti-heroes.

Prime-time television played its full part in the national ritual of fantasy wish fulfillment. MAC GYVER, AIRWOLF, COVER UP and a host of other series had swashbuckling heroes, all full of Ramboesque daring-do, all over Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Latin America, putting foreigners in their place (or what Americans thought was their place) and making the world safe for American citizens to do whatever they liked to do wherever they liked to do it.

Aside from re-enacting the RAMBO scenario, there were other Vietnam stories popping into other series. Some re-played the FIRST BLOOD scenario, the earlier

story of John Rambo, the harrassed and hard-done-by Vietnam vet, who fought for his country, only to find it had no place for him on his return. It was a scenario which focused on the Vietnam vet, not only as the hero of the war, but also as its main victim.

Quite a number of stories featured Vietnam vets, deranged with disorientation and rejection, usually putting the blame on government officials, anti-war activists and apathetic citizens. Discussion of the rights and wrongs of it often formed the basis of dialogue trying to talk a Vietnam vet away from going off the deep end, often in a suicide attempt.

Matt Houston's cousin, for example, once back home in the USA, after surviving for twelve years as a POW in Vietnam, threatened to jump off the top of the Houston building in disillusion and disorientation. His father, Matt Houston's uncle, expressed his bitterness. When his son went to Vietnam, he said:

> "He had a bunch of ideas...like duty, country, honour...
> It was people like him that got eaten alive."

THE A TEAM put a more genial face on the persecution of the Vietnam vet, but it nonetheless portrayed them as having been hounded by the government, even court marshalled and sentenced to death at one point, for something they had done on government orders. It made children's folk heroes of a band of looney adventurers, who robbed the Bank of Hanoi, assuming that they were in the right, because it was under orders from their government, and also assuming that they were in the right on the run from that same government.

Other stories have zeroed in on the half-breed children of American GIs and Vietnamese women as the main victims of the war, called 'dust children'. MAGNUM did a dust child story about one Tran Quoc Jones, a Vietnamese street urchin hustling in Hawaii, who came to the US to find his GI father, after his mother had been killed by the communists.

Even HIGHWAY TO HEAVEN got in on this one in a story about a GI, who sent for his Amerasian daughter, and the obstacles misguided people put in the way of her climbing into the great American melting pot. In Vietnam, she was rejected as part-American and therefore not truly Vietnamese. In America, she was called a gook and therefore not really American. A hostile neighbour asked if her Vietnamese mother had thrown the grenade that killed her husband in Vietnam. However, with an angel to sort it all out, this one ended happily ever after. The answer was simply to love thy neighbour.

But 'love thy neighbour' was an injunction very selectively prescribed by Christian America. There was no suggestion that it should be extended to Vietnamese, who chose to defend their country's right to progress to a socialist society, rather than consorting with American GIs, who wished to make love as well as war, while laying waste to their country and its people.

The view running through most of these series was that GIs, having done their bit to destroy Vietnam, deserved the best of everything when they got home and they were not getting it. They were heroes and they should be treated as such, so this view went. Not only was what the Vietnamese suffered ignored in many of these stories, but the whole thing was turned around, as if the Vietnamese were the aggressors in a war against the Americans.

Indeed, in a particularly nasty episode of AIRWOLF, this tendency was taken to the extreme of having Vietnamese come over to the US and kidnap the wives and

children dear to the Vietnam veterans, who destroyed their village in Vietnam, to mark the tenth anniversary of the event. Another episode of AIRWOLF showed a Vietnamese community of farmers, who settled in the US after the evacuation of South Vietnam and were being forced to pay feudal tribue to their traditional landlord imported with them, still needing American superheroes to sort out their problems for them.

Other series, or at least scenes in other series, have given glimpses of a darker picture of the Vietnam veteran. Some plots dealt with smuggling operations GIs ran in Vietnam, often shipping back contraband, drugs and money in the coffins of soldiers killed in action. Other plots have dealt with the settling of scores from Vietnam, often showing enlisted men seeking official justice for war crimes committed by brutal officers, who sent scores of their own men unnecessarily to their deaths, never mind the Vietnamese blood on their hands.

An episode of SIMON & SIMON was built around evidence brought to them by a marine against an officer, who was responsible for sending 79 men in his unit to the slaughter in the cynical belief that they were expendable. Having been unsuccessful in going through official channels and appealing to the media, he came to private investigators to help. Even though their client came to a tragic end, the closure was still one where all the loose ends were tied up far too easily. At the funeral, with the sacred American flag on his coffin, the last post and the official salute, America, Christianity and the Marine Corps were all lined up on the right side after all. It was the individual officer, not the nation or the nature of the war, who bore the responsibility for whatever injustice.

However, there has been no satisfactory fictional synthesis of this central experience of American social history, not in any format. In cinema, PLATOON has obviously been a healthy antidote to RAMBO, but it was still a very partial perspective centered on the experience of the Vietnam vet. In tv drama, only occasional episodes and passing references. A plot of MURDER SHE WROTE referred to expectations of 'the definitive novel on the Vietnam War', but this too is yet to come.

Certainly, the definitive drama of the era in all its manifestations has not yet come. As to the fragments which have flickered through the airwaves so far, what they reveal more than anything else is a society which has yet to come to terms with the forces that have shaken it to its depths in the sixties and has still a long way to go in doing so.

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