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# THE TELEVISION WAR: TREATMENT OF GENDER AND THE VIETNAM EXPERIENCE IN NETWORK TELEVISION DRAMA IN THE 1988-89 SEASON

M. ELAINE DOLAN BROWN

The United States is at long last coming to grips with its Vietnam experience. American involvement in Southeast Asia has received renewed scrutiny of late whether in the form of new national war memorials, new course offerings on the subject available on our college campuses, successful box office films, or inclusion in the prime-time schedule on television. As the U.S. slowly integrates the Vietnam experience into its cultural heritage, popular images of the war and its aftermath, and increasingly popular images of the female experience in and after Vietnam have exploded into the American consciousness.

Portrayals of women and the Vietnam experience in television drama generally fall into one of two categories; those plotlines or characters associated with the war itself, and those which focus on the ramifications the war had for its survivors.

This critique will examine the ways in which these images are treated in current network television dramas, both in prime-time programming as well as in daytime drama storylines. In shows that deal with the war itself, the focus will be on patterns in attitudes toward the war, types of characterizations of American men and women in a foreign and hostile environment, portraits of the Vietnamese, male and female, and cultural interaction in general. In those programs with contemporary settings which deal with the war's aftermath, the Vietnam veteran's readjustment to American society, and the different rates of success experienced by men and women in that process, as well as the portrayals of Vietnamese refugees and Amerasian children are the predominant themes.

Vietnam was, and is an increasingly popular topic in network daytime drama. In fact, the dramatization of Vietnam reached a high water mark in the 1989 season when all of the NBC soap operas had a Vietnam-related storyline.

NBC's *Days of our Lives* is the most recent daytime drama to include a Vietnam-related storyline. Diana Colville and Roman Brady (one of the show's popular "super couples") had set their wedding date. But like all of soap opera's super couples, they must overcome a series of obstacles before they can be united. (This is a stock formula of the

genre.) Their latest problem is Diana's ex-lover, Cal Winters, who has just returned to the US after having spent many years as a POW in Southeast Asia. Like many popular culture portrayals, he returns only to find disappointment and a world that has changed, unconcerned with the sacrifices and the hardships this lieutenant may have been forced to endure. Cal requires constant psychiatric treatment, yet this serves only as a vehicle for the audience to learn of his undying devotion to Diana, despite her more recent commitments.

Thus, in *Days of our Lives*, the portrayal of the veteran and his Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD) serve only to perpetuate the classical daytime drama device—the love triangle. Cal's psychological problems are minimized, and are acknowledged only to the point that they serve the audience and the love triangle theme; a sympathetic, or even believable treatment of the veteran is totally lacking. The female character, Diana, has little sympathy for the plight of her lost lover. However, despite her indifference, when forced to choose between the two she instigates a shooting, defending the veteran, but ruining her own life in the process. This is a crude portrayal of the woman as the character ultimately unable to cope with the effects of the war. The opportunities to explore the complex interplay between gender and war in the context of Vietnam are foregone in favor of more traditional (and simplistic) plot devices.

Where *Days of our Lives* molds the treatment of gender and the Vietnam War to fit a tried and true soap opera formula, a second NBC daytime drama, *Another World*, has at least partially fleshed out and developed the ramifications of the Vietnam war experience and the cost of the war for two characters. One plotline was resolved in late 1988, and the other is ongoing. Kris, a secondary character in the series in the fall of 1988, lost her child in the war in Vietnam. She was never able to cope with the tragedy, and as a result she progressively became crazed. Her mania culminated in hallucinations which caused her to kidnap the child of a prominent family on the show; because of her delusions, she thought the child was her own. The young child was eventually rescued, and subsequently and surprisingly, the other characters treated Kris with sympathy. She was last seen in a sanatorium undergoing therapy and has since been written out of the series.

The story of Kris is interesting when juxtaposed against that of John Hudson, a major character on the series, a man emotionally scarred by his experiences in Vietnam. John suffers from PTSD, which manifests chiefly in the form of flashbacks. These flashbacks are unpredictable and their recurrent image is a scene of small Vietnamese children in an orphanage screaming while under attack. Although he has this problem, John's work and social life are unaffected and he is able to cope, leading a relatively normal life. Unlike Kris, John's normal routine is unaffected by his experiences in Vietnam, and we have no reason to believe that his veteran status endows him with any special strengths or weaknesses. As characters, both Kris and John reflect a

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broader but still shallow depiction of Vietnam and its impact on society. Nonetheless, the male role is stronger and the character is unencumbered by the past; rather, he is shown as strong *despite* the experience.

Perhaps the most well-developed Vietnam storyline dealing with the gender issue was on the 1988 season of the NBC soap opera *Santa Barbara*. In this daytime drama Cain Garver, a Vietnam veteran, disgusted with the failure of Veterans Administration hospitals to help him, isolated himself in a shack in the Rocky Mountains. His illness made him unable to cope with the world. He, too, suffered from PTSD, but in his case the syndrome was sufficiently serious to prevent him from normal social interaction. His connection to *Santa Barbara* was his rescue of the series' heroine, Eden Capwell, after her plane had crashed in the mountains.

Cain's personality was complex; he alternately suffered from fits of violence and alcohol abuse because of his Vietnam experience. Like the character John Hudson, Cain suffered from flashbacks, but the depiction of his illness was more three-dimensional. He is unable to communicate his pent-up anguish and frustrations; only the audience is aware of the relationship of his flashbacks to his asocial behavior.

Cain was traumatized by the death of his Vietnamese lover Su Li, blaming himself for the tragedy. His commanding officer, Major Philip Hamilton (another character in the series) also blamed Cain. Both men had been in love with Su Li, and after the war most of the Major's time was spent plotting revenge against Cain in *Santa Barbara*. In a particularly twisted plot, with incestuous overtones, the Major arranged for a young, destitute Amerasian woman, Ming Li, to come to the US and pose as Cain's daughter. Cain accepted the woman as his child. The Major then threatened Ming Li under pain of deportation to lure Cain to bed. The Major also routinely abused and threatened a young Vietnamese man, Kai, whom he employed as his housekeeper. Unsuccessful in these attempts to destroy Cain, the Major went on to try to frame his enemy as a rapist, and when caught and questioned by the authorities, the Major blamed his wartime experience for his evil actions.

The Major, like Cal in *Days of our Lives*, is not intended to evoke a sympathetic response in the viewer; rather, he is a trendy vehicle used to continue the classic daytime drama plot device—jealous plotting for revenge. Unlike the Major, Cain emerged as a heroic figure and was ultimately rehabilitated through his own efforts, with no help from the mental health establishment. His story represents a more modern, generous view of the Vietnam veteran, recognizing the Vietnam veteran as a unique type, with weaknesses and strengths which are the product of a unique and unpleasant experience. Thus, the trend continues: the male is presented in the context of the Vietnam war only to highlight his inner strength, and the woman (here Ming Li) is a weak, two-dimensional representation exploited for the purposes of the plot.

Fascinating patterns emerge from the examination of these daytime dramas. First, it is now generally acknowledged, albeit only

superficially, that there were women in Vietnam who did suffer. Portraying the Vietnam war and the ramifications of that experience for its survivors is a relatively new phenomenon on television; portraying women who were involved in the war is even newer. Second, it is important to note that the most common legacy of the Vietnam war as depicted in daytime drama is its manifestation in mental—not physical—illness. Furthermore, mental illness is almost exclusively portrayed as a conquerable illness for men, and an insurmountable obstacle for women. Physical war wounds are seldom, if ever, mentioned; people regularly return whole. We see no wheelchairs, no amputees. No one suffers from exposure to Agent Orange. Remarkably, especially in comparison with the prime-time treatment, few references to drug abuse associated with the Vietnam war are made on daytime television. Instead, the war's overwhelming effect is almost always seen as psychological—a mental struggle in which men triumph and women are defeated.

The emphasis in prime-time television initially appears to be quite different. Daytime dramas deal with how characters cope in the present; prime-time shows are set during the war. Close examination, however, reveals that the strength and weakness of characters are still based in gender.

Two major prime-time series set in Vietnam are CBS's *Tour of Duty* and ABC's *China Beach*. The 1988-89 season was the second for *Tour of Duty*, which returned to the prime-time schedule after a warmly received first season. *Tour of Duty* is built around the experiences of one platoon; perhaps in an effort to boost its sagging ratings (and following the lead of *China Beach*) the most obvious change in its second season is the inclusion of female characters on a regular basis, most notably the character of reporter Alex Devlin. Indeed, all of the ads promoting the show last fall urged viewers to tune into the series because now "It's Hot!" In its opening credits this season, not only do we see the customary scenes of war, but also we briefly pan to a partially clad woman's body.

Yet for all its new emphasis on sex and rock'n roll, *Tour of Duty* makes an earnest attempt at both realism and depth in its characterizations. In most episodes opposing attitudes toward the war are brought out, and American policy is often examined critically. Gender is often given a complex treatment. For example, one storyline featured Quakers who were aiding all civilians regardless of their allegiance. The focus of this episode was on a Quaker woman. Although the woman-as-pacifist is consistent with the general portrayal of women as the weaker sex, this character lent strength to the pacifist position, and to the debate. She stood up to soldiers, fortified only by her beliefs. In another episode, a commanding officer, after being doggedly pursued by a female American journalist, acknowledged that the press was often deceived about body counts and American losses. In yet another story, a platoon member who inadvertently killed a Vietnamese child wondered whether he would bring the same disregard for human life back to the U.S. with him when he returned.

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The characters on *Tour of Duty* have a rich and varied background. As mentioned previously, women now have more substantial roles, notably as reporters, medical personnel, or wives and lovers of the members of the platoon. Of particular interest is the inclusion of Vietnamese women, usually as GIs' wives or lovers, and more commonly (and stereotypically) as prostitutes. However, some Vietnamese women are also portrayed sympathetically as caring mothers, fighting against the odds against disease for their children's survival. The platoon itself is ethnically diverse, with black, white, and Latino men all represented. The particular cultural baggage associated with traditional male roles is often explored.

*China Beach*, the other major prime-time series set in Vietnam, is flashier and more controversial than *Tour of Duty*. Indeed, it was one of the most talked about programs when it made its debut in the spring of 1988. Like *Tour of Duty*, it takes as its theme a sixties hit record, in this case the Supremes' "Reflections of the Way Life Used to Be." Unlike *Tour of Duty*, the focus is primarily on the women who serve at the R&R facility on the ocean—a sort of Club Cam Ranh Bay. The regular female characters are a group of Red Cross workers, army nurses, an aspiring reporter, a disc jockey, and an American prostitute. (A Vietnamese woman plays a secondary role as the lover of a black soldier named Sam Beckett.)

Unfortunately, the writers of *China Beach* have routinely exploited the tried and true television formula of sex, drugs, and rock and roll. The love lives, or more particularly the sex lives, of the major characters are of paramount importance in the storylines. For example, a recent episode was devoted to the efforts of the local American prostitute, KC, to keep her home and "business" right on the base. Another episode highlighted her heroin addiction and withdrawal. And in every episode the viewers can rock and roll themselves through Vietnam by listening to the 1960s tunes the disc jockey spins, or the songs belted out by the Red Cross entertainers. This tendency reached its most ludicrous crescendo when in one episode the residents of China Beach held their own high school style prom. Such misplaced emphases trivialize the Vietnam war, and perpetuate hollow 1950s stereotypes into the 1980s.

Many of the serious themes which the show attempts to deal with are degraded by comic treatment, perhaps because the writers feel that a depressed audience equals bad ratings. For instance, McMurphy, main character and army nurse, in an episode entitled "Psywars," tries to come to grips with her lover's having been shot down by the enemy. She suffers from flashbacks of their last days together as well as hallucinations that he is with her. Her turmoil is interspersed with Warner Brothers cartoons featuring Coyote chasing Road Runner (which she had earlier watched on the base) and are presumably to serve as some sort of metaphor for her mental state. Although the writers perhaps intended the cartoons to be interpreted as McMurphy's coping mechanism, one unintentional result is the reinforced notion that women are childish.

The writers of *China Beach*, sensitive to the charges of triviality levelled against the show, have made an effort to mitigate such criticism. In a particularly serious episode, one of the primary characters—a Red Cross worker—was killed in the Tet Offensive, and at the end of the show the audience was told of the women who really lost their lives in the war. In an even greater departure from the series' established format, one segment presented real military nurses recounting their wartime experiences followed by clips from previous episodes of the program in an effort to demonstrate that the themes dealt with on *China Beach* are genuine and that suffering was not bound by gender. While such efforts are to be applauded, until the writers abandon the predictable (and saleable) format, the show is doomed to be dismissed as a typical exploitation series.

Although the Vietnam war and all of its attendant imagery has splashed onto both the daytime and prime-time schedules, it is predictably not immune to the molding and shaping forces of Hollywood. The plight of the Vietnam veteran is routinely subsumed by the conventions of soap opera. The war appears in daytime drama in the form of flashbacks, and the use of PTSD as a device has been embraced wholeheartedly, although the television version of the disease is neither as terrible nor as common as the real thing. PTSD is a convenient vehicle for the circumstance of melodrama, and it is now both a popular and recurrent theme, illustrating its centrality to the media portrait of Vietnam's legacy. And, perhaps most important, the close observer cannot help but conclude that the television version of the psychological scars of war seem to heal leaving men whole and women crippled.

Other issues also suffer distortion: prostitution is not portrayed as a degrading condition suffered by Vietnamese women seeking to survive, but as a high fashion occupation on *China Beach*; drugs are not shown as a costly outlet for troubled GIs, but as a recreational aid and an alternative source of income for entrepreneurs; and, on the prime-time portraits, the war is too often made to appear a stage for youth at play, rather than a nightmare setting for youth in terror.

The current presentation of Vietnam in television drama is a mixed bag of morals and messages. Daytime drama is increasingly recognizing the effect of the war on the fabric of everyday American life—perhaps the soap opera distortions of the Vietnam war are in keeping with their distortions of American society in general. However, despite increasingly responsible storylines, traditional gender roles too often confine the characters and the scripts. The trend in prime-time drama is even more disturbing. Although *Tour of Duty* showed great initial promise, since the arrival of *China Beach*, both series have trivialized the Vietnam experience and its resulting cost to American society with the introduction of seemingly inescapable prime-time ingredients—strong men and simple women, popular music, sexual suggestion, and homage to a society of self gratification.