



Alan Alda, left, as Capt. Hawkeye Pierce and McLean Stevenson as Lt. Col. Henry Blake in "For the Good of the Outfit," from the second season of "M*A*S*H." 20th Century Fox/Everett Collection

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When a TV Network Could Be Cynical About War

By EMILY NUSSBAUM



RERUNS

All wars are popular for the first 30 days," wrote the historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. By the time "M*A*S*H" hit the airwaves in 1972, the year the last American ground troops left Vietnam, that deadline had long expired. An antiwar sitcom that blossomed during wartime, "M*A*S*H" ran for 11 years, and it was explicitly intended as a commentary on Vietnam. But the show's setting was the Korean War of the 1950's, a chronological remove that gave the show's creators a perverse freedom, as well as a stamp of universality. To watch it now is to gaze back at an era of angry skepticism, personified by the prankster antihero Hawkeye Pierce (Alan Alda). In the bleak universe of "M*A*S*H," spokespeople are liars, generals are bullies and anyone who mouths patriotic slogans is a dupe or a hypocrite. "By the time we waded in, by the time we came on the air, people really wanted to get

How was 'M*A*S*H' able to display such a skeptical vision of the U.S. military?

the hell out of Vietnam," recalled Larry Gelbart, one of the producers. "And even a corporation like CBS was ready to do a show like that."

Depending on your politics, the show's caustic vision of authority might now seem like adolescent cynicism, or a desperately needed corrective. Tomorrow's episode on FX, "For the Good of the Outfit" from October 1973, provides a particularly searing example of its take on power. While performing surgery on Koreans from a local village in their Mobile Army Surgical Hospital, Pierce and his colleague Trapper John McIntyre realize that the shrapnel they're plucking out comes not from the enemy but from American weaponry. When they try to report this "friendly fire" incident, their worst suspicions are quickly confirmed: the hierarchy is rotten all the way to the top. A slick investigator first sweet-talks Pierce, then stonewalls, and finally "loses" the evidence. Stars and Stripes prints a piece of propaganda blaming the Koreans for the shelling. When a general is called in to settle the dispute, he suggests that Pierce could be sent to the front lines as punishment for being a whistleblower. "I've got to hand it to you, General," Hawkeye deadpans. "You buried the evidence, you got rid of the guy who knew the evidence, and now if we press this, you'll take away our breathing privileges."

The script is studded with such bitter zingers. "Now we know how Dreyfus felt when he read the story in 'Stars and Stripes,'" Hawkeye says when he reads the newspaper's false account. Hawkeye's

squirrely colleague Frank Burns describes the destruction of the Korean village as "this terrible but very human mistake made by a few of our brutal but well-meaning servicemen." But it's the final scene that truly gets across the episode's seemingly bottomless darkness: after initially having his mail blocked by the Army, Hawkeye finally gets a letter from his father back in Maine, a response to Hawkeye's request that his father help expose the incident by calling in a favor from a local senator. "Dear Son, I am afraid Senator Baxter can't be of much help to you," Hawkeye's dad writes. "It seems he was just indicted for influence peddling and faces 20 years in the pokey. Sure makes me sorry I stuffed a ballot box for him!"

According to Mr. Gelbart, CBS was generally "supportive or silent" about such portrayals of American corruption; its censors were far more concerned about sex jokes and blasphemy. The one major struggle the

creators did lose was their battle against a laugh track. "Absent the laugh track, you hear the real tone of the show," Mr. Gelbart noted. "No comment, however bitter and angry, isn't trivialized by a mechanical laugh." (Mr. Gelbart is grateful for the advent of DVD's, where episodes can be seen uncut and free of canned chuckles.) In its first season, "M*A*S*H" had shaky ratings. But once it was renewed and given a plum spot following "All in the Family," its viewership spiked; the final episode, in 1983, was watched by roughly half the country's population. It was a case of perfect synchronicity between audience and show, as the series' creators reflected back viewers' Watergate-era distrust of the government. "My rationale with the network was, if you can let Walter Cronkite criticize the country at 6:30, why can't we do it at 8:00?" Mr. Gelbart recalled.

Of course, military sitcoms with rule-breaking heroes had existed before, includ-

'M*A*S*H'

'For the Good of the Outfit'
FX, 3 p.m. tomorrow

ing "Gomer Pyle" and "McHale's Navy." But Hawkeye Pierce was a notably difficult breed of prankster — more Lenny Bruce than Dennis the Menace. A prickly truth-teller whose integrity mingled with a Groucho Marx aggression, the character had a self-righteousness that at times slid into mild sadism. As Jim Wittebols, author of "Watching 'M*A*S*H,' Watching America," points out, as the years passed, the show began to soak up other 70's movements, including feminism, and the nastier undercurrents of Hawkeye's womanizing softened, leaving him a more sentimental figure. But in early episodes like "For the Good of the Outfit," the purity of Hawkeye's rage is rather awe-inspiring. Informed that the government plans to rebuild the village,

complete with the "first soft-serve ice cream stand in Southeast Asia," Mr. Alda responds in a low-voiced fury: "Well, that's terrific. I'm glad. Now what about rebuilding the truth?"

Such a corrosive vision is hard to find these days: the most similar sensibility shows up not on TV but in the cult online comic strip "Get Your War On," where the artist David Rees has used clip art characters of ordinary office workers to rage in Hawkeye-like despair since Sept. 11. "I think the trick now is to do something that's just not part of the noise," Mr. Gelbart said. "All the debate just goes by us, downstream. Nobody seems to convert anybody." He added, "There's a certain arrogance about the people in power today that makes them immune to criticism and satire. And then again, there's the argument Tom Lehrer made: that satire died when Henry Kissinger got the Nobel Peace Prize." □