M*A*S*H: Socially Relevant Comedy
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Abstract: Long hailed as one of the most groundbreaking and politically engaged sitcoms, *M*A*S*H* is a key text from 1970s television’s “turn toward relevance.” Noel Murray, writing in a journalistic style for the popular online criticism site *The A. V. Club*, discusses a distinctive episode from the series to highlight how the show used the past to talk about the present, and how we might look at the program’s legacy on the rising culture wars of the 1980s.

Though we hold the ideal of the free press as sacrosanct in the United States, the supremacy of the First Amendment is sometimes challenged when it comes to television. Music, movies, fine art, and printed material can be produced and distributed independently by anyone who has the means, but there are only so many notches on a television dial and so much space on the broadcasting spectrum, which means that the major broadcasting conglomerates have to be licensed by governmental agencies with the authority to squelch broadcasting they find offensive or seditious—or at least to apply enough pressure that the networks make changes “voluntarily.” The nature of the fight over who has the right (or privilege) to air his or her opinion has changed over the decades, but the fight itself still rages.

Case in point: in 1967, the *San Francisco Chronicle* and CBS Television commissioned a documentary called *Inside North Vietnam*, made by British journalist Felix Greene, which showed the North Vietnamese as bloody but unbowed, and depicted them in a far more human light than any report that was coming out of the U.S. State Department at the time. CBS declined to air the film, but licensed it to the National Educational Television network, the forerunner of PBS. When news leaked that *Inside North Vietnam* was going to be broadcast, a group of congressmen drafted a letter of protest to NET president John White, suggesting that his decision to air “Communist propaganda” made him unfit to serve in a post funded by tax dollars.
Yet even with congressmen threatening legislation, television still began to question the United States’ involvement in Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s—first with detached skepticism, then with outright hostility. By the time U.S. troops drew down in 1975, it would have been hard to find anyone on primetime TV who openly supported the war, outside of maybe Bob Hope. The CBS sitcom *M*A*S*H* (1972–1983) wasn’t explicitly about Vietnam, though like the movie that inspired the show (and the novel that inspired the movie), it did debut while the war was in full swing. *M*A*S*H* used the Korean War as a stage from which to comment on the futility of *all* war, and the inherent madness of military life no matter the era or specific conflict.

The *M*A*S*H* episode “The Interview” (February 24, 1976), which aired at the tail end of the series’ fourth season, confronted the question of whether war has any value head on, via direct-to-the-camera addresses by the show’s main characters framed by a fictional journalist making a wartime documentary. At one point in “The Interview,” the men of the 4077th *M*A*S*H* unit in Korea are asked whether any kind of special medical or technical developments are coming out of the war. Here are their replies:

**Colonel Sherman T. Potter:** Oh, there are some things that get a practical trying out here that maybe wouldn’t with the same speed back home, but when you counterbalance that with the frightful expense, the frightful destruction and loss of life, I don’t think it’s an equal balance.

**Major Frank Burns:** Korea will become a shining example of the American policy of benign military intervention.

**Corporal Max Klinger:** I think it’s the most stupidest thing in the world. You call it a police action back home, right? Over here it’s a war! Police action sounds like we’re over here arresting people. Handing out parking tickets. War is just killin’, that’s all.

As a follow-up, when Colonel Potter is asked if he sees *anything* good coming out of the war, he snaps, “Not a damn thing,” then glances at the camera, not sure whether he should apologize for swearing.

Though “The Interview” is based on an episode of *See It Now* (CBS, 1951–1958) in which Edward R. Murrow interviewed Marines in Korea at Christmastime, it has more in common with the cinema verité documentaries that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. The use of jump cuts, the relaxed tone of the interviewees, and the frankness all convey “1976” more than they convey the early 1950s. “The Interview” would feel right at home on television today, in the age of the mockumentary format. The old colonel’s awkward glance at the camera when he slips and says “damn” is like something out of *The Office.*
Also, while “The Interview” is an atypical *M*A*S*H* episode, it’s still very *M*A*S*H*-like. After the opening credits, a voice informs us that the show will be in black-and-white; oddly, barely fifteen years after color became commonplace on television, an episode in black-and-white was considered an event. Then Clete Roberts—a veteran broadcaster who was an actual war correspondent in the early 1950s—introduces the concept of the mobile surgical hospital and explains that he’s going to share with us his conversations with some of the personnel, while warning that their saltier language might be bleeped. That’s a curious warning on a meta level, given that in nearly every other episode of *M*A*S*H* viewers have seen these people in much more stressful situations than a television interview, and yet they’ve never said anything that had to be bleeped. Even more meta: while the interviewee’s answers are meant to be off the cuff, many of their replies sound unusually quippy, as though they were scripted by a comedy writer.

And the kinds of questions that Clete Roberts asks in “The Interview” aren’t so much the kinds of questions that a Korean War correspondent would ask a *M*A*S*H* unit as they are the kinds of questions that a fan of *M*A*S*H* would ask the show’s characters. Writer-director Larry Gelbart, who helped develop the series and worked on it for the final time with “The Interview,” built the episode through a combination of improvisation and scripting, letting the actors answer questions based on what they thought their characters would say. There’s a distinction between what Harry Morgan would say as Colonel Sherman T. Potter on the TV sitcom *M*A*S*H* in 1976 and what an actual commanding officer of a field hospital in Korea in 1951 would have said during the actual war—especially to a TV reporter. The Korean War was a fascinating conflict: a foreign policy overreach on the part of an America so confident after the triumphs of World War II that its leaders failed to take into account how much they’d drained the military’s resources in the years that immediately followed the surrenders of Germany and Japan. But outside of the occasional regional or historical reference, *M*A*S*H* was never all that concerned with telling true-to-life stories about fighting and doctoring in Korea. After all, this was a show that took eleven years to depict a war that ended in three. So “The Korean War” on *M*A*S*H* became something existential and metaphorical, not actual.

None of the above is meant to denigrate *M*A*S*H*, “The Interview,” or the work of Larry Gelbart—all of which are estimable. It’s only to note that *M*A*S*H* had a different agenda than historical accuracy. It was about skewering authoritarianism, advocating for simple human decency, and exploring the changing roles of women and men, all as seen from the perspective of its own time in the 1970s, not the 1950s.

What also made *M*A*S*H* special was that it had a look and feel unlike any of the other mature sitcoms that became popular in the early 1970s. It wasn’t as warm
and wry as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970–1977) or *The Bob Newhart Show* (CBS, 1972–1978), and it wasn’t as intense as the Norman Lear family of sitcoms such as *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971–1979) and *Maude* (CBS, 1972–1978). *M*A*S*H* was shot on a film studio lot, with no audience, and using a single-camera set-up, more like a feature film. It had a laugh track that the producers often fought to diminish or eliminate—notably, there’s no laugh track in “The Interview.” And while Robert Altman’s 1970 movie featured naturalistic, overlapping dialogue, Gelbart—who honed his chops working for Sid Caesar during TV’s first decade—was more classically showbiz, favoring gags and punchlines.

The cast of *M*A*S*H* was a mix of old Hollywood types and actors who fit more with the 1970s “New Hollywood.” Loretta Swit was off doing a play when this episode was shot, but “The Interview” features the rest of the show’s core players. Alan Alda as surgeon Benjamin “Hawkeye” Pierce became known as the quintessential “sensitive man” in the touchy-feely 1970s, even though his most famous character is a womanizer, and a bit of a jerk. Mike Farrell is much more sensitive as the soft-hearted surgeon B. J. Hunnicutt, self-described in “The Interview” as “a temporarily mis-assigned civilian.” Harry Morgan had been playing grizzled characters for decades in Hollywood genre movies (and on TV’s *Dragnet*) before he took on Colonel Potter, and he positioned the CO as a jaded paternal type, as though he’d wandered in from some old war movie. Larry Linville as Major Burns spoofed paternalistic arrogance, showing how people who are convinced they’re right about everything have been insufferable in every era. William Christopher and Jamie Farr were both steadily employed character actors in the 1960s on television and in movies, and didn’t venture too far from their types as Father Mulcahy and Corporal Klinger—the former meek and kind, the latter brash and earthy. And Gary Burghoff as company clerk Radar O’Reilly was the
lone \textit{M*A*S*H} regular who also appeared in the movie, and had the kind of low-key, quirky presence that Altman loved.

Here are Linville, Alda, Morgan, Farrell, and Burghoff at work, answering on behalf of their characters the question, “What do you miss most from home?”

\textbf{Major Burns:} [Long pause.] Well, my family of course. My wife, my children. . . . They’re my strength! I’m one of those that feels that marriage is the headstone of American society.

\textbf{Captain Pierce:} Pistachio ice cream . . . and bananas. And pancakes, I miss. And bacon frying. I miss the smell of bacon in the morning, waking up to that. It’s a long time since I smelled that.

\textbf{Colonel Potter:} I miss my wife, of course. I miss my son, my daughter-in-law. I have a new baby grandchild, I haven’t seen her, I’d like to. But one of the things I miss the most is people my own age for companionship. I’m old enough to be the father of almost everyone around here, and then some. You just miss being able to sit around and chew the fat with somebody your own age, somebody with your own background. Well, not background, but your own experiences.

\textbf{Captain Hunnicutt:} I’ve got a lot of lost time to make up to my family. The Bay area, San Francisco, specifically Mill Valley, is where I live. That’s where Peg is, and my daughter, Erin. She’s lovely. She squeezes your nose.

\textbf{Corporal O’Reilly:} Well, first thing I want to do is see my mom. And then I got this ’49 Chevy that I’m fixin’ up. A neighbor swapped me it for one of my pregnant sows, y’know . . . Ottumwa, Iowa. Nobody famous ever came from there, except once Eleanor Roosevelt’s car got stalled at our train crossing. Some people heard the screaming and they said, “That sounds just like Eleanor Roosevelt!”

The way Burghoff delivers the punchline of his story (“That sounds just like Eleanor Roosevelt!”) differs from how Linville delivers his (“I’m one of those that feels that marriage is the headstone of American society”). One \textit{sounds} like a punchline; the other sounds more natural and whimsical. Neither is preferable, necessarily, just different. But Burghoff’s performance—or maybe just the way his character was written—gives him the flexibility to make a joke elsewhere in “The Interview” about how whenever the wooden latrines give him slivers, “you really find out who your friends are,” and then later to deliver a heartbreaking monologue about turning away Korean orphans who need medicine and food. In that monologue, Burghoff as Radar also says, “That’s where it’s really at, y’know?”—a bit of slang which adds to the feeling that \textit{M*A*S*H} has its head more in the 1970s than the 1950s.
FIGURE 21.2.
Off-the-cuff comments from Alan Alda's "Hawkeye" Pierce articulate 1970s attitudes about war and military life more so than those of the 1950s.

“The Interview” offers a mix of those poignant monologues and quickie one-liners, all allowing Gelbart to deliver his last M*A*S*H thoughts on war in general and these characters in particular. Klinger gets to give one more shout-out to Tony Packo’s in Toledo, home of “the greatest Hungarian hot dogs.” Hunnicutt gets to express his admiration for the nurses for doing “man’s work” and to describe how on his first day at the 4077th, he performed three amputations before he had his first breakfast. Potter gets to say that his heroes are Abe Lincoln and Harry Truman, and that he won’t take advantage of the opportunity to say hello to his wife and family because “it’s not dignified.” And Father Mulcahy gets to say that he’s looking forward to going home someday to “run the CYO.” He also gets to deliver one of the most memorable speeches in M*A*S*H history:

“When the doctors cut into a patient, and it’s cold, y’know, the way it is now, today . . . steam rises from the body. And the doctor will . . . will warm himself, over the open wound. Could anyone look on that and not feel changed?”

Mulcahy’s talking about doctors warming themselves over open wounds complicates some of the main questions often asked about M*A*S*H, then and now: Is the show harsh enough when it comes to the realities of war? Is it too harsh? Robert Altman used to complain that the TV series had sanitized and cut-up his more anarchic film. (Of course, Altman was also annoyed that his son Mike made more money for writing the show’s theme song “Suicide Is Painless” than Altman ever made for directing the movie.) Sam Fuller, meanwhile, used to say that it was impossible to make any movie or TV show that was truly anti-war, because even the most raw-looking production would become “another god-damn recruitment film” to young men who wanted to prove they could handle
the mayhem. And yet Mulcahy’s speech defies the conventional wisdom about anti-war statements. It’s so matter-of-fact, and melancholy, and not in the least bit attractive or soft.

At one point in “The Interview,” Roberts asks the people of the 4077th if war was ever glamorous to them, and Hawkeye responds that his experiences have shaken him so much that he can’t read Hemingway any more. But Hawkeye also gives a reason why war might have some lasting value when he describes his colleagues as the “finest kind” (a Hawkeye-ism held over from Richard Hooker’s original novel, as well as the movie). And when B.J. is asked whether he’s planning to maintain any of his 4077th friendships once he leaves Korea, he says he’s torn between honoring those relationships and forgetting this whole chapter of his life.

Regular M*A*S*H viewers felt at home at the 4077th, no matter how miserable the characters were. Fans knew every character’s hometown, and may have pined right along with them when they waxed rhapsodic about Ottumwa or Crabapple Cove, even though those same fans were perfectly happy to spend time in Ui-jeongbu week after week—or even night after night once the show was sold into syndication. That reinforces what Hawkeye says in the closing montage of “The Interview”:

A war is like when it rains in New York, and everybody crowds into doorways, y’know? And they all get chummy together. Perfect strangers. The only difference of course is in a war it’s also raining on the other side of the street and the people who are chummy over there are trying to kill the people over here who are chums.

Did M*A*S*H make military life look both glorious and familial, or was the series so irreverent that it bordered on the unpatriotic? It’s worth comparing “The Interview” to the See It Now episode that inspired it, in which Murrow tries once or twice to get the troops to say that their work in Korea is wasteful and pointless, though Murrow never pushes too hard and the Marines never stray off-message. In “The Interview,” by contrast, Hawkeye talks about writing a sexually suggestive letter to Bess Truman, and complains that in the Army “the clothes are green, the food is green . . . except the vegetables,” and says that in a war, to stay sane, “One thing you can do is to get out in the road when the jeeps are coming by and everybody sticks their foot out in front of the jeeps, and the last one to pull his foot in is the sane one.” The character’s contempt is palpable.

After Gelbart left M*A*S*H, the show maintained its excellence by and large, though there were times when the writers couldn’t tell the difference between sophisticated storytelling and smug preachiness, and Alda’s alternately sullen and snappish portrayal of Hawkeye did become distractingly rooted in Me Decade
pop-psychology. And every time the show lost a character and added a new one, it tended to move further away from the farcical elements and broad comedy that Gelbart and his co-producer Gene Reynolds had used in the early seasons to balance the earnestness. (The quips, however, remained. The show was practically a punchline factory in its later years.)

And though \textit{M*A*S*H} became a huge hit and an enduring favorite of TV fans and critics alike, there were times when its continued existence was as precarious as that of \textit{Inside North Vietnam}. In 1974, FCC chairman Richard Wiley, in collaboration with the heads of the major networks, decided to forestall threatened action against the increasing maturity of TV content by drafting an industry-wide policy creating a “family hour” from 8 to 9 p.m. eastern time. The Writers Guild Of America filed a lawsuit, and at trial, Larry Gelbart testified that the “family hour” policy had produced a chilling effect on TV series with adult themes, and that he’d already had four previously approved \textit{M*A*S*H} story proposals sent back for retooling by CBS. The judge on the case ultimately ruled that the “family hour” was a violation of the First Amendment, and was especially appalled when a network executive explained that the policy wasn’t so much designed to safeguard children as it was to protect parents from being embarrassed when they watched these shows with their kids.

So the major TV creators of the 1970s, like Gelbart and Lear, remained free to keep exploring mature themes, and to express a political point of view that was unapologetically leftist, or at least flippant about traditional conservative American values. Their sensibility dominated television in the 1970s, and on into the decades that followed in syndication, and it was so pervasive that an entire generation of right-leaning people grew up feeling marginalized. Subsequent Republican politicians fought back by changing the media market, allowing individuals and corporations to increase their media holdings, and thus making rocking the boat less of a priority.

If Gelbart’s intention was to advance a liberal message via popular entertainment, he succeeded, inasmuch as \textit{M*A*S*H} became a long-running and beloved TV hit. The anti-authoritarian side won key battles in the 1960s and 1970s, not just politically, but in the court of public opinion, where progressive attitudes toward race relations, pacifism, feminism, and charity became entrenched as “the norm,” with anyone standing in opposition automatically cast as a villain or a relic. But once the Vietnam War was over, the Culture War intensified. Gelbart, Lear, and their peers were helped some in their time by the perception that they were the underdogs, speaking out despite government-sponsored attempts to silence them. But massive success changed that perception. Subsequently, conservatives could claim the mantle of the rightfully aggrieved, as they saw themselves portrayed as mean-spirited buffoons (and in primetime, no less). And so, just as they had in
the 1950s, the Right pushed back, reopening a discussion on right and wrong that shows like *All In The Family* and *M*A*S*H* seemed to have settled. In the early days of television, the Right exerted pressure through legislation and oversight. More recently, they’ve emphasized the fundamental American sense of “fairness,” arguing—rightly or wrongly—that the Hawkeyes have had their say, and that now it’s time pass the microphone to Frank Burns.

**Further Reading**


Thompson, Ethan. “Comedy Verité? The Observational Documentary Meets the Televisual Sitcom.” *The Velvet Light Trap* 60 (Fall 2007).