



by Amitai Etzioni

Nice Guys Finish First: Today's Television Heroes

Recently an old movie and TV formula has been reversed—with considerable success. The bad guys have become the good guys, and the good guys are almost too good to be true. The reversal parallels a trend in American society, and therein lies a tale about the media's purported tendency to play up negative or anti-establishment news and views.

In the familiar but fading formula one good guy is cast as the underdog. He runs up against his boss (or his boss's boss), the institution, often the whole world. The world—which may be as small as a police department, city hall, hospital, or a corporation—or as large as the military—is depicted as corrupt, bureaucratic, crazy, or some combination of the above. The underdog is threatened and beaten, but he perseveres. He wins out against all odds and the system.

While the formula may be old and tired, it is far from abandoned. Two recent movies follow it closely. *War Games* pictures a teen-ager against the U.S. military-government establishment. The youngster is a bit of an odd ball; he spends endless hours in a darkened room futzing around with his computer. One day he penetrates an Air Force super-computer. As a result, the computer believes that the U.S. is under nuclear attack and triggers a preprogrammed response in kind. The establishment suspects the kid is a Communist agent and puts its trust in the super-machine. The computer the establishment made takes over, in a nuclear version of Chaplin's *Modern Times*. The youngster, with the help of a computer-wizard hermit and one old general, saves mankind.

In *Blue Thunder*, a group of Fascist-like government officials are planning to introduce into the Los Angeles police force a 1984-style helicopter. It and they can violate one's civil rights by using its surveillance equipment to eavesdrop on conversations and visualize movements inside private homes and offices. The hero,

a maverick police helicopter pilot with Vietnam scars, stops them against all odds. (The movie spawned a TV series with the same name and tenor.)

The theme of these movies is, in sociologists' terminology, alienation. Modern man is said to have been "depersonalized" by a system geared to the needs of the market, technology, and national security. The system ignores the true needs of "the people" in the name of affluence, science, or deterrence. The system is depicted as run by power elites who benefit from it. Lost in the system are the traditional values of small-town America, of community, family, and individuality. From Karl Marx to Max Weber to Ernest Schumacher ("small is beautiful"), giants of social science have advanced the thesis that rationality and modernity and bigness are deeply dehumanizing.

One reason tales of alienation play to full houses is that many Americans feel alienated. In 1984, for instance, more than 74 percent believed that in the U.S. "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer"; 57 percent felt that "most people with power try to take advantage of people like yourself," and so on. Most relevant, only 25 percent believed that you can put a great deal of trust in the people who lead our typical institutions, from the military to churches to corporations.

Newly Lovable Leaders

Now comes "Hill Street Blues," a much acclaimed and popular TV series, as well as the successful series "Hotel," to turn the formula on its head. "Hill Street" almost completely—"Hotel" completely.

The hero of "Hill Street," precinct commander Frank Furillo, is a rather unusual police captain. Forget about gruff, authoritarian, macho Kojaks. Furillo is a sensitive person, like someone who has been successfully psychoanalyzed, or who did not need it in the first place. He is aware of his own feelings and knows how

to work them out constructively. When Furillo reacts to his ex-wife's making out with another cop, he is charged with jealously giving her suitor poor assignments. Furillo neither frowns nor growls; he quickly promises to make amends.

He responds to his underlings' needs, proclivities, and moods—without violating their privacy, sense of autonomy, or dignity. Furillo frequently changes their assignments, taking into account personal differences. When Lieutenant Howard Hunter attempts suicide, Furillo discreetly suggests counselling. When Hunter resists, the captain prods gently but knows when to stop.

Furillo is quite ready to risk his career to fight corruption. But he is not self-righteous when colleagues are caught; he is more distressed than indignant. He is not macho at all, preferring negotiations with a hostage-holding criminal to a shootout. However, when all other options are exhausted, he acts decisively. He also vigilantly observes the civil rights of those in custody; the ACLU could hardly lay a glove on him.

He knows no prejudice. In his command there are women, blacks, Hispanics, all treated equally and as individuals. He deals with gays and gang leaders in the community without paternalism; they are fellow human beings—but without a license to violate the law.

To crown it all, Furillo is married to a beautiful, powerful woman who also works—often in opposition to him. Their relationship, full of sex wrapped in love, is open and durable. Though the season ended with the threat of a separation, it's difficult to believe that their maturity and communications skills won't carry them through. If the rift proves permanent, the situation will be incompatible with the show's theme thus far.

The "Hill Street" leadership is not without blemishes. A touch of the old formula is preserved. The police chief to whom Furillo reports has few of his merits and many of the antagonizing features the alienation formula calls for. He is an arbitrary, manipulative publicity hound. He is, however, a rather minor figure; at the center of the action are Furillo, who brooks little interference from the outside, and his station, a somewhat disorderly but effective world, a bit confused but stocked full of humanity.

"Hotel" is to "Hill Street" what saccharin is to sugar: sweetened *ad nauseum*. The reversed formula is pushed here to extremes. The institution is a fancy hotel, and the authority figure is manager Peter McDermott. He acts as a loving father to the mostly young staff. He never directs them; he suggests gently that they go about their paces. When they err, McDermott does not grow angry or sanctimonious: he takes them for counselling sessions at the bar. He is mindful of the employees' needs. When one of his aides provides a free room to a stranded singer he falls for, McDermott understands. He stands up for an employee accused of child molesting—unfairly it turns out—and for his assistant, said to have bedded a hotel guest. When he ruffles his assistant's feathers by asking her for a date

when a preferred companion stands him up, he is quick to admit his insensitivity and make amends. His security chief in the ritzy hotel is black and an ex-con, Billy Griffin. When he encounters a former prison-mate, who claims Griffin should allow him to rob the hotel, McDermott risks the hotel's reputation to provide Griffin with a chance to prove his mettle. He does.

When a Fascist group organizes a conference in the hotel, McDermott fights for freedom of assembly and then gets the group out without resorting to police or violence.

"Hotel" exceeds "Hill Street" in that the ultimate authority figure, the hotel owner, is also drawn in glowing colors. If McDermott is a father figure, Victoria Cabot is distinctly grandmotherly. Supportive of one and all and never ceasing to smile affectionately, she intervenes in the hotel management rarely, and then only to sweet talk her manager into more good deeds and acts of principle. A young married couple, a bellboy and a desk clerk on different shifts, cannot make it to their home often enough; they avail themselves of an empty hotel room. When they are caught, Cabot asks them not to borrow rooms in the future—but offers them her penthouse while she is on vacation.

The Us Generation

Touches of the new positive formula are found in other places. In "St. Elsewhere," Dr. Donald Westfall, chief administrator of the hospital, provides quiet, thoughtful, sensitive leadership in what is otherwise a disoriented world, more akin to Paddy Chayefsky's *Hospital*. Moreover, as a single parent, he sets a model of how to combine work with good fathering for his teenage daughter and autistic son. When things get out of hand, Westfall first talks them over with his daughter, then with a therapist—right out of some mental health textbook. (A touch of the old is invested in a high-strung, publicity minded surgeon, Dr. Craig. But when push comes to shove, he also turns out to have a heart of gold.)

"Trapper John, MD" once played off a hippie, non-establishment young physician against an uptight head of the emergency room and an establishmentarian administration, with Trapper himself acting as the balancing wheel. In recent seasons, however, the hippie doctor has matured and mellowed, and the men at the top have grown more approachable.

The new formula reaches even such a cliché-ridden low-brow show as "Emerald Point N.A.S." The central figure here is Rear Admiral Tom Mallory, who combines fathering his men with sweetly raising three daughters. Gone are the days when Ben Stein, who studied more TV shows than most, found that on the tube "military men are either irrelevant or bad" (in his *The View from Sunset Boulevard*). Mallory cares about his men at least as much as he does about his daughters. Sample: He knocks himself out to help a subordinate deal with the loss of a man in a training exercise. The series does,

though, succeed in having its cake and eating it. The second most prominent character is Harlan Adams, the head of a "conglomerate," who can alienate the socks off a viewer, even after he has exhausted his six-pack.

In "Something About Amelia," a 1984 TV film about incest, there were three "treating professionals" (a psychologist, a social worker, and a psychiatrist) all sensitive and sensible, effective and gentle. This is a long way from the days when therapists were depicted as masters of vacuous talk, detached from reality, unable to handle their own problems—much less their kids.

Also to the point is that anti-everything "M*A*S*H" retreated from the front lines to the reruns. Launched during the war in Vietnam, "M*A*S*H" expressed its anti-war theme vociferously. War was presented as evil (its victims were frequently innocent villagers—often children) and as absurd ("We patch people up, only to send them back to the war"). In a telling episode, the surgeons removed American shrapnel from Korean villagers on our side of the line. When the surgeons reported the incident, they ran into an orchestrated coverup, censorship of their personal mail, and threats to send them to the front if they didn't withdraw the report.

Flouting Army regulations, medical proprieties, and the rules of etiquette, the series reveled in thumbing its nose at the establishment. In its early years, the main line of confrontation was with Dr. Frank Burns. Burns was everything despicable about the military establishment: insufferably pompous, insensitive, rigid, and unthinkingly pro-war. "M*A*S*H" grew more subdued over the years. Burns was replaced by a subtler, more likable character, and everyone else became less acerbic. But as the age grew less "anti", even a defanged "M*A*S*H" couldn't hold onto its massive appeal.

Revolt against Radicalism

None of this suggests that there was *never* a positive authority figure on TV before—nor that all shows have become lovey-dovey. There were some good guys in charge in times past, but most were—like the unforgettable Marcus Welby, MD—in private practice. Only rarely did we see likable people leading *institutions*. Most important, what constitutes positive authority has changed: how they are much more liberated; sensitive to minorities, women, and civil rights; warm and open; neither macho nor paternalistic.

Meanwhile, out there in the great American society, the memories of Vietnam have been gradually receding, followed by a new wave of more conservative and establishment perspectives. Now, people yearn for less anti-ism, for more positive affirmation. It sometimes takes the form of nostalgia or turning the clock back to an authoritarian, macho world. This is one explanation for the recent call for law-and-order, back-to-basics in education, and the world according to the Moral Majority. At the same time, the quest is also on

Berry's World



"What is it we always say — 'reality distorts TV' — or is it the other way around?"

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for a synthesis between the stability and structure of the old and the boundless permissiveness and withdrawal from commitments of the counterculture and anti-establishment years. While divorce declined in the early 1980s for the first time in twenty years, the marriages that remained were not all traditional; most women now married continue to work outside the home, for example. Religious revival is part traditional, part innovative—there are even female rabbis. In corporations there is a movement to involve workers in management decision making, à la Japan. In short, the new conservatism is oddly liberated.

The media, it seems, are beginning to reflect and contribute to the development of these reconstruction themes. Development of new leadership styles thrives on role models. No social engineer could do much better than the creators of Captain Furillo. And while McDermott's feather-light mode of management may work only in luxury hotels, his style seems less bizarre in today's evolving management world than it would have in, say, the fifties.

Leaders serve as embodiments of institutions. In an anti-age, antagonizing elites added fuel to the alienation generated by institutions. The new breed, should it multiply, may contribute to the rehabilitation of American institutions and how we feel about them. □

Amitai Etzioni is University Professor at the George Washington University and Director of the Center for Policy Research. He draws here on his recent book, An Immodest Agenda: Rebuilding America Before the 21st Century.