

Was M*A*S*H really about Korea?

What part of the culture of the 1970's was M*A*S*H trying to critique and what message were they trying to convey about the culture?

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Part A: Abstract

The Vietnam War is a fascinating topic. There is a wealth of conflicts, conspiracies, and catastrophes to study. The very fact that the US pulled out of the country in defeat is a compelling reason to study the war. The soldiers who returned were not greeted, supported, or respected by the American public, the people they were fighting for. Society left them alone to grieve the war and the situations that occurred there.

Television is a popular form of entertainment. Today, it can be watched commercial free at the viewers' convenience via online streaming sites. It was also popular in the 1960s and 70s as it brought a war from the other side of the globe into the American living room. The television sitcoms of this period are still available thanks to DVD releases and a wide variety of cable channels.

I have used television as a distraction. This distraction allows me, for one hour, to enter into another world. I am the neighbor, the sister, the best friend as I experience life with the characters of the show I am watching. This can medium and experience can have a profound impact on the way we think about and interact with culture. For this reason, I am curious. Why would the citizens of the 1970s watch the television show M*A*S*H? It is full of irreverent humor about a war that the US is obviously losing. By the time the show began, the war was in a downward spiral and the overexposed American public knew this through the wonders of broadcast news programs.

The questions and implications this show, and the culture it was placed in, raise fascinate me. Was M*A*S*H really about Korea, even though the show begins while the US is in an obvious conflict in Vietnam? If M*A*S*H was about Vietnam, and I think it was, was it trying to convey a specific message about the culture. What is the nature of that message? What part of the culture, specifically is studied and what morals or lessons are they trying to teach us? Lastly, is there any way to study the impact this show had on its culture.

Vietnam is still a gaping wound in the history of our country. Our current engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan is often compared to it. Vietnam is still with us in many ways, very little closure has occurred, and people are still feeling the effects. I believe that my questions are still relevant. Not only is the war a part of our lives but the show is as well. I was born 5 years after the show ended and yet I still know what it is. I believe that there must be something hidden just beneath the surface to give it that much enduring value. I hope to find what is hiding there and see if it can bring closure to the wound that is Vietnam.

Through a simultaneous qualitative analysis of the definitive elements of the 1970s and the television show's story lines, I hope to find answers to my questions. Qualitative research allows for document analysis and detailed study of a particular culture. I will also use normative methods to look at and understand conceptual ideas that may be conveyed in the show. Television seems to allude to a world that should be and is not always an accurate portrayal of the way the world is. In order to understand this balance and answer my question I need to study the culture. I need

to know where the intersections occur between the large story arches of the show and the social history of the 1970s.

These particular methodologies allow me to interact and engage with the culture and society from decades past. They also provide means for the finding the details that are important for drawing connections from a large variety of sources and information. I want to embed myself as much as possible until this culture and understand it to the best of my ability. I feel that qualitative and normative methods of research provide the best way to do that, in this particular situation.

This is a very personal study for me. I want to engage and be an active participant as I allow the research to guide my conclusions and study. I also care about war and the affect it has on people. I am fascinated by the role of television in our lives and its power to affect us. This project could play a significant role in the way we encounter television and its impact on history. I am hopeful that it will make contributions and thoughtful discussion to both the discipline of history and media communication. I would like to present this research at a conference outside the university and pursue publications in research journals in both fields of study. I am hopeful that this will be a thought-provoking study to build dialogue on the role of television in our lives.

I love theology and history. I am not sure how the two will interact and relate in my future. However, I have found that projects such as these are formative and biographical. Perhaps my answers will come from this study. I believe that my interest in the practical applications of theology will also find a way into my

research, even if only at the level of my own personal reflection. I hope that the work that I do here will not only influence the academic divisions that it concerns but will also prepare for life after IWU. As I head into the world of seminary, tough questions about war and peace will be broached. I will also be asked to consider the role of media culture in the church. This project, while touching on a painful subject in our nation's history, can also prepare me to tackle these tough questions.

Part B: Summary Review of Pertinent Background and Context

The Vietnam War era is recognized as conflict between citizens and government, media and government, and the soldiers and the civilians of the United States. It was a time of intense emotion, psychological trauma, and critical opinions. Literature regarding Vietnam is broad and expansive. M*A*S*H was a television show that began during the last stages of the Vietnam conflict in 1972. Many people believe that M*A*S*H is a show about Korea and on the surface that is how it appears. However, it could also be argued that M*A*S*H was an intentional critique of the culture. In order to see if there is a correlation between the two it is necessary to study the social and media history of the Vietnam War.

The social history of Vietnam is a specific branch of historical research. It studies the perceptions of people and the implications of those perceptions. There are an impressive number of portrayals of the Vietnam War. Authors describe Vietnam as an unwinnable war¹, a series of divisive conflicts², as a series of domestic

¹ John Prados. *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009)

policies³, and as an Anti-War movement⁴. Several books discuss the portrayal of the Vietnam War in literature and film⁵. The authors analyze these depictions based on their historical accuracy and impact on the audience⁶.

Research into the social history revealed the strong power both popular culture and news media had on people's perceptions. As stated above, thorough research exists on the topics of Hollywood and popular culture, as part of the social history. News media played a large role in shaping people's perceptions and extensive research is available in this area⁷. Broadcast journalism seems to play a significant role because of the nature of the conflict between the government and the press. Most researchers agree that the government and the press disagreed about the stories presented, regarding the Vietnam War⁸. However, one researcher believes

² Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin. *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960's*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007)

³ Melvin Small. *At the Water's Edge: American Politics and the Vietnam War*. (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publishers, 2005)

⁴ Tom Wells. *The War Within: America's Battle over Vietnam*. (Lincoln: iUniverse, Inc., 2005)

⁵ Albert Auster and Leonard Quart. *How the War was Remembered: Hollywood and Vietnam*. (New York: Praeger, 1998). Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud. *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War and American Film*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990). Mark Taylor. *The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film*. (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2003).

⁶ Michael Anderegg. *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991). And Maureen Ryan. *The Other Side of Grief: The Home Front and the Aftermath in American Narratives of the Vietnam War*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008).

⁷ Daniel C. Hallin. *The "Uncensored War:" The Media and Vietnam*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) and Melvin Small. *Covering Dissent: The Media and the Anti-Vietnam War Movement*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994) are two examples of the work done in this area.

⁸ Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini. *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), William M. Hammond. *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media 1962-1968*. (Washington: Center of Military History, 1988), William M. Hammond. *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War*. (Lawrence University Press of Kansas, 1998), and William Prochnau. *Once Upon a Distant War: David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, Peter Arnett—Young War Correspondents and Their Early Vietnam Battles*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

that the government agenda is the one displayed in the broadcast portrayals of Vietnam⁹.

Although considerable and thorough research exists on historic and broadcast portrayals, few researchers have studied the direct role of story. Story is being considered here as a branch of media communication. Hollywood used literature and film to depict the conflicts of war and help the nation cope with the eventual defeat, as stated previously. Biographical and historical retellings are an accepted medium for this branch of media, as well¹⁰. The television show *M*A*S*H* became popular during the latter years of the war and it depicts an Army surgical hospital. It is based on a book, by the same name, about the experience of three Army surgeons in the Korean War¹¹. The impact of *M*A*S*H* on people's perceptions of the war has not been studied, even though it is a satirical representation of War, during a time of War¹².

Stories play a role in shaping people's perceptions of the world around them. There is no research on the nature and implications of that role with the Vietnam War and the television show *M*A*S*H*. One study exists on the relationship between culture and the show, but there is no mention, in the book, of the impact of the show

⁹ Clarence R. Wyatt. *Paper Soldiers: The American Press and the Vietnam War*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993)

¹⁰ Tom Brokaw. *Boom! About the Sixties: What Happened, How it Shaped Today, Lessons for Tomorrow*. (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2008), Frederick Downs. *The Killing Zone: My Life in the Vietnam War*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), Heonik Kwon. *Ghosts of War in Vietnam*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), Donna Moreau. *Waiting Wives: The Story of Schilling Manor, Home Front to the Vietnam War*. (New York: Atria Books, 2005), and Christopher Ronnau. *Blood Trails: The Diary of a Foot Soldier in Vietnam*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006).

¹¹ Richard Hooker. *MASH: A Novel about Three Army Doctors*. (New York: William Morrow, Inc., 1968).

¹² Alan Alda, et al. *M*A*S*H*. Seasons 1-4. Produced by Gene Reynolds and Larry Gelbart. (Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2008).

on culture¹³. As a satire, M*A*S*H is commenting on some form of the culture. The question remains as to what aspect of the culture is the show analyzing and what message about the culture was the show trying to convey.

Part C: Working Bibliography

Social History of Vietnam

Anderegg, Michael, ed., *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991.

Anderegg and his contributing authors seek to portray the unique relationship between the Vietnam War and its visual representations. The essays compiled here are a chronologically organized qualitative analysis of the depiction of the Vietnam War in American film. *Inventing Vietnam* is significant to my research because it shows the broad range of film representations.

Auster, Albert, and Leonard Quart. *How the War was Remembered: Hollywood and Vietnam*. New York: Praeger, 1998.

Albert Auster writes a book that traces the broad range of films regarding the Vietnam conflict from the mid-1950's to the 1980's. This book is a qualitative analysis of the concrete details of the plot and cinematography of each film studied. The focus of film and its relation to the historical aspects of Vietnam are significant to my project because the author seeks to prove that the films have only scratched the surface of the true battle in Vietnam.

Dittmar, Linda, ed., and Gene Michaud, ed. *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War and American Film*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990.

From Hanoi to Hollywood is an anthology of essays that seek to provide a new way of seeing film representations of the Vietnam conflict. The goal of the essays is to encourage a fuller understanding of the past and its relationship to positive future action. The anthology is a collection of critical analyses of the historical accuracy of films released about the Vietnam War era and the ramifications they had on peoples' perceptions about the war. The essays are significant for my research because they

¹³ James H. Wittebols. *Watching M*A*S*H, Watching America: A Social History of the 1972-1983 Television Series*. (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1998).

talk about the power of images to distort, displace, and destroy knowledge of history.

Isserman, Maurice and Michael Kazin. *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960's*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Isserman and Kazin use qualitative forms of research to present a comprehensive, academic history of the many tensions of the 1960's. Their section on the Vietnam War uses an extensive amount of documents and personal interviews to show the many facets of the conflict and its effect on America. This is relevant background information that is helpful for continuing research on the role of story in shaping people's perceptions of the Vietnam conflict.

Prados, John. *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009.

John Prados seeks to provide a fresh analysis of the Vietnam War and its possible similarities to the present day conflict in Iraq. His qualitative research is done through documentary study (some of which are only recently declassified), personal interviews with people personally involved in the conflict on political, military, and civilian levels, and a study of the literature on Vietnam. This book is relevant to my research because it is a comprehensive background on the Vietnam War and its impact on the people involved.

Small, Melvin. *At the Water's Edge: American Politics and the Vietnam War*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publishers, 2005

This book provides an authoritative and qualitative study of the domestic policies of the Vietnam War. Small shows the effect of the policies on US Foreign policy and the view of war by the American people. This book is relevant to my research because it helps to illuminate the conflict within the government regarding Vietnam and the long-term implications of the conflict.

Taylor, Mark. *The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2003.

Mark Taylor provides a critical and qualitative analysis of what he perceives to be the key accounts of the Vietnam War in history, literature, and film. His purpose is to explore the nature of the truth conveyed in these mediums and the wide variety of interpretations of the conflict that have emerged. This study is significant to my research because it shows the broad nature of representations on the War and the impact these representations had on the perceptions of the American people.

Wells, Tom. *The War Within: America's Battle over Vietnam*. Lincoln: iUniverse, Inc., 2005.

Tom Wells provides an extensive, narrative account of the battle between citizens and the American government over America's involvement in Vietnam. Wells conducts a qualitative study through interviews with Anti-War activists and senior government officials and evaluation of documents from both sides. This research is significant because it shows the dynamic nature of the conflict over Vietnam and the personal nature of the emotions involved.

Role of Media

Hallin, Daniel C., and Paolo Mancini. *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Hallin and Mancini display the dimensions of differentiation between media systems and the political constructs that help them evolve. Their book proves this by displaying their conclusions from their qualitative survey and quantitative interviews of media institutions in 18 Western European and North American democracies. The book provides necessary and relevant background information about the circulatory relationship between media and politics.

Hallin, Daniel C. *The "Uncensored War:" The Media and Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

Daniel Hallin seeks to prove the role of both news media and myth in destabilizing the American public's views on the Vietnam War. These myths are from both popular culture and tales from previous wars. The qualitative research presented here is a discussion on conclusions reached through documentary research and personal interviews. This book is significant because it shows the connection between news media and story to influence public perception.

Hammond, William M. *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*. Washington: Center of Military History, 1988.

Public Affairs examines the tension and controversy that developed as the Vietnam War lengthened and reporters began to collect information, as part of their daily work. The book interprets the role of the press during the war through a qualitative study of the Army and Defense Department Records. It is significant to my research because it shows the tension between news media and military and the effect on the American public.

-----, *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998.

This book seeks to accurately show the escalation in tension between military and media that occurred throughout the course of the Vietnam War. Hammond uses a variety of government documents, several in-depth interviews, and an informed study of the war coverage by the press to discuss this with historical accuracy. This source is significant to my research because it seeks to accurately display the tension between the government and the media during the war.

Landers, James. *The Weekly War: Newsmagazines and Vietnam*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004.

The Newsmagazines worked as a supplementary and complimentary news outlet to the nationally syndicated television newscasts. They also followed the emotional reaction of the American public by interpreting the significance of the news. James Landers proves these two theses with extensive qualitative research

through a study of the three main weekly newsmagazines and their stories released during the course of the Vietnam War. This is extremely significant to my research because I am studying the weekly events of 1972-1975, through weekly newsmagazines, and see the correlation between them and the viewing of M*A*S*H in American homes.

Prochnau, William. *Once Upon a Distant War: David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, Peter Arnett – Young War Correspondents and Their Early Vietnam Battles*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

In this book, William Prochnau, seeks to tell the story of three young reporters and the early coverage of the Vietnam War. Prochnau tells these stories through a qualitative study of letters, journals, and extensive personal interviews. This book is significant because it shows the impact of the War on the reporters. The war affected more than the public or the government, it also helped to form the opinions of those who reported the news.

Small, Melvin. *Covering Dissent: The Media and the Anti-Vietnam War Movement*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994.

Melvin Small shows the power of the media in the Anti-War movement in this book by proving that the media control what information is conveyed and how the American people perceive it. Small concentrates on major news outlets, headline stories, and wire reports in this qualitative study because he deems them the most influential in shaping public opinion. This is relevant background information because it shows the power of the media and the emotional tension of the anti-war movement.

Wyatt, Clarence R. *Paper Soldiers: The American Press and the Vietnam War*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Clarence R. Wyatt goes against the mold and seeks to prove that the government intentionally manipulated the press to convey the government's agenda for all media coverage of Vietnam. He does a thorough examination of 25 years worth of news coverage and military, government, and private documents regarding

America's involvement in Vietnam. This is relevant to my research because it conveys the opposite opinion of most books that cover this topic. He is able to prove it but it is a lose argument with many logical holes. The author's purpose is also significant because he emphasizes the importance of knowing the true story of Vietnam since the remnants of the War are still with us today.

Role of Story

Alda, Alan, Wayne Rogers, McLean Stevenson, Loretta Switm Larry Linville, Gary Burghoff. *M*A*S*H*. Seasons 1-4. Produced by Gene Reynolds and Larry Gelbart. Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2008.

*M*A*S*H* is a television show about a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital in the Korean War. The show originally aired from 1972-1983 and alluded to the Vietnam War and other cultural conflicts of the day. I will only use seasons 1-4 because they originally aired during the conflict in Vietnam. The nature of the show changes after the US pulls out of Vietnam.

Apel, Otto F. and Pat Apel. *MASH: An Army Surgeon in Korea*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998.

This book is a biographical account of the life of an army surgeon in Korea. The book is told in memoir format and details the triumphs and tragedies of Dr. Apel's 10 months as a surgeon in Korea. This is relevant to my study because he was an advisor to the writers of the television show *M*A*S*H*.

Brokaw, Tom. *Boom! About the Sixties: What Happened, How It Shaped Today, Lessons for Tomorrow*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2008.

In this book, Tom Brokaw combines his personal recollections and reflections on the greater 1960's era with personal interviews. Brokaw is able to prove the thesis stated in his subtitle by talking with the people who influenced the emotion and the controversy of the time. The book is relevant to my research because several of the stories Brokaw uses talk about the influence of the Vietnam War on American culture. Brokaw also shows the way that stories can be used to present truth.

Downs, Frederick. *The Killing Zone: My Life in the Vietnam War*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978.

This book is the journal of an infantryman in Vietnam in order to combat negative views of soldiers in the US. He is seeking to acquaint Americans with the day-to-day reality of life as a soldier in Vietnam. Downs' story is relevant to my research because it shows the power of story to confront and shape perception. It also shows the healing power of story in the lives of the author and the audience.

Hooker, Richard. *MASH: A Novel about Three Army Doctors*. New York: William Morrow, Inc., 1968.

This is a novelization of true stories from the Korean War. Hooker uses his own stories and those of two of his friends to convey the story of the doctors of the Korean War. The novel inspired the movie that inspired the television show. The book is relevant to my research because it shows the power of story while also showing the origins of the television show that is the basis of my research.

Kwon, Heonik. *Ghosts of War in Vietnam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Kwon tells the story of the Vietnamese experience and memory of the War through tales of the dead. He tells a cultural history of the war through the cultural rites, practices, and understanding of the dead souls and their experience with the war. Kwon's work is a qualitative study of cultural structures and literature on the impact of the war on the Vietnamese people. It is relevant to my study because it shows the impact of the war on the Vietnamese people and the use of story to help cope with the reality of the war.

Moreau, Donna. *Waiting Wives: The Story of Schilling Manor, Home Front to the Vietnam War*. New York: Atria Books, 2005.

Waiting Wives tells the story of military wives and children who called an old Kansas Air Force base home for the duration of the Vietnam conflict. The author bases the book on her own recollections, personal interviews, and government documents about the place known as Schilling Manor. The stories told here are relevant because they show the impact of the war on families at home. It is also a

therapeutic measure for the author, which helps to prove my thesis on the power of story.

Ronnau, Christopher. *Blood Trails: The Diary of a Foot Soldier in Vietnam*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2006.

This book is the direct combat diary of Christopher Ronnau's time as a foot soldier in Vietnam. He wants to share the pride he feels from his service. This book is a window for those who have not experienced the trials of war and a reminder for those who have forgotten their time in Vietnam. This book is significant from other biographical accounts because he is still proud of his service and willing to admit the shortcomings of his younger self.

Ryan, Maureen. *The Other Side of Grief: The Home Front and the Aftermath in American Narratives of the Vietnam War*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008.

Ryan offers a commentary on the various narratives—both fiction and non-fiction—that emerged about the Vietnam War during and immediately after the conflict. Ryan is seeking to bring closure to those who experienced the war and its abrupt departure from American news and culture. She also seeks to remind Americans a generation removed from the war of the reality of the conflict at home and in Southeast Asia. This book is a relevant critique of the literature available about the Vietnam War that will be useful for my research.

Wittebols, James H. *Watching M*A*S*H, Watching America: A Social History of the 1972-1983 Television Series*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1998.

As stated in the title, this book is an analysis of the impact of the television show M*A*S*H on the people that watched it. Wittebols does a qualitative analysis of the show and its relationship to the time in which it was produced. It is extremely relevant to my study because it is the only research I have found, thus far, that studies the relationship between the show and the culture of the 1970's.

Part D: Preliminary Reflections on Faith and Scholarship

I have come to a point where it is hard to separate my faith from what I do in the academic realm. My natural interest in theology and biblical studies were a catalyst in this process. War is an especially tough topic to consider outside the context of my faith. I struggle to walk the line between complete pacifism and believing in the Just War theory. I have grappled with the situation in Iraq and its connections to Vietnam. My faith will influence the way that I work through my research.

I believe that this project can be a formative experience. My beliefs have changed my perception of war and suffering. They have also fueled an intense passion for justice. Ultimately, I hope that this project has redeeming value for the Vietnam era. I would like to show that something good and enjoyable came along in the midst of despair and defeat. I am hopeful that my faith will influence and enhance this research to make it valuable and effective.

Part E: Evaluation Process

Semester One: Spring 2010

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| 1.) Thesis/Problem/Question Development | 25% |
| 2.) Information Seeking/Selecting and Evaluating | 35% |
| 3.) Outline of Paper | 30% |
| 4.) Meetings Every Three or Four Weeks on Progress | 10% |

Semester Two: Fall 2011

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| 1.) Thesis/Problem/Question | 5% |
| 2.) Information Seeking/Selecting and Evaluating | 25% |
| 3.) Analysis | 25% |
| 4.) Synthesis | 25% |
| 5.) Documentation | 10% |
| 6.) Presentation (Celebration of Scholarship: Spring 2011) | 10% |