

***12 O'Clock High* and the Image of American Air Power, 1946-1967**

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The image was powerful and infamous: Slim Pickens, rodeo performer and star of numerous film and television Westerns, straddles a giant H-Bomb and, with Stetson in hand, rides it to earth and to doomsday. Here was the essence of Stanley Kubrick's film *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), a dark satire on the insanity of a world that could produce a doctrine of Armageddon and, without irony, reduce it to the acronym "MAD" (Mutually Assured Destruction). While provocative, Kubrick's film was merely the "most notorious chapter in this period's assault on the image of air power."¹ With origins in the era of interwar isolationism, and expressed via print media as well as early cinema, this image asserted that American air power provided protection, deterred potential aggressors and, if necessary, would deliver victory when war came. In the eyes of many strategists, this image was affirmed by the events and experiences of World War II, a conflict that saw American air force commanders loudly proclaim faith in the bomber's ability to secure victory through the *precise* delivery of destruction. These were the ideas celebrated in wartime propaganda and, with some subtle revisions and refinements, post-war cinema, from *Air Force* (1943) to *A Gathering of Eagles* (1963).

By the early 1960s, however, as Cold War tensions increased, this image came under increasing criticism—hence *Dr. Strangelove*. Hence, too, Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22* (1961), adapted as a film in 1970, and John Hersey's *The War Lover* (1959), released in cinemas in 1962. Yet amidst these critiques, one prominent cultural product did seek to sustain a defense of American Air Power: the Fox Television/QM Productions series *12 O'Clock High* (ABC, 1964-67).² Based upon a novel (1948) and popular feature film (1949) of the same name, the television series first aired just eight months after Kubrick released *Dr. Strangelove*.³

Set at an American bomber base in World War II England, and focused on the officers and enlisted men of the fictional 918th Bomb Group, *12 O'Clock High* was partly inspired by a contemporary 1940s nostalgia, seen most clearly in another Fox production, *The Longest Day* (1962); it ran for three seasons on ABC before cancellation in January 1967.

This chapter examines the origins of the television series, paying close attention to its place within the visual culture of American Air Power. I argue that it sought to reclaim and reinstate an “old” image of Air Power as a means of countering the critiques provided by the likes of Kubrick, Heller, and Hersey. However, the chapter also shows that this act of reclamation was doomed to fail because the “old” image no longer accommodated the needs of the moment. Nineteen sixty-four was not 1949, and the world of the television series was not that of the earlier film. Indeed, the image of American Air Power had been long since undermined, not just by Slim Pickens, but also by the political and military events that had shaped Kubrick’s satirical assault: the Cold War, the war in Korea, and especially the Cuban Missile Crisis. The escalating conflict in Vietnam provided a final blow, ensuring that war in the azure was seen in a radically different light. Thus, when the first episode of *12 O'Clock High* aired in September 1964, just one month after the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, its days were already numbered.

World War II and the Visual Culture of American Air Power

According to historian Michael Sherry, in the aftermath of World War I, and in order to demonstrate the significance of military aviation, American Air Power advocates developed a revolutionary vision of strategic bombing. Drawing upon ideas then being discussed by General Giulio Douhet in Italy and Marshal Hugh Trenchard in Britain, this vision—most famously articulated in the United States by General William “Billy” Mitchell—declared that Air Power offered the only means through which to secure the territorial integrity of the western hemisphere, as it was based upon a military technology, the bomber, which was powerfully

destructive, but also attractively progressive and affordable (an important concern during the Depression). If war came, Mitchell said, this technology offered the means to deliver an organized campaign of bombing designed to cripple an enemy's industrial infrastructure and thus secure strategic victory.⁴ In American Air Power doctrine, then, the bomber quickly accommodated itself to a dynamic and largely unresolved tension: it was a machine of scalpel-like precision *and* the delivery vehicle of overwhelming destructive power, the harbinger of Armageddon. By the 1940s, this “Jekyll and Hyde” image had emerged as a potent influence on popular conceptions of Air Power in the United States.⁵

American entry into World War II provided the perfect opportunity for senior air force commanders, all of whom were Mitchell disciples, to implement this doctrine. For these so-called “Bomber Barons”—General Henry “Hap” Arnold, General Ira Eaker, General Carl “Tooe” Spaatz, General Jimmy Doolittle—the role of the bomber was to deliver, in daylight, *precision* strikes on the “choke” points of industrial infrastructure. This idea would be most clearly realized in the “Schweinfurt Raids” of August-October 1943 during which the Eighth Air Force of the United States Army Air Force (USAAF)—the organization responsible for the American contribution to the Allied strategic bombing campaign—targeted German ball-bearing manufacturing plants (because no military machine can run without ball-bearings). In later raids, the Eighth Air Force would similarly attack German oil refineries.⁶

This concept of Air Power quickly secured a prominent position in American popular culture. Indeed, “Hap” Arnold, who commanded the USAAF throughout the war, and Ira Eaker, in charge of the Eighth Air Force until January 1944, were both more than happy to exploit their contacts among American publishers and press to communicate their visionary agenda (Eaker was a graduate in Journalism).⁷ As a result, even one of the most popular novelists of the Depression, John Steinbeck, wrote in support of the Eighth Air Force.⁸ As the war continued, Arnold and Eaker also enlisted help from those involved in a communications

technology of the same vintage as military air power: cinema.⁹ Two of the most successful propaganda films of World War II confirm the point: *Air Force* (1943), directed by aviation enthusiast Howard Hawks, and prompted by an idea of General Arnold's, and *The Memphis Belle* (1944), directed by William Wyler, who was fresh from the success of 1942's pro-interventionist *Mrs. Miniver*. With enthusiastic Air Force support, both films celebrated the American bomber, specifically the B-17, the aircraft central to the Allied strategic bombing campaign in Europe.

Following victory in 1945, and after the US Strategic Bombing Survey (commissioned by Arnold) fell short of declaring that the Allied air campaign had been *decisive*, there were several further cinematic efforts supportive of strategic bombing. *Command Decision* (1948), directed by Sam Wood, and starring Clark Gable, is a case in point. Based on a play and then novel authored by William Wister Haines, the film tells the story of Eighth Air Force General Dennis (Gable), and his battle to destroy German jet-manufacturing plants in the face of resistance from congressmen concerned by the "cost" in men and machines. As far as Dennis is concerned, and with a clear nod to the ideas of Billy Mitchell, strategic bombing provides the only means to eradicate the threat posed by these new jet aircraft, and thus win the war and save lives. For Gable, this film had personal significance: he had flown five missions as a gunner with the Eighth Air Force in order to get material for an Air Force recruitment film (*Combat America*).¹⁰

Similar in style and content, but more powerful in delivery, was Daryl Zanuck and Henry King's *12 O'Clock High* (1949). Based upon the novel published a year earlier by Eighth Air Force veterans Sy Bartlett and Beirne Lay, Jr., this film provided yet another robust representation of the importance of strategic bombing.¹¹ The story centers on General Frank Savage, tasked with turning around the performance and morale of the 918th Bomb Group (BG), based at an imaginary East Anglian airfield—Archbury. The commanding officer of the

918th is suffering from combat exhaustion, a fact demonstrated, says the film, by his increasing caution and unwillingness to risk the lives of his men. In contrast, Savage, played by Gregory Peck, is a motivated and forceful disciplinarian. He quickly imposes himself on his subordinates and converts the 918th from a hard-luck outfit to a hard-hitting one. Throughout, the film makes clear that Savage is no cold and calculating killer, but a soldier with a job to do. Indeed, just like Gable's General Dennis, he seeks to save lives through the resolute prosecution of the war.

While audiences warmly received these cinematic visions of World War II Air Power, they were predicated nonetheless upon an idea of the bomber's purpose and potential already "old" by 1949. Even the format of *12 O'Clock High* asserts this point. The film opens with scenes of a derelict American airfield somewhere in the English countryside (scenes partly inspired by the opening frames of Anthony Asquith's 1945 production *Way to the Stars*). As Robert Wohl has noted, this "atmosphere of nostalgia" ensures that "the past is now past and can be revisited only in fond memory."¹² Similar nostalgia for old certainties was even more apparent in Otto Preminger's 1955 picture, *The Court Martial of Billy Mitchell*, which revisited Mitchell's interwar fall from grace due to his strident attachment to the idea of strategic bombing. To be sure, the courtroom drama was engaging, but a decade after Hiroshima the debate between Mitchell and the Army "Top Brass" over the destructive potential of bombing looked rather dated.

Updating the Image of Air Power in the Cold War

Aware that the earlier image of Air Power had lost its force, General Curtis LeMay—who became head of the newly created Strategic Air Command (SAC) in the same year *Command Decision* was released—was keen to update it for the nuclear age. For LeMay, an Eighth Air Force veteran who earned his reputation directing operations in the Pacific Theater,

the best way to do this was by emphasizing that at the heart of SAC lay the idea of calm command and control. SAC, in short, were not the Horsemen of the Apocalypse, but the guardians of global peace. Enter the so-called “SAC Trilogy,” a series of films celebrating Air Force professionalism and procedures.¹³

The first of this trilogy, directed by Anthony Mann, and aptly titled *Strategic Air Command* (1955), was inspired by one of the most powerful actors in postwar Hollywood, a man committed by both politics and personal experience to the doctrine of strategic bombing—Jimmy Stewart. Stewart had flown twenty missions as a wartime officer in the Eighth Air Force and, like LeMay, was a personal friend of Beirne Lay, the co-author of both the novel and film versions of *12 O’Clock High*.¹⁴ In conversation with Lay, Stewart suggested the idea for a film about a World War II veteran and Air Force Reserve Officer recalled to active duty in order to help SAC meet the ever-growing demands on its manpower and mission. What followed was a screenplay along just these lines. Stewart plays Dutch Holland, World War II bomber pilot and baseball legend. Set six years after the war’s end, we see Dutch recalled to service by a wartime buddy in need of “mature” leaders to help fulfil SAC’s mission. Dutch is reluctant; he is recently married and enjoying life as a peacetime ball-player. But duty calls, and he returns to uniform. Of special interest is the way General Hawkes (clearly modelled on LeMay) wins Dutch over to military service. With very little subtlety, the General tells anyone who will listen why SAC exists: “we’re here,” he informs Stewart, to “to stop a war from starting.” The other two constituents of the “SAC Trilogy”—*Bombers B-52* (1957), directed by Gordon Douglas, and *A Gathering of Eagles* (1963), directed by Delbet Mann—address similar themes, and all three pictures involved either one or more of the Bartlett/Lay *12 O’Clock High* team.

However, although intended to revise the image of Air Power for the nuclear age, even the SAC Trilogy became dated as real world events altered the context in which Americans understood the role and rationale of the bomber. From the Soviet testing of an atom bomb in

1949, to the fears of nuclear escalation that accompanied the Korean War, contemporary events threatened to expose the bomber for what it really was—a destroyer.¹⁵ And then came two incidents that threatened to undermine the very role and reputation of SAC. First, the Gary Powers controversy of May 1960 (when the Soviet Union shot down a CIA spy plane) raised serious questions about whether or not, in the event of hostilities, SAC aircraft would actually be able to penetrate Soviet air space. Second, the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 produced significant public concern about the threat of nuclear holocaust, and about the controls in place to ensure the world could not be annihilated by accident or error. Within the context of these two incidents, the image of Air Power became the subject of a profound challenge.

Take, for instance, Philip Leacock's 1962 picture *The War Lover*, which depicts the B-17 as the weapon of choice for a psychotic bomber pilot—played in the film with charisma and menace by Steve McQueen—who loved war so much that it provided a sexual thrill. For this pilot, and in a perverse twist on the logic of General Frank Savage, bombing is a “job,” but one which he likes (in one scene he whoops with joy after being given the reconnaissance photographs recording his most recent “work”). John Hersey, of course, was already famous by this point for revealing the horrors of atomic destruction in *Hiroshima* (1945). Elsewhere, Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22*, published a year before *The War Lover*, offered a biting satire on war and the various degrees of madness that it promotes, demands, and sustains. As such, it provided a diametrically opposed image of Air Power to that prevalent in post-war cinema. As Steve Call succinctly explains: “[i]f *The War Lover* is a photographic negative of *12 O'Clock High*, *Catch-22* is its demented nightmare version.”¹⁶

The most celebrated critique of Air Power in this era was Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove*. Instead of LeMay-inspired General Castle chomping on his cigars as he delivers yet another pronouncement on the absolute necessity of SAC, we have (with a rather different hint of

LeMay influence) General Buck Turgidson (George C. Scott) and General Jack Ripper (Sterling Hayden). The former is philistine, delusional and occasionally manic when contemplating the destructive power of the B-52, one of which has “gone rogue” and is headed for Russia to deliver the “bomb.” The latter dispatches said bomber (and several others) after being consumed by the paranoid obsession that communist infiltrators have “polluted his bodily essence.” We are a long way here from the idea of calm command and control that dominates *Strategic Air Command* and *A Gathering of Eagles*.

Such, then, was the image of Air Power offered in visual culture by the early 1960s. From the propaganda platitudes of *Air Force* to the blunt politics and patriotism of the SAC Trilogy, advocates of American Air Power used visual culture as a means to secure popular support for their mission. However, the sharp and satirical critiques of Hersey, Heller, and Kubrick, as well as the Cold War tensions of the moment, dealt their efforts a powerful blow by the sharp and satirical critiques of Hersey, Heller, and Kubrick, as well as by the Cold War tensions of the moment. Combined, these “real” and “reel” events ensured that by the early 1960s, and on the “eve of America’s most controversial war [Vietnam], air power had experienced a rapid fall from grace in the eyes of the American public.”¹⁷

***12 O’Clock High* and the Resurrection of Air Power**

Steve Call concludes his insightful examination of the ways in which Air Power has been sold to the American public with this “fall from grace.” In cinematic terms, such a conclusion seems apt. Yet to conclude here also neglects an important development in the audio-visual canon of Air Power. For if American cinema largely abandoned the doctrine of strategic bombing in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis and *Dr Strangelove*, one American *television* series embraced it. The series was *12 O’Clock High*.

The origins of the series have been well discussed by Alan Duffin and Paul Matheis in their exhaustive study of the various incarnations of *12 O'Clock High*.¹⁸ As they explain, by 1951, movie theaters were closing as the sale of television sets soared—ticket sales were down, audiences had declined, and profits had fallen. In an attempt to respond to this challenge movie studios tried new and expensive experiments, such as expanding the use of color film and developing better quality picture formats. At the forefront of these experiments was Twentieth-Century Fox, among the studios worst hit by the declining fortunes of the movie industry. Indeed, Fox was struggling to respond not just to the changed dynamics of the moment, but also to some of their own poor decisions. For instance, after selling much of their Hollywood real estate in order to raise capital, they then plowed the new funds into a picture that quickly became a byword for excess, waste, and box office failure: *Cleopatra* (1962). Equally important, their founder and talisman, Daryl F. Zanuck, who had built a career on his intuitive ability to deliver what audiences wanted to see, had left the studio in 1956 amid rancor and recriminations. Without him, Fox lost three decades of sharp and savvy decision-making and story-telling expertise.¹⁹

In 1960, Zanuck returned from his self-imposed exile in France, appointed his son Richard as president of Fox Television, and, with *The Longest Day* (1962), quickly reasserted his ability to identify the zeitgeist.²⁰ The film cost just \$7.75 million to make (as opposed to the \$42 million price tag of *Cleopatra*) and was a commercial and critical success.²¹ Two years later, the considerable media attention surrounding the twentieth anniversary of the D-Day landings confirmed Zanuck's skillful reading of the moment.²²

But saving the company required more than just one successful picture, and so under Zanuck's leadership Fox also invested greater resources in the new medium of television.²³ Following the success of *The Longest Day*, and no doubt inspired by Zanuck's long-running interest in the Air Force (he was a Charter member of the Air Power League and had been

personally involved in shaping the 1949 film), company executives began searching for suitable World War II-themed stories among their existing copyright properties. They turned to *12 O'Clock High*, a story which also offered the opportunity, two years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, to recreate a positive image of Air Power by setting the story in World War II Europe. In this historical context, characters would be able to voice the logic and rationale of strategic bombing without invoking Hiroshima, Nagasaki, or the threat of Armageddon. The Department of Defense was approached for support and technical advice, which was soon forthcoming (the DoD remained involved for the duration of the series and had right of approval on the scripts).²⁴

The idea for the series' structure came from Quinn Martin, recently the producer of *The Untouchables*, (ABC, 1959-63) and later a key figure in such productions as *The FBI* (ABC, 1965-74) and *Green Hornet* (ABC, 1966-67). Quinn, who had served in the Signal Corps throughout the war, formed his own production company—QM Productions—in 1960. With input from writer Paul Monash and *12 O'Clock High* author Beirne Lay, Quinn crafted the idea for a series based on “stories of men during war, not always men at war.”²⁵ In the lead role of General Frank Savage, Quinn cast the Broadway trained Robert Lansing. Just a year earlier Lansing had a minor role in the concluding picture in the SAC Trilogy—*A Gathering of Eagles*. Solidifying these links to the SAC trilogy, Master Sergeant James Doherty, who served as technical advisor on *Bombers B-52*, fulfilled the same role on *12 O'Clock High*.²⁶ Meanwhile, to support Lansing, Quinn cast John Larkin in the role of Major General Wiley Crow (Savage's immediate superior and friend), and Robert Overton as Major Harvey Stovall, his Executive Officer (the only character to last all three seasons). In terms of the aesthetic, the series was filmed in black and white, which allowed for the frequent display of original wartime footage of American bombers in action (much of this footage was taken from wartime documentaries, or from post-war films such as *Command Decision*).²⁷

Season one explored the narrative possibilities suggested by Monash and Lay. The thirty-three episodes feature stories in which Savage finds love and romance; stories of capture and captivity; stories of resistance, betrayal, and collaboration. Notably, women often feature as either domestic distractions or subversive threats. As in the SAC Trilogy, they are the representatives of peace and domesticity who provide the cause and justification for the male work of war, and, when necessary, offer moments of rest, relaxation, and recovery. For instance, in Episode 10 (tellingly titled “Interlude”) Savage, exhausted by combat, is ordered on leave. He takes the train to the “end of the line” (Scotland) and duly falls in love with his carriage counterpart, Anne Macrae, played by Dana Wynter, reprising something of the role she played opposite Robert Taylor in *D-Day: The Sixth of June* (1956). But the potential threat that this “interlude” might permanently interrupt Savage’s work is disarmed by a cunning plot device: Macrae is only on the train because she is heading home to die (she has terminal carcinoma). Thus, Savage gets to have his cake and eat it, too. He loves, learns (to cry and feel again), loses, and then returns to war, the better man (and warrior) for being reminded why, and for whom, he fights: he fights for peace, picnics, and posies (shortly before Macrae dies, she reveals to Savage her legacy—a flower bed, sown in her garden).²⁸ Elsewhere, women are depicted according to the other pole of the classic Virgin/Whore dichotomy; that is, they are the cynical, immoral (or amoral) sexual temptresses who threaten to undermine the business of bombing. In Episode 8 (“The Hours Before Dawn”) Savage is confronted by an English lady so devoid of moral scruples that she declares “neutrality” and refuses to aid his escape after they are both imprisoned by a downed Luftwaffe bomber pilot. In Episode 12 (“Soldiers Sometimes Kill”) Savage is even drugged and duped by a woman acting on behalf of an English Nazi fifth-columnist.²⁹

Nevertheless, amid these various stories of love and loss, domesticity and deceit, season one frequently revisits the theme central to the original novel and the 1949 film: the necessity

and utility of Air Power. In particular, episodes repeatedly rehearse the reasons why the 918th BG are in England and the details of how they do their job. It is here that we see most clearly the attempt to hit the rhetorical rewind button and revive the purpose and rationale of American Air Power.

Episode 6 well demonstrates the point. Titled “Pressure Point” it follows the attempts of General Savage to win over an anti-bombing politician undertaking an inspection of American airfields in England (a plot that was essentially derivative of *Command Decision*). The politician in question, Senator Clayton Johnson (Larry Gates), already distrusts Savage due to a past connection (fifteen years earlier Savage had wanted to marry Clayton’s daughter, but the Senator broke the engagement due to his dislike of military aviators). These feelings are intensified by Clayton’s belief that strategic bombing is ineffective and overly costly in terms of American lives. Ultimately, however, Savage converts the Senator to the war-winning effectiveness of his bomber force by delivering a mission in which the target is completely destroyed, without the loss of a single American plane.³⁰

Even when the doctrine of Air Power is not foregrounded, it is often in the background or between the lines. In Episode 7 (“Decision”) for instance, the precision of the B-17 is powerfully demonstrated by the fact that it is able to hit a factory building immediately adjacent to the “cage” in which a group of American POWs have been imprisoned by their German captors so that they might serve as a human shield.³¹ On other occasions, the value of strategic bombing is asserted in the face of the very moral and ethical qualms so central to the attacks levelled in the likes of *The War Lover* and *Dr. Strangelove*. Thus, in Episode 2 (“Follow the Leader”), Lt. Mellon, the lead bombardier in the 918th BG, is traumatized by the fact that he is responsible for the accidental destruction of a Dutch school. But after discovering that the error was due to mechanical failure rather than human oversight, General Savage orders him on the next mission. Mellon goes, overcomes his moral uncertainties, and drops his bombs. They fall

right on target, and there is no suggestion of civilian death. Similarly, in Episode 4 (“The Sound of Distant Thunder”), another bombardier, Lt. Lathrop (Peter Fonda), a quiet tee-totalling mid-westerner, loses his faith in bombing after his English girlfriend is killed during a German raid on London. Having experienced what it is like on the receiving end, Lathrop declares to Savage that he cannot go on. With words directly inspired by the rhetoric of the wartime bomber barons, Savage counters that in the long run bombing will actually shorten the war and thus save lives. Lathrop listens, learns, and is ready the next day for the mission. Later, in Episode 19, (“Faith, Hope and Sergeant Aronson”) the idea that the doctrine of strategic bombing is a sort of “faith” is affirmed by a story in which an airman of deep religious conviction loses his way following the death of his best friend. He returns to the true path only when required to be a blood donor for a wounded General Savage, and only after finding love with a local English girl. With his “heart” restored (much like the wounded Savage, after a complicated operation to remove a piece of shrapnel lodged in his chest), Aronson (Sorrell Booke) returns to battle. Indeed, the closing scene actually suggests that he returns to do “God’s work.” Here strategic bombing is divine retribution, and American bombers merely the tools through which God smites the unrighteous. Little wonder that in Episode 11 (“Here’s to Courageous Cowards”) even a former conscientious objector is won over to the rightness of the cause.³²

Such was the skill and subtlety of the first season. It does not shy away from the moral and ethical uncertainties of bomber crews, nor does it ignore the fact of “collateral damage.” Furthermore, unlike its cinematic forebears, the first season of *12 O’Clock High* is not blunt with its politics. Rather, it veils its ideological commitment to the bomber through stories that ostensibly explore “other” issues—love, trauma, Anglo-American relations. Yet the resolutions to these stories quietly assert that strategic bombing is right, proper, and effective. Love might be lost, but at least the war will be won; civilians might, very occasionally, be killed, but only

by accident or mistake; moral uncertainties are raised, but only to ensure they can be confronted and silenced.

Throughout, the audience is encouraged to view events—their reason and rationale—from the perspective of wholesome farm-boys, mature and sensitive representatives of the American melting-pot (Episode 19’s Sgt. Aronson is a scholarly and devout Jewish-American), or knowledgeable commanders. General Savage is the lynchpin of the whole series, and his very name is indicative of the rationale that structures the show. “Savage” is suggestive of the potential for primitive violence and brutality, and, in the novel, we are told that the character is of partly “Indian blood.”³³ Yet as the novel, film, and television series all assert, General Savage is no mere barbarian. Like James Fenimore-Cooper’s Hawkeye, his capacity for violence, his “Indian” ancestry, his inner Hyde, is always controlled, to be unleashed only when time and circumstance demands.

The public and critical response to the series was mixed. Some critics, like those in the *New York Times*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*, thought Robert Lansing’s General Savage was powerful and engaging. Others were less impressed, finding the performances wooden, the plots facile and overly simple in their conclusions, and the possible scenarios provided by the focus and format far too restrictive.³⁴ Perhaps these critics had a point, for the ratings certainly proved disappointing. After securing an impressive Arbitron rating of 23.3 for its first episode (which equated to 50.9% share, or over half of US households with the television on at that hour), in subsequent weeks the show settled at a rather more lowly rating of 12.³⁵ Part of the problem was that the network screening the show—ABC—seemed uncertain about exactly where to place it in their schedules. It first screened at 9:30 pm on Friday evenings but moved to 10 pm halfway through the series. Moreover, after deciding to commission a second season, ABC moved the series again, this time to the earlier slot of 7:30 pm and on Mondays.³⁶ The network also made a key demand: that General Savage would have to go.³⁷

One of the series' screenwriters, Harold Bloom, recalls that central to ABC's demand was their concern that, in the hands of Lansing, General Savage looked like a "brooding villain."³⁸ Indeed, in his eyes, furrowed brow, and the intensity of his performance, there is something reminiscent of Steve McQueen's psychotic bomber pilot from *The War Lover*. In concert with this "problem," ABC also suggested that the show was too focused on the views and opinions of commanders, rather than on the experiences of the young men flying the planes (who it was assumed would be more engaging for the younger, 7:30 pm, audience).³⁹ After Generals Turgidson and Ripper, moreover, and with the outspoken LeMay now Chief of the Air Staff (in 1965, LeMay would famously declare that he thought North Vietnam should be bombed back to the "stone age"), it was now increasingly difficult to see the commanders of Air Power as unequivocally "good."

Thus, despite being intended to re-establish the image of strategic bombing, the decision to focus much of the story-telling on General Savage actually threatened to do the opposite. This was especially the case because the director of photography, keen to ensure the show had an authentic, gritty quality, consciously chose—like Kubrick—to invoke a film noir style. Shadow, contrasts of light and dark, and grainy combat footage were all employed to assert the seriousness of the subject matter.⁴⁰ As a result, Lansing's brooding was accentuated by a brooding set, and the result was dark both aesthetically and in tone. So Lansing was dismissed, and his character, the central figure in the 1948 novel and the clear focus of the 1949 film, was killed in the opening episode of season two ("The Loneliest Place in the World"). Significantly, Lansing refused to appear on set simply to receive the *coup de grace*, and so his exit was achieved by a "clean," if less than subtle, sequence: Savage's plane is hit during a bombing mission and falls from the sky. Back at Archbury, a message from the French Resistance confirms his death, and his picture and name are duly removed from the Group's command roster.⁴¹

Following the abrupt departure of General Savage, season two is different in feel and form, particularly because the other key character who articulated the views of the World War II Bomber Barons—General Crowe—had similarly exited stage left (John Larkin, who played Crowe, sadly died in early 1965 following a heart attack). With Savage and Crowe gone, the differences between season one and two were apparent right from the start, and emphasised in the new lead: Paul Burke, as Colonel Joe Gallagher. Gallagher had previously featured in the opening episode of season one as something of an ill-disciplined flyboy. In season two, however, he emerges as a mature and seasoned commander. To be sure, he occasionally lacks Savage’s clarity and conviction, but, in many respects, Gallagher is a more sympathetic and human character. He makes mistakes; he gets drunk; he pursues women with gusto, yet he maintains his moral compass and makes the tough decisions. However, by replacing the character of *General Savage* with that of *Colonel Gallagher*, and by giving the role of support to *Sergeant Komansky*, played by Chris Robinson (as opposed to *General Crowe*), the decisions Gallagher has to make are of a different sort and order. Whereas Savage and Crowe debated the merits of the overall strategic bombing campaign, Gallagher and Komansky foil saboteurs, perform heroics, and argue over women. Consequently, there is much in season two intended for a younger audience—more sky-fighting, excitement, and romance. In order to suggest chronological progression, the series also shifts the action to a different point in the war. While season one placed the drama in 1943, a time when the commanders of the USAAF were still making the case for daylight bombing, season two moves the focus to the months leading up to D-Day (another clear nod towards the recent success of *The Longest Day*, and also suggestive of the impact of the twentieth anniversary D-Day commemorations, which included a popular CBS documentary featuring Dwight Eisenhower wandering the beaches of Normandy with Walter Cronkite).⁴²

If the dynamics of the show were altered by the re-introduction of matinee idol Paul Burke, and by the comradeship (and tension) between his character and that of Sgt. Komansky, the show's writers nonetheless remained committed to providing a positive image of Air Power. In Episode 19 ("Which Way the Wind Blows") for instance, Gallagher, finds a way of delivering precision attacks even in overcast weather, an idea refined further in Episode 21 ("Back to the Drawing Board") following the development of a new specialist piece of equipment, the "Bomb Through Overcast" device. In Episode 22 ("25th Mission"), the writers even reuse, once again, a plot device from *Command Decision*, albeit with a slight twist: Gallagher must lead his group on a mission to destroy a jet fighter manufacturing plant, but he must do so at *night*. Thus, even darkness cannot deny the precision of the B-17. A similar homage to the past was also apparent in Episode 24 ("Angel Babe"), clearly inspired by *The Memphis Belle*.⁴³

In addition to episodes that continued to assert the value of Air Power, season two also included some striking attempts to disarm the powerful critiques delivered by the likes of Kubrick, Heller, and Hersey. In Episode 7 ("Show Me a Hero, I'll Show You a Bum"), for example, we see Sgt. Komansky kick loose a bomb that becomes stuck in the bomb bay during a mission, but there is pointedly no rodeo ride to doomsday. Episode 9 ("I Am the Enemy"), meanwhile, focuses on an officer very similar in motivation and purpose to Steve McQueen's war-loving pilot from *The War Lover*. However, rather than being revealed as a home-grown American psycho, this pilot—Major Kurt Brown, played by a pre-*Star Trek* William Shatner—turns out to be of German ancestry. His desire to kill German civilians is thus translated into a death wish, rather than being indicative of the real purpose (and result) of strategic bombing. In Episode 13 ("The Jones Boys") the story pivots on war profiteers and features an American airman selling government equipment for personal profit. In contrast to Heller's Milo

Minderbinder, this is not to be understood as the underlying rationale of war revealed. Rather, to pursue profit is commensurate with duty denied and morals corrupted.⁴⁴

Despite these changes, the response of viewers remained mixed. Notably, some of the “old” fans disliked the new format and complained that, in making the show more attractive to a younger audience, it had lost much of its character depth and gritty realism.⁴⁵ There were problems, too, in the form of tensions between the two leads, Burke and Robinson, the latter of whom occasionally scene stole from the former. Then there were the ratings, which remained poor, generally hovering somewhere around 11.5 to 15.2 according to Arbitron (a 24 to 27 share). As a result, when surveyed in September 1965, *12 O’Clock High* was found to be only the twenty-sixth most popular show on the schedules. By November 1965, it was out of the top forty.⁴⁶

Despite a new lead, impressive production values (\$130,000 per episode by season two), and a shift in the schedules, *12 O’Clock High* was still struggling to live up to expectations. Even a concerted and costly publicity campaign had failed to build the necessary anticipation. Nonetheless, in March 1966 Quinn Martin received news that the show would be renewed for a third season, but on a new condition—that it be produced in full color.⁴⁷ Not all were convinced that this was the way to go. The film noir-inspired director of photography, William Spencer, remarked that “World War II was in black-and-white. It’s hard to make color look down and dirty and grim.”⁴⁸ Filming the show in color also presented practical problems. Most of the wartime footage of bombers flying and fighting was in black-and-white, and this made splicing difficult if not impossible. However, ABC insisted, and QM Productions finally agreed.

Thus, season three certainly *looks* different to seasons one and two. In full technicolor, the show no longer suggested the gritty quality of authenticity that had characterized earlier episodes. Still, action-adventure remained a key focus, and there was more love, loss, and

romance, as well as references to contemporary transatlantic relations and Cold War concerns (more than one episode features Russian characters). During planning, the producers also opted to keep the chronology in and around 1944 so that D-Day could again be in the background. Despite the technical challenge, even the familiar imagery of World War II air combat remained present, as *The Memphis Belle* provided plenty of suitable color footage. As if to assert the extent to which the show remained in tune with its roots, ABC also returned it to its original timeslot of 10 pm on Fridays.⁴⁹

Cancellation and Conclusion

In spite of these initiatives, *12 O'Clock High* continued to struggle in the ratings, and across a two week period in October 1966 it was recorded as the ninety-first most popular show (out of ninety-two).⁵⁰ Consequently, a month later, ABC announced they were dropping the show; season three ended in January 1967 after just seventeen episodes.⁵¹ At the time, several factors were identified as responsible for the show's poor overall performance. It was, to be sure, competing against many other shows, not the least of which was *Combat!* (see Chapter 2 in this volume). Another factor concerned the relatively high production values, a cost which obviously had to be recouped. Perhaps, too, as some critics suggested, the scenario was overly restrictive; a World War II airfield might work well as the focus for a film, but less so for a TV series offering thirty-three episodes per season. Eventually, the choice of plot lines *would* expire (a point apparent in season three, which saw some episodes revisiting plots from season one).

All of these are certainly explanatory factors in the collapse and cancellation of *12 O'Clock High*, but the contemporary political and cultural context was the crucial factor. By 1967, the doctrine of Air Power had seen too many challenges and critiques, too many questions asked and fears expressed, as American "victory culture" commenced its terminal

decline.⁵² Who, now, could see a bomb kicked out of a plane without thinking of Slim Pickens? Who, after Buck Turgidson, could see in an Air Power General a calm and clear commander? Who, after *Strangelove*, not to mention Hiroshima, could see in the strategic bomber anything other than the Destroyer of Worlds? Moreover, the answer to the last question provided yet more problems, for the people who did still have faith in the bomber were those *at that very moment* seeking to apply its power in Vietnam. Operation Rolling Thunder, the American air campaign against North Vietnam, officially began in March 1965, just as *12 O'Clock High* was half way through its first season. The campaign remained on-going until 1968 and thus provided the real-world Air Power backdrop to the televisual theatrics of Quinn Martin's production. Significantly, the Air Force officers who planned Rolling Thunder remained, like General Savage, fully committed to the doctrine of strategic bombing. As historian Mark Clodfelter has explained, in adherence to what had become the "dogma" of this doctrine, Vietnam-era air leaders "insisted that future attacks directed against a nation's capability to fight would weaken its will to resist."⁵³ Such was the logic, and the ultimate flaw, governing Rolling Thunder. As a concept, strategic bombing assumes that the enemy *must* have vital centers to attack, and the destruction of such targets will, in turn, affect the ability to make war. Neither of these represented accurate assessments of the nature of the North Vietnamese economy, or of the dynamics of the indigenous Viet Cong guerrilla movement. In short, a World War II-era vision of strategic bombing was simply wrong for Vietnam and wrong for the 1960s.⁵⁴

Here was the ultimate reason for the end of *12 O'Clock High*. As both novel and film, it had been successful because its vision of Air Power met the demands of the moment. By 1964, this vision had foundered. Korea, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the satirical and political attacks of Kubrick, Heller, and Hersey, all had compromised the "old" idea of Air Power. And then came Vietnam, a conflict in which this old idea was applied to South-East Asia, with little

success. Furthermore, the extent to which the show and the doctrine were in symbiotic relationship was institutionalised through the advice and support provided to QM Productions by both the Department of Defense *and* the Air Force (the latter even included images from the show in recruitment posters).⁵⁵ Thus, as the 1960s progressed *12 O’Clock High*, just like the actual application of Air Power in Vietnam, stuttered and struggled, before stalling and crashing. Little wonder that the show’s producer, Bill Gordon, later remarked: “there was no question about it. The anti-Vietnam protests and general anti-war sentiment worked against *12 O’Clock High* rating-wise, and perhaps the cliché of World War II.”⁵⁶ Even the one storyline that might have provided a route through the impasse—celebrations of the wartime transatlantic alliance—was nullified by contemporary disputes and disagreements. Britain persistently refused to contribute troops to the fighting in South-East Asia while President Charles de Gaulle would declare in June 1965 that the “United States was the greatest danger in the world today to peace.”⁵⁷ A year later, De Gaulle withdrew the French military from NATO and then demanded the removal of all US troops from French soil. What chance now for stories lingering on the closeness of the Grand Alliance or eulogising the Anglo-American “ties that bind”? And so ABC’s *12 O’Clock High*, a TV series born of a nostalgic return to the imagined certainties of World War II and intimately connected to a thirty year effort to celebrate American Air Power, found that it had no place or purpose amid the changes, challenges, and confusions of the late 1960s.

¹ Steve Call, *Selling Air Power: Military Aviation and Popular Culture after World War II* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2009), 158.

² Quinn Martin Productions, *12 O’Clock High* (LA: Twentieth-Century Fox Television, 1964-67). 60 min (78 episodes). All 78 episodes can be viewed here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_Q7NSR8aZ8&list=PLa9qIKyih9blBR_t4bdPpeTJ2jqBs

frl . All subsequent references are to this youtube collection.

³ Beirne Lay Jr. and Sy Bartlett, *12 O'Clock High* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965).

⁴ Michael Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 22-46.

⁵ Call, *Selling Air Power*, 32-33.

⁶ Donald Miller, *Eighth Air Force: The American Bomber Crews in Britain* (London: Aurum Press, 2006) and Ronald Schaffer, *Wings of Judgment: American Bombing in World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), esp. 35-79. Royal Air Force Bomber Command had a policy of night-time “area bombing.” For details about how this has been portrayed, see Michael Paris, *From the Wright Brothers to Top Gun* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 140-150, and Mark Connolly, “Bomber Harris: Raking Through the Ashes of the Strategic Bombing Campaign Against Germany,” in *Repicturing the Second World War*, ed. Michael Paris (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 162-176.

⁷ Call, *Selling Air Power*, 26-27.

⁸ John Steinbeck, *Bombs Away: The Story of a Bomber Team* (New York: The Viking Press, 1942); John Steinbeck, *Once There Was a War* (New York: The Viking Press, 1958).

⁹ Paris, *From the Wright Brothers to Top Gun*, 108-110; 152-157.

¹⁰ Robert Wohl, *The Spectacle of Flight: Aviation and the Western Imagination, 1920-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 141; Kenneth D. Rose, *Myth and the Greatest Generation: A Social History of Americans in World War II* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 167.

¹¹ Lay and Bartlett, *12 O'Clock High*, 1948. Lay was no stranger to film adaptations.

¹² Wohl, *Spectacle of Flight*, 273.

¹³ Call, *Selling Air Power*, 111-114.

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- ¹⁴ Starr Smith, *Jimmy Stewart: Bomber Pilot* (Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2005).
- ¹⁵ Simon Duke, *US Defense Bases in the United Kingdom: A Matter for Joint Decisions?* (London: Macmillan, 1987), 35-36.
- ¹⁶ Call, *Selling Air Power*, 152.
- ¹⁷ Call, *Selling Air Power*, 172.
- ¹⁸ Allan T. Duffin and Paul Matheis, *12 O’Clock High Logbook: The Unofficial History of the Novel, Motion Picture, and TV Series* (Boalsburg, PA: BearManor Media, 2005), 96-103.
- ¹⁹ George F. Custen, *Twentieth Century’s Fox: Daryl F. Zanuck and the Culture of Hollywood* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 352-360.
- ²⁰ Custen, *Twentieth Century’s Fox*, 360-368.
- ²¹ Duffin and Matheis, *12 O’Clock High Logbook*, 97.
- ²² Sam Edwards, *Allies in Memory: World War II and the Politics of Transatlantic Commemoration, c. 1941-2001* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 118-127.
- ²³ Custen, *Twentieth Century’s Fox*, 317-322.
- ²⁴ Duffin and Matheis, *12 O’Clock High Logbook*, 128.
- ²⁵ *Ibid*, 105.
- ²⁶ *Ibid*, 112.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, 121.
- ²⁸ “Interlude”, Season 1, Episode 10, *12 O’Clock High*, aired November 27 1964.
- ²⁹ “The Hours Before Dawn”, Season 1, Episode 8, *12 O’Clock High*, aired November 13 1964. “Soldiers Sometimes Kill”, Season 1, Episode 12, *12 O’Clock High*, aired December 11 1964.
- ³⁰ “Pressure Point”, Season 1, Episode 6, *12 O’Clock High*, aired October 30 1964.
- ³¹ “Decision”, Season 1, Episode 7, *12 O’Clock High*, aired November 6 1964.

³² “Follow the Leader”, Season 1, Episode 2, *12 O’Clock High*, aired September 25 1964; “The Sound of Distant Thunder”, Season 1, Episode 4, *12 O’Clock High*, aired October 16 1964; “Faith, Hope and Sergeant Aronson”, Season 1, Episode 19, *12 O’Clock High*, aired January 29 1965; “Here’s to Courageous Cowards”, Season 1, Episode 11, *12 O’Clock High*, aired December 4 1964.

³³ Lay and Bartlett, *12 O’Clock High*, 23.

³⁴ See, for example, Jack Gould, “A.B.C’s ‘Jonny Quest’ a series for Young” *The New York Times*, September 19, 1964, 54; “Review,” *Newsweek*, September 25, 1964; “Review,” *Newsweek*, September 28, 1964.

³⁵ Duffin and Matheis, *12 O’Clock High Logbook*, 126-127.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 146.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 132-134.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 131-132.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 131.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 113.

⁴¹ “The Loneliest Place in the World”, Episode 1, Season 2, *12 O’Clock High*, aired September 13 1965.

⁴² Edwards, *Allies in Memory*, 111-127; *D-Day Plus 20 Years: Eisenhower Returns to Normandy*. CBS Reports, Columbia Broadcasting Systems, Inc., 1964. 123 min.

⁴³ “Which Way the Wind Blows”, Season 2, Episode 19, *12 O’Clock High*, aired January 24 1966; “Back to the Drawing Board”, Season 2, Episode 21, *12 O’Clock High*, aired February 6 1966; “25th Mission”, Season 2, Episode 22, *12 O’Clock High*, aired February 14 1966; “Angel Babe”, Season 2, Episode 24, *12 O’Clock High*, aired February 28 1966.

⁴⁴ “Show Me a Hero, I’ll Show You a Bum”, Season 2, Episode 7, *12 O’Clock High*, aired October 25 1965; “I Am the Enemy”, Season 2, Episode 9, *12 O’Clock High*, aired,

November 8 1965; “The Jones Boys”, Season 2, Episode 13, *12 O’Clock High*, aired
December 6 1965.

⁴⁵ Duffin and Matheis, *12 O’Clock High Logbook*, 131, 147.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 148.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 152.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 153.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 157.

⁵¹ The final episode was “The Hunters and the Killers”, Season 3, Episode 17, *12 O’Clock High*, aired January 13 1967.

⁵² Thomas Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

⁵³ Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 36.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 203-210.

⁵⁵ Duffin and Matheis, *12 O’Clock High Logbook*, 146.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 158.

⁵⁷ Frank Costigliola, *France and the United States: The Cold Alliance Since World War II* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan, 1992), 143.