

# Magnum's America: Nam and Apple Pie

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Writing for the only newspaper in town that doesn't believe the Nielsen ratings are newsworthy makes me willing to guess that a good many of you haven't ever glanced at *Magnum, P.I.* That sex-pistol name alone sounds like a put-on. And Tom Selleck is just chuck that grins in the check-out line. Well, if you really are "you," you're mistaken. As entertainment, *Magnum's* funny and hip. (TC.)

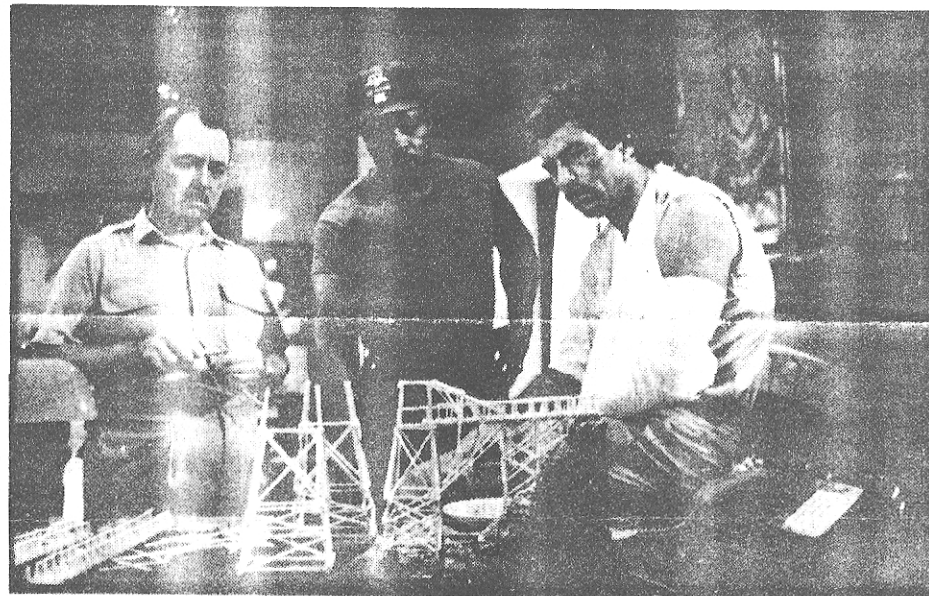
More important is that it's the detective genre's first-ever epic. The show isn't conceived on the more respectable level of seriousness that *Mash* and *Hill Street Blues* forever aspire to; it's as pop-blatant as *Dallas*, though infinitely better at same. Nor are any of its elements intrinsically new. But they've been borrowed and rearranged (from a headily promiscuous variety of prototypes) into a combination that is original, just by being the most synthetically all-inclusive. Beyond that, *Magnum* makes knowing use of TV's unlimited current-events-allusiveness—a wealth which usually lacks resonance, because it's all new money—to give itself size and meaning. On its own pop terms, it's the first action show with a sense of history.

The setting is Hawaii (as in 5-0, q.v.). *Magnum*, a down-at-heels private eye who is benignly irreverent and perpetually impoverished (q.v. *The Rockford Files*), somewhat raffish (q.v. *Baretta*), but also one hell of a hunk (q.v. *Vegas*, Burt Reynolds, and popular entertainment since the Renaissance), has scammed a more-or-less precarious niche on the estate of a fabulously rich, perpetually absent author (q.v. Nero Wolfe and the unseen God of *Charlie's Angels* inter alia). Its steward is a punctilious, dapper ex-British Army regular, naturally named Higgins (as in Professor Henry). But *Magnum* and his two sidekicks—multiple sidekicks, a recent television discovery, up the ante in every plot—black, imposing, cynical-but-lovable T.C., who runs a helicopter charter service for plot mobility, and quick-operating, anything-for-an-angle discoworld Rick (*Lou Grant's* Bossi gets fired and chutes back into lowlife), were members of the same Vietnam commando unit, which is their collective wound and the fulcrum of their mutually held notions about courage, fair play, and honor-among-teammates. This last is lifted whole from *The Deer Hunter*, except that instead of a progress from honor to disillusionment, you get both points of view coexisting statically side by side—a not untypical film-to-TV alteration. The navy, and more particularly the "Naval Intelligence Agency" they all worked for, plays the role of the domineering establishment that TV usually assigns to the local police—watching *Magnum*, you might never guess that Hawaii is under civil administration.

Vietnam, which crops up directly via flashback, is the ur-source of motivation and memory, and is also treated as a virtually psychotic experience: though the flashbacks frequently appear as the key to present-day character or plot, the context is a welter of men shooting, running, and dying in the jungle, with no apparent purpose for the "missions." Even so, the war's presence, along with the Pacific setting (Hawaii is seen as the gateway to an Orient rife with political and corporate intrigue, drug, gold, and gun traffic, and all-purpose foreignness) and the machinations of the "NIA" make *Magnum's* latent

motif an America that's finally getting used, however unwillingly, to adapting its frontier virtues and all-around nice-guy-ness to the brutal realism of world politics. The show, obviously never debating the right or wrong of being a superpower, treats it instead as a visual (and plot-generating) assumption, a point of recognition as familiar as the Vietnam scenes. But *Magnum*, the hell of a good guy who has to toughen up to stay even, is the post-Vietnam-American national character in allegorical action.

The ideology of a TV show is rarely something consciously worked out. A show's creators dredge up emblematic pop images almost instinctively, without making distinctions between those that come from the audience's unconscious and those the media generates itself, slapping them together for their value as images without much regard for contradiction. In that sense, *Magnum's* schizoid



Deconstructing a post-Vietnam morality: Higgins, T.C., and Magnum

Vietnam (the obscene nightmare doubling as macho proving ground—which equation incidentally suggests how illogic can have its own accuracy) is the result of a process essentially no different from saying, "Let's put *Vegas* in Hawaii." But one of *Magnum's* two impresarios is Glen A. Larson, among television's few thinkers of big thoughts—his last biggie, *Battlestar Galactica*, metaphorized the Holocaust as the flight of Earth's last surviving tribe from interstellar Nazis. *Battlestar* collapsed of its own frumpily didactic weight; the new dialectic—Marlboro men against horse thieves—is a lot more pop.

How to hold on to past ideals and codes in an amoral present is the show's theme, not only in characterizing all the regulars but in hinging the plots: the villains, too, are often turncoats—people who, having once believed in the code, betray it. The modernity is in the handling of this struggle as psychologically perilous and potentially crippling; and it's not one man's obsession, but the show's generic condition. *Everyone's* reactions turn on the past's quirky tangle and weight, and *Magnum*—whose own brooding simmers on the low flame of his robust mental heartiness—is there to rationalize it all.

Of course, it helps that the cowboys are also hipsters—whose style the private eye is allowed to borrow from more explicitly here than ever before. The tone of *Magnum* isn't fraught, like most detective shows, but loose and funky, with—for TV—inordinate amounts of time lovingly devoted to establishing the characters'

humor, roguishness, and scruffy likability. You watch the show for them, and the first-rate dialogue—line for line, it's as fine-tuned as *Lou Grant*, and often funnier—and the plethora of everyday detail that's always most effective on TV, but that most series are too slovenly made to take advantage of. One of its continuing pleasures for me, since it's something I know a little of, is that the navy stuff and the government-abroad atmosphere, when it appears, is mostly dead-on: the social habits of Americans posted outside the continent, the local lingo, and the military's protocol and sense of self in such places are all surprisingly apt.

The casting is uniformly good, but the series probably wouldn't work without Selleck, who is a master of television behavior in much the same way Clark Gable, in the same role (Rhett Butler), was a master of movie behavior. Selleck, whose rugged good looks are a little more rugged and less good than par—his mobile, beetling brows and prognathous jaw could easily get him cast as a heavy—uses them to unexpected nuance; instead of the leading man's mortician baritone he's got a high, slightly nasal voice that's expertly modulated for comic effect. Even when the writing is at its best, his sidelong readings take it an extra, playful inch. Authentic physical zest is rare on TV—even action heroes meant to be swankily sexy tend to come off as tight-lipped dim bulbs, like Robert Urich on *Vegas*, or Mike Connors as *Mannix* (never could figure out why *he* quit the police force). But Selleck's presence and air of huge enjoyment are almost

spun a two-hour exploration ("meditation" is not the word) on the themes of loyalty and treachery, whose final message was that in a stab-in-the-back world the good guys have to turn as dirty as the enemy to win. *Magnum* and T.C. do everything they do out of the highest, homiest sense of loyalty and camaraderie, the Russians play ruthlessly on same, and the semiruthless NIA (American, after all) sits on the fence. Meaningful allusions to World War II abound: at the outset, T.C. flies over Oahu singing "Remember Pearl Harbor," and later mentions—oh, so casually—that a helicopter is taking "the same route the Japanese used in 1941." Higgins—whose British-empire past makes him an old hand at this—sits home building a model of the bridge on the River Kwai, and his mention of the movie (where Alec Guinness's sense of honor and duty made him the enemy's patsy, remember?) sends *Magnum* to his Betamax to solve the mystery by hearing William Holden say in *Stalag 17*, "They can do that. . . . Put somebody right in our midst. We'd never suspect."

The script pushed the multiple layers of this increasingly hallucinatory landscape on you with amazing dexterity and insistence; the result, as pure television, was spellbinding. *Magnum* is generally the best action show on TV, but moments in this episode even rivaled Peckinpah: a telephone repairman, caught by a sniper, dangling limply from his rig on a pole; T.C., resigning himself to horror in Vietnam, pressing his haunted eyes against the bamboo bars of his cage while rain turns his face silver. The two most stomach-churning moments of violence were the most graphic I've ever seen on television, and they were graphic to incite you, to justify not only T.C.'s killing rage but *Magnum's* final act. Both men end up thrashing their code in order to live up to that code: "destroying the village in order to save it" turned into butch psychology. And yet the writing and the performances were so potent that you didn't just root them on, the way you might root for *Bronson* in *Death Wish*—you looked on them as honorable men (and great guys) driven by inexorable, near-Greek fate.

I don't know how many of you noticed "KGB" and "Russians" back up there. So far as I know, this is a first; even *Mission: Impossible*, to whom subverting foreign governments was as American as chewing gum, left it at "an unfriendly European power." The show's denouement turned on both this open anti-Sovietism and the theme underpinning it, in one of the most startling scenes ever on American television. After the prince is saved, *Magnum* (whose offscreen narration is one of the film noir cemetery) explains that KGB-man Ivan (whom the teleplay makes directly responsible for Sadat's assassination, by the way) is going scot-free, because the State Department doesn't want to offend the Russians. Pause. "But," says *Magnum*, remembering innocent guest stars brutally murdered, "that wasn't good enough." He kidnaps Ivan and marches him off into the woods, a gun at his back. Ivan, who is cynical and jaded as only Russians can be, gives the traditional "You Americans are soft" speech: "You won't, Thomas. You can't. If I had a gun, in battle, you could shoot me. But like this—your sense of honor [mild contempt] and fair play [greater contempt] won't let you." He starts to walk away. *Magnum* blows him in half.

For the last week I've been appalling my friends by telling them the story of that episode. I've been appalling them more by telling them that it made me a fan. I don't believe the people who made the season premiere acted out of ideological motives; I think they're making expedient, commercial use of images already present in the public mind that for the first time in years are frightening again, and for better or worse I think that's what pop culture is for. Get tough, America, the Reds are on the loose. Or is *Magnum* only telling us what we already suspected—that the best hipsters are reactionaries, after all?