



*The Big Picture: The Cold War on the Small Screen* by John W. Lemza.

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The US Army faced a crisis of personality from the end of the Korean War to the escalation of the conflict in Vietnam, when its value to strategic operations trailed that of the Navy or Air Force. These years corresponded with a public relations push in the form of *The Big Picture*, a weekly television series that ran from 1951, with episodes on the Army's experiences in the first part of the Korean War, all the way to 1971, when the show's implicit sense of American exceptionalism and military boosterism was out of step with the attitudes of the viewing public. By the time the show's remit was established and its reach secured by its syndication across the country at a time when television ownership was rising exponentially, it had a key function in American cultural life. As historian John Lemza (Virginia Commonwealth Univ.) puts it,

for two decades *The Big Picture* would serve as a vessel to reach into American homes, as well as public and political spaces, to make important connections and shape thinking about the role of the army in the early Cold War period, its modernization trends, its history, and the lives of service members. (71)

His book's first chapter, "Welcome to *The Big Picture*," provides an extensive production history of the show. It was first produced at the Signal Corps's Army Pictorial Center in Astoria, Queens, NY, and, by the end of its run, at the Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville Alabama, AL (41-43). The Army's use of Hollywood actors who enlisted during World War II meant that, by the time the show was in production, there were established links with industry technicians as well as on-screen personalities; the show was effectively a mix of military personnel and professional film makers (45-48). This gave *The Big Picture* a certain prestige, while forging ideological associations between stars, their politics, and the show's viewers. For instance, the notoriously hawkish John Wayne appeared in episode 512, "Challenge of Ideas" (1961), which "offered a biased contrast of political philosophies between the democracy of the West and the communism of the East, elevating the first and casting the second in a dark light" (46).

Lemza skillfully tracks the shows' messages to the general viewing public and, in some cases, to various specific audiences who consumed it. While a core armed forces viewership (both active duty and veteran) was a key audience throughout the show's run, it also tried to demystify the workings of the Army for a lay audience. The show's various episodes offer portraits of every job imaginable, from chaplain to foreign language instructors.

The author correctly highlights the series's persistent "hard anticommunist edge" (122); clearly this was an overtly propagandistic show appealing to US interests and stressing the Army's role in maintaining those interests. Even though the public's perception of the Army and the Cold War changed over the show's thirteen-year run, the producers never lost sight of this: by the time the show ended, though they had refocused on, for instance, science and technological innovation, they never softened their stance on communism (124).

Lemza is put in a tricky spot by the extent of his primary source material—nearly seven hundred episodes. While all are theoretically accessible, many are not easily available (even in ar-

chives), and only a fraction are viewable online. Moreover, themes repeated over the show's lifespan together with its Procrustean point of view (American exceptionalism, pro-military, anti-communist) means many episodes convey the same messages. Given these constraints, I was most impressed by the author's handling of *The Big Picture's* treatment of race. The series only gradually showed a diversifying army and ignored prohibitions on service in the past (165–67).

It seems the show's producers could not fully reckon with the ongoing push for civil rights in America; early episodes either excluded non-White service members or gave them background roles. That gradually changed as they became a part of mainstream Army life by the late 1960s, but Lemza does not explore in any detail what precipitated that shift.

The author similarly examines the mixed messaging on females in the Army. "The Army Nurse" (episode 516) was surprisingly progressive in its focus on a woman putting her career above marriage. But, on the whole, the series avoided issues related to the burgeoning women's liberation and feminist movements of the time (167–72).

*The Big Picture* was an important television show in its day, but, a half century on, it comes across as a relic of its era, paternalistic in tone and failing to modernize with the times. John Lemza's focus on its relevance to the Army that produced it and to the Cold War that provided its content clarifies its continued value to historians and students of its period.