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The Housewife, the Vigilante and the Cigarette-Smoking Man: The CIA and Television, 1975–2001

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Abstract

Reeling from the revelations about its operations in the 1970s, the CIA set up an Office of Public Affairs to improve its public image. Among its activities was greater engagement with television producers, but it largely failed to lead to more US drama series portraying the CIA in a better light. This article, however, analyses those few TV dramas that did characterize the CIA in the 1980s and 1990s – *Scarecrow and Mrs King*, *The Equalizer* and *The X-Files*. Each series gave a critique of the CIA and its practices while offering alternative pathways to redeeming the organization so that it could better serve US security and domestic safety. They are examples of how television dramas can ask questions, engage with critical issues in contemporary society, and push the boundaries of what we expect to see in our televisual entertainment. They may not have offered very much insight into what the CIA was actually doing globally, but their storylines did confront the public image of the CIA, question its ethos and its methods, and offer some alternative viewpoints on how the Agency might develop its role and approach. Each series attempted to push beyond stereotypes of the CIA and its agents, upset the usual balance between gender roles and refused to give the kind of closed, unambiguous viewpoints that so many US television dramas offered their audiences during the period. They contributed significantly to the cultural representation of the CIA as the Cold War drew to a close.

The CIA has been a topic for popular culture almost since its inception, both reflecting and creating the public image of the Agency's identity and meaning. Both film and television helped create a glamorous, all-American, iconic 'man of mystery' image for the Agency's spies during the heady James Bond-inspired action adventure of the 1950s and 1960s.¹ The fantastical glamour faded from the silver screen, however, as 'real world' revelations about the CIA's activities led to a more critical, often conspiracy-laden, 'new cinema' of the 1970s and 1980s as exemplified by *Three Days of the Condor* (1975).

Following the litany of revelations about CIA 'dirty tricks' campaigns, political assassinations, operations to unseat foreign

¹ See Wesley A. Britton, *Spy Television* (Westport, CT, 2004); Michael Kackman, *Citizen Spy: Television, Espionage, and Cold War Culture* (Minneapolis, MN, 2005).

governments, the infiltration of domestic activist groups and the widespread surveillance of US citizens that culminated in the 1975 Church Committee findings, the small screen's prior love affair with America's secret agents faltered. Television dramas largely failed, however, to venture into the critiques beginning to fill cinema screens. Instead, the CIA mostly disappeared from American television screens for the best part of three decades. There were a few notable exceptions in the form of mid-1980s housewife-turned-spy drama *Scarecrow and Mrs King* and the secret agent-turned-vigilante series *The Equalizer*. In the mid-1990s, *The X-Files* included current and former CIA agents among the smorgasbord of intelligence officers and public officials that formed part of the 'shadow government' colluding with aliens in the complex conspiracies at the show's core. It was not until after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, however, that the spy television genre finally gained a serious revival with series such as *Alias* (2001–6), *24* (2001–14), *Spooks* (2002–11, retitled *MI5* in the United States), and more recently *Homeland* (2011–).

I

Television has played a central role in forming public perceptions of the CIA from its earliest days. Indeed, as a former Director of the CIA, Robert Gates, has contended:

Over the years, public views of the Central Intelligence Agency and its role in American foreign policy have been shaped primarily by movies, television, novels, newspapers, books by journalists, headlines growing out of congressional inquiries, exposés by former intelligence officers, and essays by 'experts' who have never served in American intelligence, or have served and still not understood its role. While the CIA sometimes is able to refute publicly allegations and criticism, usually it must remain silent. The result is a contradictory mélange of images of the CIA and very little understanding of its real role in American government.²

In his history of US television spy dramas, Michael Kackman shows that even by the end of the 1960s 'espionage was quickly waning on American television while the reputation of U.S. intelligence agencies plummeted.'³ By the mid-1970s, that reputation was at an all-time low. The CIA's leadership became increasingly aware that it had a major public image problem. The Head of the CIA's Western Hemisphere Division, David Atlee Phillips, led the charge to rectify the negative views of the Agency. He resigned his post in early 1975 to dedicate his efforts full time to correcting the public view of the CIA through media appearances, lecturing and writing. Within the Agency itself, initially a

² Robert Gates quoted in Ronald Kessler, *Inside the CIA* (New York, 1994) p. 284.

³ Kackman, *Citizen Spy*, p. 178.

task group was formed to review the situation and then gradually steps were taken to engage more effectively with the public, both directly and through news media and other forms of cultural output.⁴

In March 1977, the CIA established an Office of Public Affairs under the directorship of Herbert Hetu, a retired Navy captain and public relations expert, tasked with ‘a mandate to inform the American public about the role of the intelligence process’.⁵ As part of his attempts to rebuild the public image of the CIA, Hetu began working with various television executives and programme-makers to produce series that would portray the Agency in a positive light. What Hetu could offer was access to the CIA’s Headquarters so that documentaries and potentially dramas could use footage of the inside of the building, particularly the impressive lobby with its iconic crest. Cameras were allowed into Langley for the first time on 24 July 1977 for the CBS production of a *60 Minutes* special: ‘Report on the CIA’. In March 1978, broadcaster, producer, former Navy Intelligence Officer and co-founder of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers Gordon McLendon, and film and television producer Fred Weintraub, best known for co-producing the Bruce Lee vehicle *Enter the Dragon* (1973), met with Hetu and CIA Director Admiral Stansfield Turner to discuss the production of a major television series on the Agency. McLendon and Weintraub argued that they were seeking to rectify the negative images being promulgated elsewhere in film and television: ‘it is worthwhile pointing out that the Agency is now being publicized, in most cases in questionable light, by such projects as “Three Days of the Condor,” “The Company,” and other[s] too numerous to mention.’ As self-described ‘patriotic Americans’ they proposed to ‘fight back in defense of the CIA and other U.S. intelligence organizations’ by producing a series that ‘[p]resents the CIA in a positive light’.⁶ A major motivating factor for the duo was the conclusion reached by former CIA Director John A. McCone that it was imperative for television programmes to be involved in the campaign to improve the Agency’s public image:

In my opinion, the noise has been so great and the image of CIA has become so tarnished that changes must be made to extinguish, as much as possible, criticism, to restore confidence and to provide an on-going dynamic intelligence service. But no changes will be useful unless the Congress, the press and *electronic media*, and the public can feel assured that the nation’s entire intelligence service, in playing its part to ensure the well-being of our nation, will always confine its operations to acceptable moral and legal standards.

⁴ Christopher Richard Moran, ‘The last assignment: David Atlee Phillips and the birth of CIA public relations’, *International History Review*, 35/2 (2013), pp. 337–55.

⁵ *Public Affairs Chronology*, Public Affairs Office, Central Intelligence Agency, 1978, CIA Records Search Tool [hereafter CREST], National Archives II, College Park, Maryland.

⁶ Memorandum from Gordon McLendon and Fred Weintraub to Admiral Stansfield Turner, 3 March 1978, CREST.

McCone's opinion had shifted considerably from his time as Director in the early 1960s when he flatly opposed public engagement. DCI Turner was impressed with the arguments of the producers, telling Hetu that he was 'generally in favour of such a project'.⁷ Hetu's office cooperated with a number of documentary and current affairs programme makers to produce episodes that were sympathetic in their depiction of the Agency. Preliminary scripts were vetted before crews were allowed to film at Langley. There was 'a good deal of communication, both written and oral and involving unclassified reference data and logistics arrangements' between the parties.⁸ Hetu argued that the Agency's 'principal contribution . . . would consist of providing information, such as anecdotes, that would be useful in preparation for episodes'.⁹ All footage filmed at Langley was then 'subject to Agency review for security breaches' before being broadcast. The Public Affairs Office insisted, however, that, despite this cooperation, the CIA 'exercised no control over content'.¹⁰

Despite the best efforts of the Public Affairs Office in the late 1970s, however, as Wesley Britton observes, 'American network television showed little interest in creating new secret agents' in its drama series. Increased public awareness of the transgressions of the CIA 'discouraged networks from seeking heroes in a realm that fostered more controversy than respect'.¹¹ There was a general paucity of US drama series in the 1980s and 1990s that featured CIA agents or spies who were even obliquely members of the Agency. There were a small handful of significant exceptions to this rule, however, each of which in their own way confronted the public image problem and offered both a critique and a revision of the Agency's work.

II

Former Hollywood actor Ronald Reagan based his 1980 election campaign and then his two-term presidency on an unabashed attempt to reassert American confidence, self-belief and strength. At the core of his foreign policy was a bold rhetorical combativeness that celebrated American exceptionalism, sought to reclaim the mantle of the United States as 'leader of the free world', and famously and provocatively condemned the Soviet Union as an 'evil empire'. Reagan unleashed the CIA in Afghanistan and Central America as he attempted to push back the Soviets mostly through proxy wars. The renewed Cold War saw

⁷ Memorandum for the record, Herbert Hetu to Admiral Stansfield Turner, 8 March 1978, CIA, CREST.

⁸ Memorandum, 'Agency contacts with PBS', Office of Public Affairs to Office of Legislative Counsel, 3 July 1978, CIA, CREST.

⁹ Hetu to Turner, 8 March 1978.

¹⁰ 'Agency contacts with PBS'.

¹¹ Britton, *Spy Television*, p. 203.

anti-Soviet rhetoric and cultural references ramped up throughout the first half of the 1980s. Yet while the Hollywood film production machine, which had actually sired the new President, embraced Reaganite flag-waving and breast-beating patriotism with such anti-Soviet fare as *Red Dawn* (1984), *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), *Rocky IV* (1985) and *Top Gun* (1986), television continued to be rather allergic to dramas that took up the new Cold War fervour, and in particular steered clear of the CIA as subject matter. While television producers embraced other aspects of Reaganism, not least in glamorous depictions of the rich, self-made capitalists of *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, they largely avoided dramas that tackled the grittier, more morally ambiguous aspects of Reagan's foreign policy, and especially the renewed vigour with which the Agency was being employed. The most notable exception became the most successful spy drama of the 1980s, running for four seasons from October 1983 to February 1987.

Scarecrow and Mrs King must have come across as a rather bizarre pitch – a recently divorced suburban housewife, who now lives with her two sons and her mother, becomes a secret agent for 'The Agency' (ostensibly the CIA) after a chance encounter at a railway station with a debonair agent nicknamed 'Scarecrow'. The programme was designed largely as a comeback show for actress Kate Jackson, whose career had faltered somewhat after she left the highly successful series *Charlie's Angels*. In *Scarecrow and Mrs King*, Jackson played Amanda King, a character that has been described as 'an average American housewife who relies on intuition and social-cultural awareness in the attempt to combat evil'.¹² The series captured the zeitgeist in a highly effective mix of renewed Cold War intrigue, the heroic reimagining of the all-American action spy, and an arguably progressive assertion of the worth and power of the modern working single mother, but alongside a more conservative highly Reaganesque celebration of the traditional qualities of patriotism, family values, the can-do spirit and homespun wisdom. In one of the few academic treatments of the series, Tricia Jenkins has argued that it promoted the 'New Right' vision of the Reagan administration, suggesting that 'women who exhibit the feminine traits of domesticity, self-sacrifice, and nurturance can contribute to the nation's security, while it simultaneously emphasizes the importance of traditional masculinity to the nation-state through the character of Lee Stetson, Amanda's partner'.¹³

The gender stereotyping in *Scarecrow* is highly apparent and has been critiqued by several authors. A study of young adult viewers conducted shortly after the series ended revealed that Amanda King was perceived as 'exhibiting primarily feminine expressive traits and stereotypical femi-

¹² Stephen J. Toner, 'Television and the American imagination: notions of romance', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 22/3 (1988), pp. 1–13, at p. 6.

¹³ Tricia Jenkins, 'The suburban spy and the rise of the New Right: negotiating gender politics in *Scarecrow and Mrs King*', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 36/4 (2009), pp. 200–8, at p. 202.

nine behavior', somewhat out of step with other television depictions of women in crime-fighting dramas during the period, while the central male character Lee Stetson (Bruce Boxleitner) was rated as being particularly high in 'masculine expressive traits' and in stereotypical masculine behaviour.¹⁴ As Stephen Toner observes, while Stetson uses 'intelligence, knowledge and personal contacts' together with his highly skilled training to combat communist plots, it is King's role as a 'homemaker' that makes her a 'good woman' as opposed to other less feminine female characters in the series such as Francine Desmond (Martha Smith).¹⁵ Even though she is divorced, Amanda very pointedly retains the name Mrs King rather than reverting to her birth surname and adopting Ms as her title, giving a strong indication even in its title of the programme's association with the New Right backlash against feminism. In terms of the messages the programme conveys about the CIA through its gendered roles and depictions it is a significant and interesting cultural product of its time.

Scarecrow's reliance on traditional methods of intelligence-gathering, interrogation and covert action represent a sanitized and reclaimed version of the practices that had been revealed and reviled through the CIA's recent negative public history. There is a distinct and deliberate attempt to restore a heroic all-American spirit to the actions of Stetson's secret agent. Yet the programme still offers a critique of those professional Agency methods, even if rather subtly, because although the highly masculine Scarecrow often has to save an imperilled Mrs King from the deadly grasp of enemy agents or other adversaries, his attempts to foil plots or uncover espionage often fail to produce the desired results. Amanda's homespun, more nurturing and kind-hearted approach, by contrast, is shown time and again to be more effective and successful. The gender politics is often crude. As a seasoned housewife and mother, Mrs King is familiar with recipes whereas Scarecrow is not, so in one episode only she is able to decipher the coded recipes in a television cookery show her mother watches and reveals a KGB spy ring. Such contrasts between the protagonists' skills and experience, as well as the tension between Mrs King being a mother and homemaker while also secretly being a secret agent, are utilized as sources of 'comedy' within the show. Such depictions do much to undermine the agency and ingenuity of the central female character, ensuring that even when she is proven to be the more capable of the two agents the traditional gender hierarchy is always restored.

Yet a rather different reading of the programme is possible. As noted above, frequently the heroic, highly trained male agent finds his methods frustratingly inadequate and he is unable to uncover whatever plot is at play, whereas Mrs King's more nurturing, caring approach

¹⁴ Faye H. Dambrot, Diana C. Reep and Daniel Bell, 'Television sex roles in the 1980s: do viewers' sex and sex role orientation change the picture', *Sex Roles*, 19/5–6 (1988), pp. 387–401, at pp. 393–4.

¹⁵ Toner, 'Television and the American imagination', p. 8.

yields greater results. In these repeated plot devices, *Scarecrow and Mrs King* can be read as pre-empting the arguments in favour of soft power approaches that can provide US foreign policy-makers with more effective and nuanced ways of engaging internationally and achieving their objectives. In the context of the sabre-rattling, bombastic Cold War renewal of the Reagan administration replete with proxy wars and nuclear brinkmanship, this is a quite radical critique that does shine through in multiple episodes despite the revanchist attempts to privilege resolutions that require Scarecrow to play the action hero. As Jenkins notes: 'one of Amanda's most striking strengths is that she often represents the voice of compassion in intelligence gathering and hampers the efforts of her espionage agency when those efforts infringe on human rights to life and liberty.'¹⁶

Scarecrow and Mrs King broke new ground in television programmes portraying CIA agents, and in the spy fiction genre more broadly, by featuring a female character as its central protagonist. Not only that, but she was not primarily included in the programme for her titillation value, not solely as a victim to be rescued (although on many occasions she did perform this role), and not as a sexually driven character whose wily ways could seduce information out of adversaries or simply provide the love interest for a central male character (even though ultimately she did secretly marry her partner). As Jenkins argues, the series carved out 'a new space for women in the politically based and heavily male-dominated television genre' of spy programmes: 'While it may seem that emphasizing women's compassion, humanity, and ability to serve as their agency's moral compass reemphasizes notions of sexual difference embraced by the New Right, it is also possible to read this emphasis as carving out a new feminist identity in the genre.'¹⁷ It is possible, of course, to overstate this reading since it is clear that the programme still retained a good deal of the traditional rendering of gender roles common not only to the spy genre but to a whole range of other programming. Nonetheless, *Scarecrow and Mrs King* contains elements of critical narratives that suggest it was more than simply a feel-good Reaganesque romantic comedy drama. It went further perhaps than any previous primetime network television drama to project the notion that women could play as significant a role as men in the intelligence services, while also suggesting that there were potentially highly effective alternatives to violence and subterfuge in the pursuit of national security.

III

The next long-running 1980s US television drama to feature the CIA was a far less wholesome affair. British actor Edward Woodward played

¹⁶ Jenkins, 'The suburban spy', p. 205.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Robert McCall in *The Equalizer* for four seasons from 1985 to 1989. McCall was a former CIA assassin who had resigned from the Agency and was now operating as a vigilante, with tacit police support, in New York City. McCall was full of regret for his past, believing that he had become ‘trapped in some dirty little game that no-one ever won’. His motivation now was to atone for his CIA past by giving his help to the innocent, vulnerable and needy. He secured business with a newspaper advertisement that stated simply: ‘Got a problem? Odds against you? Call the Equalizer’.

The series has been described as a ‘potent paranoiac fantasy’, a sense deepened by the portrayal of McCall by Woodward, who ‘cut a formidable figure’.¹⁸ The opening credits of each programme preyed on this sense of paranoia with dark, shadowy scenes of New York streets at night that gradually became populated with solitary, vulnerable characters, mostly women, who were cornered in elevators, phone booths or on subway platforms by menacing looking men. Only very belatedly in this opening sequence did the silhouette of the Equalizer emerge, briefly at first poised with a handgun to face down the bad guys, and then standing ready in front of his car, with light cast slowly across Woodward to reveal his tough, stoic visage. Critics such as Jon Abbott have suggested McCall was an ‘enigmatic hero’ who exhibited a ‘vulnerability, character and humanity’ that made him something of a ‘reassuring father figure’.¹⁹ Mimi White argues that McCall ‘serves a decisive therapeutic role in relation to his clients’, helping to resolve their personal conflicts as well as the often life-threatening problems that require his ‘professional’ services. Throughout the series, by helping others he is striving to absolve himself of ‘the profound personal and moral disgust’ that he feels about the missions he carried out for the Agency.²⁰ Cynthia Walker agrees that McCall ‘seemed the soul of decency, always polite and impeccably dressed’, yet his cold-hearted killer instinct was also apparent because the viewer could always ‘detect determination in his steely-eyed gaze and danger in his rueful laugh’.²¹ They would also have observed the lethal danger in the steel of his gun with which he frequently deployed ultimate justice, leaving a significant body count throughout each season of the programme. He may well have been ‘an urban guerilla for the good’, but he achieved this by using the same deadly skills that he had supposedly come to abhor in his former career. By the end of the pilot episode, the audience is left with no doubt about his credentials as a former Agency assassin since at the conclusion of his first case he has left behind what he himself admits is ‘quite frankly just

¹⁸ Cynthia W. Walker, ‘Edward Woodward’, in Horace Newcomb (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Television* (Abingdon, 2014), pp. 2580–3, at p. 2582.

¹⁹ Jon Abbott, *Stephen J. Cannell Television Productions: A History of all Series and Pilots* (Jefferson, NC, 2009), p. 226.

²⁰ Mimi White, *Tele-Advising: Therapeutic Discourse in American Television* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1992), pp. 157–8.

²¹ Walker, ‘Edward Woodward’, p. 2582.

a bit of a mess'. In contrast to Amanda King's use of nurture and homespun wisdom, McCall employed the same tough brutality on the streets of New York that had served him so well as a political assassin.

The Equalizer faced some criticism for its endorsement of violent vigilantism. The programme's executive director, James McAdams, acknowledged that the premise could be criticized but also attempted to defend it: 'We are trying to take a realistic approach but it is probably subject to some questions. Putting an ad in the paper and taking on great odds is something that dances around the realities of law enforcement.' He felt, however, that the programme's medium meant that limits were nonetheless imposed on McCall's methods: 'TV does suggest certain kinds of behavior. It is important as we go along that we indicate the *Equalizer* is a court of last resort, only when other means are exhausted.'²² Woodward claimed in an interview at the time of *The Equalizer*'s debut that: 'The only thing we can do is make sure that the violence is not overt.'²³ In the lead actor's native Britain, however, the perceived high levels of violence in the programme meant it was rejected as an import by the BBC. As Michael Grade, then BBC Director of Programmes, explained: 'We are being more scrupulous than ever in the choice of series we buy from America.'²⁴ The UK commercial network ITV, which had been home to Woodward's earlier UK series *Callan*, had fewer qualms and took up an option on the series. A five-year study of viewers' perceptions of their television watching identified *The Equalizer* as a 'fascinatingly sadistic' drama that exemplified programmes that were 'strangely compelling' even though they were perceived as not being particularly salubrious. As one female viewer commented about *The Equalizer*, 'you know what's coming isn't good for you, but you keep watching.'²⁵

Contemporary reviews of the programme often noted its appeal among women of all ages – Woodward even won the accolade of 'sexiest man in television' during the show's run.²⁶ In rather different ways than *Scarecrow and Mrs King*, the gender aspects of the programme are certainly interesting and significant. It is perhaps surprising, given the violent nature of much of the protagonist's actions, that one of the most extensive, penetrating and positive articles written about *The Equalizer* during its time on air was by Margo Jefferson in the renowned feminist magazine *Ms*. Writing in September 1986, Jefferson praised the programme as 'one of the cleverest action adventure dramas to appear on TV in recent seasons' and described as fascinating 'the manner in which it plays the fixed conventions of the manly thriller against contemporary

²² Sally Bedel Smith, 'Edward Woodward: new TV hero', *New York Times*, 19 Sept. 1985.

²³ Kirk LaPointe, '*Equalizer* emphasizes Woodward's acting rather than guns, gore', *The Citizen* (Ottawa), 17 Sept. 1985, p. 18.

²⁴ Francis X. Clines, 'BBC study finds US TV more violent', *New York Times*, 15 Aug. 1987.

²⁵ David Gauntlett and Annette Hill, *TV Living: Television, Culture and Everyday Life* (London and New York, 1999), p. 50.

²⁶ Britton, *Spy Television*, p. 211.

feminist-influenced demands for more social, psychological, and sexual complexity in our popular heroes'. Jefferson argues that the appeal to women viewers is multi-faceted: 'The Equalizer is our father (he soothes our fears and teaches us how to live in the world); our heroic rescuer (we are allowed to feel sexually attracted to him); and our employee (we hire him and insist that he do his work well).' Crucially though, and in stark contrast to many male leads in 1980s detective series, police dramas or other action genres: 'When his work is done he must leave, and so we are never in any real danger of being dominated or overshadowed by him. We become independent women again.' *The Equalizer*, therefore, was unusual for its time, and within the broader history of television spy dramas, in developing a complex 'system of social and sexual checks and balances'.²⁷

Although McCall has turned his back on the Agency, the CIA is a strong and central presence throughout the series. Early in the pilot episode, McCall is shown arguing with his former Agency supervisor, named simply 'Control' in a nod to the work of spy author John Le Carré. McCall asserts that he is 'an old war horse let out to pasture', but Control (Robert Lansing) responds that he is actually 'the most dangerous man I have ever known'. It is established immediately that McCall has been one of the Agency's most important agents. Control explains why the Agency is not going to let him go: 'You've got too much information in your head – places, names, dates, entire networks. You know the other side would have a field day pulling that stuff out of you.' Later in the episode, Control tells McCall that he has managed to downgrade his security risk status from 'dangerous to tolerable'. His freedom from the Agency is not complete, however, as he is told 'you can be a hero for us once in a while.' Usually after some cajoling from Control, McCall is often enlisted to help with various Agency missions, recovering stolen documents from a KGB mole, tracking down rogue agents, and helping Control with information and contacts to resolve whatever other business he brings his way. In return, McCall passes on information and leads to Control when he comes across evidence of potential defectors, infiltrators, bugging or other enemy plots. The overarching sense is that the Equalizer is looking out for us all – ensuring our personal safety from crooked businessmen, greedy landlords, criminals, gangsters, blackmailers, stalkers, rapists and murderers, whilst also still watching over the nation's safety. Like *Scarecrow and Mrs King*, the programme combines domestic safety with national security in ways that appear designed both to make the viewer nervous about the threats that are all around us and also to assure us that there is a way for them to be resolved, that McCall and by extension the CIA are keeping a watchful eye and using whatever force is necessary to protect the nation from evils within and without.

²⁷ Margo Jefferson, 'Some kind of hero: the quixotic appeal of "The Equalizer"', *Ms.*, 15/3 (1986), pp. 10–13, at pp. 10, 12–13.

There is a critical ambiguity at the core of *The Equalizer*. McCall's character is frequently lamenting his past, thereby offering the audience a critique of the excesses of power and uses of lethal force that had been the mainstay of CIA activity. He implies that what he was doing with the Agency was immoral, dedicated to questionable or wrongheaded objectives, and contrary to the best interests of the American people, while now he is making up for that condemnable past by putting his skills to work in the name of good, righteous causes to compensate for the wrongs he has committed. Yet despite this implicit critique of what the CIA has been doing in the name of the United States, McCall uses exactly the same methods to mete out his own form of justice against his clients' foes and transgressors. Just as the CIA used illegal methods, such as summary executions and brutal interrogations, so does McCall in practically every episode. He rarely stops to question the 'bad guys', to check that his client's complaint is justified or try to apprehend the perpetrator; instead he simply dispatches them with bullets or a knife. As he barks at one victim of his vengeance: 'How does it feel to be dead? You are scum. You are scum! You make everything you touch dirty. And you've made me lower than you are. And that I will not forgive. I do not forgive!' As Jefferson observed: 'McCall blends ruthlessness with penance, professional success with spiritual malaise, conservative values with liberal ones' and is therefore 'living a dangerous paradox', because 'having acted by what he now believes was an immoral code of conduct, he is attempting – with the same methods – to evolve a moral one.'²⁸

For all his complaining about the Agency and his wish to be left alone as a private citizen to carry out his personal vendettas, he also clearly retains a great deal of loyalty to Control. His regular willingness to give up his contacts, offer advice, or engage in a mission for the very organization that he is apparently so determined to condemn and turn his back upon, suggests that he still holds some respect for the organization that moulded him, even while he holds contempt for its excesses. Audiences are left, therefore, with the sense that there is essentially nothing wrong with the CIA or its more brutal methods provided they are employed in the name of a justifiable cause. The problem has been that the masters of the Agency had misdirected their agents and their skills. The solution then is not to disband or exert greater bureaucratic and political control over the Agency's activities – indeed McCall treats such limitations with contempt at various points in the series – but simply to ensure that right-minded individuals such as McCall, his sometime sidekick and former fellow agent Mickey Kostmayer, or even Control, are left to reform the nature of the organization and move it on to a more righteous path. As McCall is reminded in one episode, the work of the Agency is 'not evil; it's a craft. As long as the objective is sane, it's not evil.' In this respect, the series can be read as being

²⁸ Ibid., p. 10.

reflective of the Reaganite belief in stripping away bureaucratic and political limits, a faith in the United States as ‘a force for good’, and in the power of rugged individualism. As one critic observed in the early days of the series, *The Equalizer* could be seen as ‘a call to the United States to act as it sees fit and not allow its alliances to restrain it’, since McCall believed there should be ‘no limits to his actions if he is justified.’ The avenging hero of the series could, therefore, be regarded as the personification of ‘global unilateralism in action’.²⁹ In her *Ms.* article, Jefferson rejected such claims, noting that unlike some other action heroes of the time, McCall ‘does not have a poster of President Reagan on his office wall’.³⁰

Nonetheless, despite its often scathing criticisms of the Agency and its ways, the programme affirms the necessity of a secretive intelligence service that is required to protect the US and its people from all manner of threats. It advocates that such a service needs to be run on stronger moral ground, however, at least in terms of the objectives and missions that it pursues, while it privileges the values of loyalty, patriotism and a strong work ethic – characteristics that might be argued as having been taken to extremes by several of Reagan’s foot soldiers, not least NSC staff member Oliver North and various members of the CIA who became entangled in the Iran–Contra affair. The scandal, which further tarnished the reputation of the CIA, became public while *The Equalizer* entered its second season. One of the most tangible issues between McCall and the Agency that came through as a major criticism of the CIA’s approach was the lack of trust between agents in the organization and between the Agency and the American people. McCall appears desperate to rebuild that trust – between himself and Control, with his son and his ex-wife, and moreover with his clients for whom he becomes father figure, caretaker, protector and teacher as he takes them into his fold, resolves their problems and shows them how to stand on their own two feet. Ultimately, *The Equalizer* suggests, the CIA is redeemable, no matter how rotten it may appear at its core.

IV

If *The Equalizer* appeared to suggest that one way for the CIA to improve its reputation was to engender greater trust among the people, the most significant US television drama to feature the CIA in the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall seemed to smash that possibility to pieces. The science-fiction/horror/spy genre crossover *The X-Files* held as one of its central principles that its viewers should ‘Trust no-one’. *The X-Files* was a hugely successful phenomenon, running for nine seasons between September 1993 and May 2002, and incorporating the

²⁹ Quoted anonymously *ibid.*, p. 13.

³⁰ Jefferson, ‘Some kind of hero’, p. 10.

transfer to the big screen for two motion picture episodes, although the second of these bore little relationship to the main arc of the TV series. The 'X-Files' of the programme's title were unsolved FBI cases involving the paranormal and other strange phenomena that gradually revealed, as the seasons developed, an increasingly complex and wide-ranging set of conspiracies involving a shadow government and alien infiltrators. The heroes in the series were two FBI agents – the conspiracy-embracing 'true believer' Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) and the sceptical scientist turned Special Agent Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson). Although the series was centred on these FBI agents and increasingly the FBI Assistant Director Walter Skinner (Mitch Pileggi), the CIA also played a prominent if often ambiguous role.

Mulder and Scully's main nemesis throughout all nine seasons was the mysterious and menacing agent known as the 'Cigarette Smoking Man', or 'Cancer Man' as Mulder liked to call him. Although the character was eventually revealed to be a key operative with 'The Syndicate' – the shadow government group at the heart of the programme's conspiracies – his association with and indeed membership of the CIA was suggested from early in the series. Indeed, for his second appearance, in the first-season episode 'Young at Heart', he is actually listed in the credits as 'CIA Man' rather than 'Smoking Man' as he was usually credited. Throughout most of the episodes, his origins, true identity and even his loyalties were very deliberately shrouded in secrecy or subject to confusing claims and counterclaims. In the fourth episode of Season Four, the audience was treated to a long and detailed explanation of his past in 'Musings of a Cigarette Smoking Man'. The veracity of the story revealed in the episode is never confirmed and may well be yet another elaborate fabrication within the longer story arc, but it entangles the Cigarette Smoking Man, and by implication the CIA, in a number of key historical events, and a few less significant ones. A young Cancer Man is seen assassinating John F. Kennedy and framing Lee Harvey Oswald; five years later he suggests and then carries out the murder of Martin Luther King Jr; and later still he orchestrates the sexual harassment scandal over the nomination of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, rigs the trial of Rodney King, fixes the Super Bowl, and even seems to sow the ideas for the screenplay of the Tom Hanks film *Forrest Gump*³¹

Most readings of the Cigarette Smoking Man conclude that he is treacherous, devoid of morality, even the personification of all that is evil in modern political power. Yet Timothy Dunn and Joseph J. Foy have argued that there is a more positive reading that can be made, one that is shared by actor William B. Davis, who played him throughout the series. According to Dunn and Foy, he is 'not a sinister villain but

³¹ 'Musings of a Cigarette Smoking Man', *The X-Files Wiki*, <http://www.x-files.wikia.com/wiki/Musings_of_a_Cigarette_Smoking_Man> [accessed 17 Nov. 2014].

rather a hero compelled by extraordinary circumstances to lie, deceive, and even kill, all for the sake of protecting humanity. He is one of the few people with the courage and steely resolve to do what is necessary, even if it means ignoring traditional moral norms.' Ultimately, they conclude, it can be argued that he 'should be honoured, not condemned, for what he does'.³² This reading of the Cigarette Smoking Man could actually be applied to the Central Intelligence Agency itself. Advocates and defenders of the Agency would argue that it has been misunderstood, the significance of its role in maintaining world peace and security ignored or denied, and the necessity of its methods and sometime ruthlessness unappreciated.

Unlikely as it would probably seem to most viewers of *The X-Files*, the central nemesis of the Cigarette Smoking Man could emerge from all the conspiracies, red herrings, bluffs and double-bluffs as a politically significant and even sympathetic character who is working against all odds to protect the United States and the wider world from the deadly threats they face, much as the CIA would argue it is doing in its global intelligence work. As Michele Malach has observed: 'Cancer Man, as his lack of proper name indicates, represents something much larger and more significant than himself, the power of these hidden levels of government to see all, know all, and reveal only what they think others need to know.'³³ As he explains with Mulder holding a gun to his head in Second Season episode 'One Breath', the sacrifices he has made have been worth it because 'I believe what I'm doing is right. . . . If people were to know the things that I know, it would fall apart. . . . You can kill me now, but you'll never know the truth.' At this stage in the series, Mulder is unable to destroy the Cigarette Smoking Man seemingly because he understands that for all his immorality and menace, just like the Agency he represents, he may well serve some higher purpose that may be as necessary as it is unsavoury.

For Douglas Kellner, *The X-Files* raised 'questions concerning dominant institutions, ideologies and values'.³⁴ Kellner argued that the series challenges 'the working of contemporary society, puts in question oppositions between science and reason and their other, and subverts the conventions of traditional commercial television to an unparalleled extent'. It provides 'challenging texts through which we can engage . . . the fundamental sociopolitical and cultural issues of our time'.³⁵ Yet

³² Timothy Dunn and Joseph J. Foy, 'Moral musings on a Cigarette Smoking Man', in Dean A. Kowalski (ed.), *The Philosophy of The X-Files* (Lexington, KY, 2009), pp. 142–58, at p. 143.

³³ Michele Malach, '“I want to believe . . . in the FBI”: the special agent and *The X-Files*', in David Lavery, Angela Hague and Marla Cartwright (eds), *Deny All Knowledge: Reading the X-Files* (London, 1996), pp. 63–76, at p. 74.

³⁴ Douglas Kellner, 'The X-Files and the aesthetics and politics of postmodern pop', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 57/2 (1999), pp. 161–75.

³⁵ Douglas Kellner, 'The X-Files and conspiracy: a diagnostic critique', in Peter Knight (ed.), *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America* (New York and London, 2002), pp. 205–32, at p. 206.

while the series ‘capitalizes on popular discourses of paranoia and conspiracy, articulates negative views of government, and attracts an audience critical of existing institutions’, it also manages to appeal to ‘both antiauthoritarian and establishment audiences’ because, as Kellner concludes, it also ‘upholds belief in authority, justice, hard work, and other dominant societal values’.³⁶ The political messages conveyed in *The X-Files* were, therefore, as multi-layered and complex as the story arc or ‘mythology’ at the core of the series. Kellner celebrates the series for serving as a ‘fitting icon for an age that is attempting to resolve turbulent conflicts over values, culture, institutions, and the organization of society’.³⁷ Writing in *The Independent* newspaper in the UK, however, John Lyttle argued that the *X-Files* was not political at all but was actually ‘instead of politics’. In contrast to the more radical readings of the programme, Lyttle pointed out the major problem with the subjects of the episodes and ultimately the political insignificance of the series:

Scully and Mulder don’t want to wake you up to, and be responsible for, say, CIA involvement in the illegal overthrow of Chile’s President Allende, or even the budget deficit. They want you to wake up to, and be responsible for, the Loch Ness monster, for liver-eating mutants who live for hundreds of years, for Bigfoot. Which is no responsibility at all.³⁸

The X-Files may have challenged much conventional wisdom, but with its focus on the fantastical it peddled conspiracy theories that suggested dark forces had taken over the US government from within but made such claims not only commonplace but also ridiculous. The CIA was present as part of the shadowy government conspiracy at the heart of the series, but its depiction was so incredible that no matter how much Fox Mulder wanted you to believe, it was difficult to mount any serious critique of the CIA using any of the arguments of the series as a basis because they rendered the CIA, and indeed other agencies such as the NSA and even the FBI, into powerless pawns in a larger game of ultra-elites colluding with a characterless alien race to infiltrate, dominate and ultimately repopulate the planet. While the Cigarette Smoking Man and his fellow protagonists may well have been members of the CIA, the critical edge in the Agency’s portrayal in *The X-Files* became lost in the ever more convoluted plot lines and increasingly desperate manner of Mulder’s mission to expose ‘the truth’. In the Fifth Season episode ‘The Pine Bluff Variant’, when Mulder repeats his mantra ‘I want people to know the truth’, a CIA agent responds: ‘Well sometimes our job is to protect those people from knowing it.’ As a whole, it appears that is exactly what *The X-Files* manages to do. The truth may well be out there, but the critical mass of *The X-Files* 202 TV episodes is unlikely to do very much to help its viewers uncover it. While it does

³⁶ Ibid., p. 229.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ John Lyttle, ‘Do we need *The X-Files*?’, *Independent*, 6 May 1996.

challenge its audience to ask questions and challenge authority, it directs those questions only rather obliquely at the distribution of political power in the United States or at questions concerning the methods and objectives of the US intelligence services. It may have seemed strange that such an apparently radical and challenging programme was one of Fox TV's most successful productions, but by diverting attention away from the more tangible aspects of power relations in the United States, the series did little ultimately to undermine or upset the conservative biases of the Murdoch empire.

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Having had its reputation shaken to its core during the revelatory days of the 1970s, the CIA continued to suffer public image problems during the 1980s and 1990s. Television dramas did little to obviate this position during the period despite the efforts of the Agency's Office of Public Affairs to promote programming that would reflect its intelligence gathering work in a better light. It would not be until 1996 that the CIA would appoint its first entertainment industry liaison officer, Chase Brandon, long after other government agencies had opened formal relations with film and television companies.³⁹ Those few American television dramas that were produced in the interregnum between the demise of the 'man of mystery' spy series in the early 1970s and the rise of the post-'9/11' glut of 'war on terror' era dramas served a significant but often overlooked role in attempting to engage with the CIA's perceived problems, while in each case also asserting the need for an Agency that could more effectively and successfully fulfil its role as the protector of US interests as well as (preferably) US values and principles.

The three series analysed here – *Scarecrow and Mrs King*, *The Equalizer* and *The X-Files* – each offered critiques of the CIA as an agency and of the tactics and practices it had adopted. These critiques were not unproblematic, but they did in each case offer audiences opportunities to reflect on the role of the CIA both in US foreign policy and within US society more generally, all within the relatively safe bounds of prime-time television. The format of *Scarecrow and Mrs King* may appear particularly safe – the focus on a largely naive amateur sidekick who stumbles into the intelligence business and then regularly relies on the macho professional spy hero for her salvation from the bad guys. Yet there is more nuance in the series than a mere surface-based reading such as this would suggest. Mrs King is often critical of the methods used by Scarecrow, and her own more values-based, less violent approach usually reaps the greatest rewards. The programme often unsettles archetypal spy drama conventions in ways that challenge the

³⁹ Tricia Jenkins, *The CIA in Hollywood: How the Agency Shapes Film and Television* (Austin, TX, 2012).

audience to consider how secret intelligence services might be redeemed if they were to adopt greater ingenuity, traditional values and perhaps more patience in their operations. Unlike most cinematic depictions of an irredeemable CIA during the period, *Scarecrow and Mrs King* depicts an Agency with faults but one that can be revived and serve an essential purpose in national security, provided it is closer to the people (as represented by Mrs King) and more accountable.

The Equalizer is unrelenting at times in its deep criticism, through McCall, of the Agency that he is trying desperately to leave behind. Yet here too the redemptive aspects can be applied not only to the central character but also more broadly to the Agency itself. There is ambiguity, even hypocrisy, in *The Equalizer*'s transposition of the same tough, often brutal or lethal methods that are much criticized when used for ill purposes by the Agency but celebrated when employed supposedly for good by McCall. The self-reflective nature of Woodward's portrayal of the guilt-ridden but self-assured ex-agent, however, enables audiences to reflect and critically engage with difficult questions concerning the CIA's legitimacy and accountability when it acts in the name of domestic safety and national security. *The Equalizer* may be as full of high octane chases and shoot-outs as any other action series of the era, but there is a critical core that often outweighs the cartoon-like resolution of many of its stories, and offers a wide-ranging interpretation of the CIA, what it has been, and what it could be.

Of the US drama series that featured the CIA during the 1980s and 1990s, *The X-Files* seems to go the furthest in unsettling, even attacking, official narratives and the dominant culture. Although it may obfuscate much of its critique of the US government and of the CIA specifically with its ever more complicated conspiracies and 'monster of the week' plots, it nonetheless serves as an example of a television drama that challenges convention and actually implores its audience not to trust in authority, or indeed anything else. The danger is that the highly addictive, heady mix of sci-fi, thriller, detective mystery, horror and the paranormal ends up stultifying rather than stimulating its audience. In some respects, although it seems a more radical and alternative series than its predecessors analysed here, *The X-Files* is the more conservative series because the critiques it offers are so incredible and outlandish that an acceptance that the 'real world' status quo is actually 'the truth' becomes an almost natural conclusion.

Taken together, however, all three series are examples of how television dramas can ask questions of their viewers, engage with critical issues in contemporary society and push the boundaries of what we expect to see in our televisual entertainment. They may not have offered very much insight into what the CIA was actually doing in Iran, Chile, Central America, or eastern Europe, or even on the home front where most of their episodes were based, but through their storylines each series did confront the public image of the CIA, question its ethos and its methods, and offer some alternative viewpoints on how the Agency

might develop its role and approach. Each series, even the seemingly more conventional *Scarecrow and Mrs King*, attempted to push beyond stereotypes of the CIA and its agents, upset the usual balance between gender roles, and refused to give the kind of closed, unambiguous viewpoints that so many US television dramas offered their audiences during the period. They contributed significantly to the cultural representation of the CIA in the final years of the Cold War and then the initial period beyond the fall of Soviet communism.

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 opened a new era of spy dramas that featured the CIA and its agents often as protectors of the United States, going against the odds to foil terrorist plots, uncover subterfuge within and counter the array of threats facing the United States. Yet much of the ambiguity of the 1980s and 1990s dramas analysed here remained in post-‘9/11’ dramas and clear influences can be seen, not least in *24*, which was co-created by Joel Surnow, former Supervising Producer and one of the main writers on *The Equalizer*. Robert McCall may well have been equally if not more appalled by the methods employed by the CIA in the pursuit of the ‘war on terror’ as he was by the Cold War practices of the Agency. Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland), the main protagonist of *24*, is also a former CIA agent, but unlike McCall he has no qualms about continuing to use the brutal methods he learned at the Agency, remains an operative for a government agency, and never fails to show tireless loyalty to his country, even when he falls prey to corruption within the system he is serving to protect and is forced to go ‘rogue’ to ensure justice prevails. The relationship between the CIA and the producers of US television dramas may well be closer now than it was in the 1980s and 1990s. Especially in the initial years after 11 September 2001, the depictions of the CIA were largely more positive than they had been for some time. Yet the portrayals of the CIA and its operatives that had been popularized by *Scarecrow and Mrs King*, *The Equalizer* and *The X-Files* left their mark on programme-makers. As the CIA’s public image took further hits as a result of its role in the ‘war on terror’, television dramas again began to reflect a more ambiguous reading of the Agency that owed much to those programmes made in the two decades before ‘9/11’.