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“JUSTICE THROUGH STRENGTH AND COURAGE!”
TELEVISION AND COLD WAR CHILDHOODS
IN THE 1950s

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**“Justice Through Strength and Courage!” Television and North American Cold War
Childhoods in the 1950s**

Synopsis:

The 1950s was Canada’s first televised decade: a period during which the majority of Canadian families became television consumers and watched programs produced both by the country’s national broadcaster, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and by private networks across the border in the United States. It was also the height of the Baby Boom, when the country’s largest generation was born and grew up watching television. The expansion of mass culture on the small screen caused significant anxiety among Canadian adults who worried about television’s disruption of family life and its long-term consequences for children’s education, health, and identities.

Justice through Strength and Courage: Television and North American Cold War Childhoods

From 1954 to 1956, and then through syndication in the early 1960s, American and Canadian children followed the adventures of a Korean War hero battling diverse Cold War evils in the exciting Saturday morning serial, “Captain Midnight.” Because this series was overtly situated in the geopolitical realities and fears of the Cold War era, it offers an ideal window into the messages provided to North American children through the new medium of television concerning security, gender and ethnicity.

The thirty-nine black and white episodes were not just action-packed fantasies for children’s entertainment, but also acted to contain childhood within the Cold War domestic home front in North America.

Television was a new and novel technology when Captain Midnight first appeared on the small screen in 1954. Americans and Canadians bought televisions by the millions in the 1950s; by the end of the decade the majority of households in both countries contained at least one tv set.

Many Canadians watched American television. Signals from the major US networks travelled across the border, and Canada's only station until 1958, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, also purchased content from US networks to fill its schedule.

Captain Midnight aired on the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS network) and, compared to many other children's programs from the 1950s, had high production values.

Captain Midnight began as a radio drama in 1938, with the back story of a young Great War American aviator, Charles "Red" Albright, who earned the moniker Captain Midnight when he successfully returned from a particularly dangerous and crucial mission on the stroke of midnight.¹

The radio programme lasted until the end of 1949, and naturally Captain Midnight engaged in dangerous missions throughout World War II. The serial aired during the dinner hour (also known as the children's hour of programming), but young people may not have been its only audience.

According to Stephen A. Kallis Jr, a pilot and unabashed fan of radio's Captain Midnight, the program was "the favorite of many US Army Air Corps flight crews when stationed in the United States."²

And there was a Canadian connection right from the outset. Captain Midnight's nemesis, Ivan Shark, was imprisoned in Canada on kidnapping charges.

Like many children's radio programmes, Captain Midnight engaged in direct to children marketing. During the 1940s, when Ovaltine became the sponsor of Captain Midnight, the show became "one of the most generous dispensers of radio premiums on the airwaves."³

These perks, which would be acquired through submitting proofs of purchase from Ovaltine cans, included Secret Squadron decoder badges which enabled the young members to de-code "important messages from headquarters." These premiums were expanded on television and included colourful cups and mugs with Captain Midnight's image and cloth patches identifying the wearer as a member of the Secret Squadron.

During every episode of the television series, the young viewers were encouraged to place themselves in the story through identification with a young actor/Secret Squadron member who interacted with Captain Midnight in the plot. Sometimes the Secret Squadron member would initiate the story by contacting Captain Midnight for assistance in the crisis.

Other times, which would be more exciting for the viewers, Captain Midnight called upon a Secret Squadron member by number (such as SQ 410) to be part of the action.

TV's Captain Midnight operated from a technologically advanced and secret headquarters portending Bruce Wayne's Bat Cave. Captain Midnight was played by Richard Webb, whose athletic good looks and personal convictions made him a completely believable embodiment of Western Cold War values.

He had two contrasting sidekicks. Aristotle "Tut" Jones, played by Olan Soule, was the brilliant research scientist dedicated to preserving the state, whose skinny frame and spectacles represented the trope of the brainy nerd. Indeed, Tut Jones bore a striking resemblance to Dilton Doiley, Archie Andrew's smart friend in the Archie Comics. Like Dilton, Tut was a non-threatening, helpful communicator of science whose role would encourage young viewers to see the importance of technological innovation in winning the Cold War.

The Captain's main companion is a more complex character, Ichabod "Ikky" Mudd, whom Captain Midnight describes in the first episode as the "best flight engineer in seventy states."⁴ Yet Ikky is conceptualized as the most identifiable character for the young audience.

He asks innumerable basic questions, exhibits fear, boredom, and immaturity, yet he is intensely loyal and fights alongside the Captain in direct combat. Played by the veteran comic actor Sid Melton, Ikky is of short stature and indeterminate ethnic background, suggesting the loyal contributions of White immigrants to American society.

On the other hand, the immigrant was kept firmly in a subordinate position, as demonstrated in an episode when a young Secret Squadron member gave Ikky a direct order in Captain Midnight's absence, even though Ikky was SQ #2.⁵

Every episode began in the secret Headquarters, usually with Tut demonstrating some new gadget, weapon or chemical innovation. Inevitably, the demonstration is interrupted by a phone call or important visitor to Headquarters asking for the Captain's help in some crisis or mystery.

The Captain and Ikky would then travel in the Silver Dart, which was a Douglas Aircraft supersonic jet prototype, to the domestic or foreign scene of the action. The episodes were eclectic in plot, drawing from both current events, such as tensions in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, and from other genres, such as westerns and family drama.

Captain Midnight, Ikky and Tut fought foreign spies from indeterminate Eastern European nations, smugglers and criminals – as well as just mean adults – for the entertainment and edification of young viewers. In the process, the series was conscripting children in the cause of fighting the constant threat posed by unnamed, foreign powers.

These ‘evils’ had to be overcome within the home and the community, as well as in the larger world, through maintaining strict gender distinctions and unequivocal capitalist values. Programmes like Captain Midnight brought the Cold War into the living room every Saturday morning, normalizing the idea that all aspects of life could be mobilized against enemies of the state, and encouraging children to take an active role in civil defense.

Numerous episodes of the series include boys who join Ikky as Captain Midnight’s proteges. Many adventure and science fiction serials on television in the 1950s featured male protégés; as historian Robert Jacobs notes, these young men were part of a long tradition of boy-heroes that included Tom Sawyer, Jim Hawkins, and, later, the Hardy Boys.⁶ These boys were characters that viewers could relate to, and through which they could experience some of the action themselves.

But in addition to creating a space in the narrative for young viewers, the boy helpers of Captain Midnight also modelled a Cold War masculinity based on discipline and loyalty to North American children. Unlike Captain Midnight's more mature masculinity, to which they could aspire, the actions of the boy characters in the serial were ones that children could emulate immediately, modelling the principled yet compliant masculinity of young male Secret Squadron members.

The episode Deadly Diamonds provides a typical example. Captain Midnight and Ikky travel to New Mexico to investigate diamond smuggling on both sides of the southern border, and Captain Midnight enlists the help of SQ248, Jimmy Sawyer.

Jimmy is typical of most Secret Squadron members who were almost exclusively white and either working or middle class, as represented by their homes, possessions, or references to their parents' incomes or occupations. These boys are always eager to meet Captain Midnight and to be of assistance, and obedient – if spunky – helpers in the mission. The adults around them are typically more skeptical of the Captain.

In Jimmy's case, he's an orphan and his guardian is much less enthusiastic about Captain Midnight's arrival (disguised as Jimmy's friend, Pete).

Jimmy will inherit his parents' ranch, the Running W, when he's old enough, but, as he tells Captain Midnight as they ride through the bush to Wild Horse Canyon, he's worried he will lose it because back taxes are owed. Jimmy follows the Captain as he pieces together the mystery.

When it turns out some of the Running W employees are helping to smuggle diamonds inside horseshoes, Jimmy doesn't believe it, but quickly accepts the logic of the evidence. While Jimmy is clearly a teenager and experienced horseman, some of the other Squadron members are much younger.

Despite their age, when the episode reaches its climax and the wrong-doers are caught, Captain Midnight always orders his helpers to stay back, out of danger. While some look disappointed to be excluded from the confrontation, everyone is compliant. The episode *Deadly Diamonds* resolves quickly, with Jimmy learning that "Uncle Sam pays well for the recovery of contraband."

Not only will the reward money cover the back taxes on the ranch, but Captain Midnight has arranged for the Sheriff to become Jimmy's new guardian. A grateful Jimmy is told that he need not thank the Captain – he earned it for his part in the mission.

If Secret Squadron boys modelled a compliant masculinity in line with Cold War defense, the less frequent portrayal of young female Secret Squadron members offered viewers a representation of girls working alongside boys to help Captain Midnight. This was unique among popular programmes in the 1950s such as *I Love Lucy* and *Father Knows Best*, in which women attempted to move beyond the female realm usually met failure, disdain, or laughter.⁷

In space and science fiction programs, however, women were portrayed as “competent professionals and equal contributors to their crews, demonstrating to young female viewers... that intellect, along with scientific and technological skill, were not the sole property of men.”⁸ Secret Squadron girls appeared in a handful of episodes. For instance, in “Flight Into the Unknown,” SQ369 is a young girl who calls Captain Midnight to locate her missing father.

In so doing, she is going against her mother’s wishes to maintain family privacy by appealing to Midnight’s authority. While the young girl initiates the mission, she remains at home with her mother while the Captain searches for her father. In another episode, “Master Criminal,” Tut is kidnapped and Captain Midnight calls on two Secret Squadron members, one girl and one boy, on opposite sides of the country to help him locate Tut.

The girl had an equally active role in the mission as the boy, transforming her pocket locator to pick up the high frequency signals being emitted from the Tut's transmitter, and relaying back to Captain Midnight at headquarters.

Other positive images of active girls were found in the omnipresent Ovaltine ads, in which boys are portrayed parachute jumping and commanding a ship while girls are seen as Red Cross nurses and in vital military work. In all of these activities, young girls like Eileen Collins, the first woman to command the space shuttle, were introduced to inspiring role models for the "technology of the future."⁹ [Ovaltine clip 1:07]

Directly related to Cold War fears and realities were episodes which involved nuclear testing, bombs and fallout. There was no concern exhibited regarding the physical and environmental effects of nuclear blasting; rather, the focus was on preparedness and winning the arms race for the good of the world.

In at least two episodes, a nuclear blast is domesticated and normalized into a military exercise where the characters blithely fly in and out of ground zero, taking their time to exit the blast site "before the fallout landed."

In “Isle of Mystery,” which takes place on a imagined south Pacific island of Luana, Captain Midnight convinces the Queen of a stereotypical backward and racially inferior tribe to cooperate with the American military and abandon her island for a nuclear test [show clip Isle of Mystery, 20:44-22:49].

While this would appear unimaginable by 21st century sensibilities, it was acceptable within the context of Atomic bomb testing in Nevada, for instance, where residents of nearby Las Vegas would participating in blast parties, climbing onto their roofs to watch the mushroom clouds.¹⁰ [show pictures] Subsequent cases of leukemia only presented themselves decades later.

Because the programme was such a thorough proponent of American military preparedness, the producer, George Bilson, was able to get Pentagon support for the use of some stock military footage.

As Bilson wrote in his presentation to the military, “the objectives of the Captain Midnight program are to promote interest in children; make excitement wholesome, foster constructive social attitudes; develop a respect for good citizenship and fine personal qualities, develop self-reliance, and to promote interest in our current events.”¹¹

Beyond the obvious global dimensions of the Cold War, such as hydrogen bomb testing and espionage, Captain Midnight also addressed domestic Cold War issues such as the importance of a proper home life to raise future patriotic citizens. In this respect, the content followed the post-WWII Freudian concerns of juvenile delinquency caused by absent or feeble fathers and inept or weak mothers.

Juvenile delinquency is addressed directly in an episode called “The Young Criminals” where a mother in a tenement district of an unknown eastern city contacts Captain Midnight because she is worried about her teenaged son. When Captain Midnight arrives on the scene he discovers the culprit to be a nefarious POOL HALL, channeling the contemporary musical, The Music Man.

The pool hall owner, Big Vic, is a criminal adult role model to a gang of young boys who he seconds into smuggling illegal goods. After Captain Midnight sizes up the situation, he understands that the boy, Tommy, needs more than a quick technological fix, and he and Ikky rent space next door to the pool hall to build a gym and boys club to siphon the gang of boys away from criminal activity and into wholesome athletics.

At the end of the episode the reformed Tommy gets to fly the Silver Dart and promises Captain Midnight that he will run the club in his stead, becoming the neighbourhood role model. In a similar way, in several other episodes Captain Midnight steps in to fill the role of surrogate father.

We are in the early stages of this research, and our questions continue to emerge with our close reading of the episodes.

Queries include how typical Captain Midnight's Cold War perspective was in children's programming at this time; how did children react and respond to these images and ideologies; how much did Canadian children's adventure programming, such as The Forest Rangers, differ in perspective from American adventures such as westerns, animal shows and science fiction; how accessible were American Cold War programmes like Captain Midnight to Canadian children and how was this reflected in the consumption of promotional materials and militarized toys such as ray guns, battleships, and so forth?

Beyond the cringeworthy depictions of race, nuclear war and contrived dialogue, Captain Midnight did encourage both boys and girls to see themselves as active participants in battles between good and evil, even if it meant disobeying their parents and other authority figures for the greater good.

¹ Patrick Lucanio & Gary Coville, *American Science Fiction Television Series of the 1950s: Episode Guides and Casts and Credits for Twenty Shows* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co. Inc., 1998), p. 84.

² Stephen A. Kallis, Jr, *Radio's Captain Midnight: The Wartime Biography* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co. Inc., 2000), p. 3.

³ Luciano & Coville, *American Science Fiction*, p. 85.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁵ "Deadly Diamonds" episode, Sept 18, 1954.

⁶ Robert Jacobs, "Boy's Wonder: Male Teenage Assistants in 1950s Science Fiction Serials and Cold War Masculinity," in Miller and Van Riper, eds., *Rocketman*, p. 53.

⁷ Amy Foster, "Girls and Space Fever," in Miller *et al*, *1950s Rocketman*, p. 69.

⁸ Amy Foster, "Girls and Space Fever," p.70.

⁹ Amy Foster, "Girls and Space Fever," p.70.

¹⁰ "Electronic Killer" episode, Sept 11, 1954.

¹¹ Mick Broderick, "Justice through Strength and Courage: Captain Midnight and the Military-Industrial Complex," in Cynthia J. Miller, A. Bowdoin Van Riper, eds. *1950s "Rocketman" TV Series and Their Fans: Cadets, Rangers, and Junior Space Men* (NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), p. 199.