

Black Hat for Uncle Sam

By Russell Baker



FOR politicians and other Washington careerists, there was some hair-raising writing the other night on the parlor wall, or at least on that part of it occupied by the television set.

In a two-hour episode of "Cannon," a popular private-eye series about an overweight Sam Spade, "the Assistant Attorney General of the United States" was portrayed as a murderous gangster in the hire of a megalomaniac with uncertain but vaguely political ambitions. In the course of the evening, we saw this Federal eminence issue orders for the corruption of justice, kill an inconvenient Mafia-type capo, conspire in a mass murder reminiscent of the Sharon Tate affair, and, finally, go off to trial for the murder of a prostitute.

Actually, there is no such person as "the Assistant Attorney General of the United States." There is a Deputy Attorney General, and under him there are three Associate Deputy Attorneys General. Farther down the organization chart, there are nine Assistant Attorneys General. The implication of "Cannon," however, was that this particular felon was No. 2 in the Department of Justice, a post that would soon elevate him to Cabinet rank.

The political absurdity of this—even the Deputy Attorney General is rarely promoted to the big job, which is a political gift of the President—is beside the point. The point is that shows like "Cannon" depend to a great extent on seeming plausible to that mass audience which the Nixon people used to call "Peoria."

"It will play in Peoria," they used to say of Nixon's more patronizing campaign scenarios, and they often did. "Cannon" has to "play in Peoria," too, and the people responsible for shows like this understand just as clearly as the Nixon people what Peoria wants to hear.

Nobody in Washington can be much cheered by the judgment of these professional analysts of public psychology that the mass audience is now perfectly willing to accept crime in the Justice Department as a plausible fictional conceit. The folks watching that show, fellows, are the American electorate. Once every two years, they rise, turn their backs on the TV set, go out to the polls and pull levers.

A few years ago, no television network would have dared present a melodrama suggesting that the upper drawer of the Federal Government was infested with gangsters and killers. Television is not a courageous industry. It rarely dabbles in entertain-

ment that might offend the lowest-common-denominator audience.

Its typical approach to Government fiction until now has been Efrem Zimbalist Jr., performing heroics for the F.B.I. Zimbalist's bushy actor's haircut would have disqualified him at once for real service in the ranks of J. Edgar Hoover, but Hoover was too shrewd a promoter to let sideburns deprive him of all that sweet publicity.

In that era, any television producer who had proposed an episode depicting Zimbalist as an agent writing anonymous letters urging public figures to kill themselves would doubtless have been blackballed from the industry. Had such a show, by some cosmic accident, ever appeared, the public hue and cry would surely have toppled an entire network.

When CBS a few years ago presented a relatively innocuous documentary pointing out that the Pentagon was spending millions to aggrandize and propagandize itself as a splendid institution, great men trembled and the

OBSERVER

trees of Washington bent under the fury of Congressional rage.

Now we have a prime-time entertainment based on the assumption that conspirators and killers may very well be running things in the Justice Department, and the public appears to find it neither outrageous nor implausible. Watergate, assassination conspiracy theorists, disclosures of C.I.A. traffic with the Mafia and reports of the F.B.I.'s criminal activities seem to have left us ready to believe the absolute worst about everything in Washington.

This opens a new field for television, which desperately needs one this season. For the first time in its history, it can turn from black-hatted gunmen, street hoodlums, spies, private sadists and murderous chiselers, and send its heroic cowboys, cops and private eyes after a brand new bunch of bad guys—the infamous Uncle Sam Gang.

The politician as bag man has always been an acceptable figure of fiction, but now we are ready for the ambassador as thief, the Cabinet Secretary as killer, the Congressman as rapist and—why not?—the President as Mister Big, running the Mafia as a tool for his real employer, Moscow's giant international espionage network.

A mass television audience that will sit still for even a little bit of this is not an audience to make a politician's heart sing as re-election morn approaches. Next year should be an excellent season to run against anybody with the bad luck to be in office, or even just against Washington.

Strange things are playing in Peoria, all you folks in Potomacland.