David M. Lawrence
MATX 601
Textual Analysis: Have Gun—Will Travel

Have Gun—Will Travel is an iconic television western that ran on CBS from 1957 to 1963. The series starred Richard Boone, a craggy faced tough—far from the typical Hollywood leading man—who plays a professional gunfighter named Paladin. Paladin carries a simple business card featuring the image of a chess knight with the words "HAVE GUN WILL TRAVEL" printed across the midsection of the knight. Below the knight are the worlds:

WIRE PALADIN
SAN FRANCISCO

Paladin is a mysterious character. While he lives well at the Hotel Carlton in San Francisco, we know little of his background. No other name other than "Paladin" is ever offered, and one episode suggests that Paladin could be an alias. He is evidently well-educated from the ease at which he can cite literature and history, his command of languages and science, and his recollections of his world travels. He has friends among the world's royalty and many Indian tribes. We occasionally hear that he went to West Point and that he fought in the Civil War, but we never learn which side he served. He is skilled in martial arts and internationally renowned for his hunting prowess. He enjoys fine food, wine, and cigars (and carries a few in his boot when on a job). He plays classical piano. When we see him at the Carlton, he is dressed quite well in light-colored garb—he appears as something of a dandy—but when on the job, his clothing is simple: black shirt, pants, belt, boots, and hat. He has a deep passion for and knowledge of the law (and often carries a copy of relevant regulations to challenge those who insist on misremembering them).

He is good and he knows it, generally charging at least $1,000 per job. Although he sometimes dissembles his allegiances, he has a strong sense of ethics—he sometimes forgoes his fees for deserving but poor clients or finds ways to get the villains to pay for the jobs he takes on. In that sense, his name, Paladin, is appropriate—it is derived from the name of the legendary Twelve Peers of Charlemagne's court who were heroes in a number of medieval and Renaissance romances.

Paladin's tools are meticulously crafted and cared for. His primary weapon is a custom-made .45-caliber Colt Army revolver (kept in a holster embossed with the image of the chess knight from his calling card). In the first episode, a skeptical prospective client asks to see the gun and thinks he's disarmed the "overdressed tin solder" after Paladin hands him the weapon. Paladin smartly retrieves it and says:

> I don't think you got a very good look at this gun while you had it. Its balance is perfect. This trigger responds to a pressure of one ounce. You look carefully in the barrel, you'll see the lines of rifling. It's a rarity in a hand weapon. This gun was hand-crafted to my specifications, and I rarely draw it unless I mean to use it. Would you care for a demonstration?[1]

He has two other weapons. When he rides, he carries a custom-made lever-action Winchester rifle strapped to his saddle. The rifle, which he rarely uses, has the image of the chess knight embossed on the stock. More frequently seen in the series is a derringer—either a single barreled or an over-and-under model—hidden under his belt. The derringer comes in handy when Paladin finds himself disarmed by someone with less-than-beneficial intent.

The allusions to chess on his business card, his pistol holster, his rifle stock, and other items he possesses are not merely decorative. The show's closing theme song, *Ballad of Paladin*, refers to him as a "knight without armor" and includes the line "A chess knight of silver is his badge of

[1] "Three Bells to Perdido." *Have Gun—Will Travel: The Complete First Season*. Wri. Herb Meadow, Sam Rolfe. Perf. Richard Boone, Jack Lord, Janice Rule. Dir. Andrew V. McLaglen. CBS Broadcasting Inc. 2004. DVD.

trust." His chess master's command of strategy contributes more than his skills or his equipment to his ability to defeat opponents. Paladin acknowledges the inspiration he draws from the game—particularly from the knight, "It's a chess piece, the most versatile on the board. It can move in eight different directions, over obstacles, and it's always unsuspected."[2]

Have Gun—Will Travel, like another groundbreaking television show, *Maverick*, was an interesting take on the traditional television western. In *Maverick,* the title characters, Brett, Bart, and (later) Beau, were quite unlike the usual ramrod-straight (both in terms of posture and moral outlook) western hero. They were gamblers and genial con-men, eschewing hard work and violence, but always ready to employ a little larceny to accomplish a greater moral good. In *Have Gun—Will Travel,* Paladin is likewise an anomaly. Gunfighters were usually villains to be dispatched by the series hero, but Paladin—the hero—was a gunfighter. In typical film and television westerns of the time, villains generally wore black, but Paladin—the hero—was the one who wore black. Likewise in typical westerns of the time, heroes were about as inscrutable as a "Stop" sign, but Paladin was nothing if not a cipher, a moral cipher of course, but one whose deeper motivations remain a mystery.

Nevertheless, *Have Gun—Will Travel* reveals much about what Americans thought, what they still like to think, about this nation's aspirations and ideology.

Americans have a historical skepticism of the value of central authority. This skepticism led to the colonies' break with England, inspired the design of the U.S. government under both the Articles of Confederation and Constitution, led to the upheaval of the Civil War, and helped inspire the rise of today's Tea Party movement. Still, many of the heroes of traditional westerns of the 1950s and early 1960s were authority figures: lawmen, military men, wagon masters, and

[2] I have not been able to determine which episode this quote comes from, and whether it is from the television series or the spinoff radio series. It is widely attributed to the series—even in a collection of essays on academic libraries.

trail bosses. Support for such heroes, and for the institutions they represented such as the United Nations, ran high in the flush of optimism following victory in World War II, but began to wane following the Korean War—and all but evaporated during the years of the Vietnam War.

Paladin anticipated the antiheroes that began to appear in literature and film as American involvement in Indochina grew. He was an outsider. He left the institutionalized life of the Army for the unencumbered life of the freelancer. His life outside the "system" allowed him to cut corners—red tape—devise solutions true to the spirit of the law (and our collective morals), and succeed in solving problems that would stymie traditional, authoritarian heroes bound to follow the letter of the law. Such flexibility appealed both to the left, who value individualism, and to the right, who value order. The Paladin character paved the way for Clint Eastwood's Harry Callahan (*Dirty Harry*) and Charles Bronson's Paul Kersey (*Death Wish*)—his acts are often extralegal, maybe sometimes illegal, but ultimately just.

This "cowboy approach" to problem solving has its downsides, however. While Paladin always succeeded on the television screen, in real-life situations, such as American foreign policy, the results can be disastrous. The fantasy of expedient resolutions and disregard for international institutions and principles led in large part to the U.S. involvement in Vietnam—which is now regarded as one of America's greatest defeats. Similar fantasy and disregard has fueled America's foray into Iraq, which, as it diverted attention and resources away from a legitimate war in Afghanistan, may lead to two defeats that may prove much more devastating to America's long-term interests, and the oft-invoked cause of democracy, for decades to come.

Paladin's reliance upon the best tools reflects America's faith in technology. His weapons, of course, are exquisite—his Colt and Winchester display some of the best craftsmanship available for that time. But Paladin also relies heavily upon science, that knowledge playing key roles in

resolving conflicts that involve infectious diseases (of humans, livestock, and crops), in assessing property values, in spotting potential worker safety issues, and in evaluating crime scenes. His faith in technology parallels American faith that technology—particularly weapons and medical technology—can make the world safe for capitalism and democracy. Paladin's use of technology is always wise. He recognizes the limitations of his tools. In the real world, however, top technology has been substituted for good judgment in matters of military, health, and environmental policy. The debacle of the Vietnam War, the quagmires in Afghanistan and Iraq, the resurgence of infectious diseases once thought eradicated, and the onset of climate change and its related issue, ocean acidification, all illustrate the inherent failure of American reliance upon tools to solve all problems.

Regardless of how Americans vote—keep in mind that the series ran in the latter days of Jim Crow, America's version of apartheid, but after *Brown v. Board of Education*—they aspire to be fair-minded. Their sympathies tend to lie with the underdog, and throughout the series, Paladin turns out to be the underdogs' champion. He helped women, Mexicans, Native Americans, immigrants and religious minorities. It seems ahead of its time with its messages of tolerance, something more appropriate for the late 1960s and 1970s. Given the Reagan Revolution, 9/11, and the political football that is immigration today, Paladin's untiring efforts on behalf of the "other" may be ahead of our time, too.

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> The peculiarity of American institutions is, the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people—to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life. … Thus American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over

> again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.[3]

Frederick Jackson Turner's seminal essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," may have given rise to a discredited theory called environmental determinism, but it does accurately reflect a vision many Americans had (and have) of themselves. The frontier spirit—arguably better described as an illusion—made a lasting mark on American culture, inspiring American attitudes and policies (both positively and negatively) toward other nations, spawning entertainment genres from country & western music to western books, radio, television, and movies.

One of the results of that fecundity was *Have Gun—Will Travel*. In Paladin's fictional world, he represents the best of American aspirations. The ideals embodied in his character are timeless. In our foundational myths of heroes struggling against the wild frontier and even wilder human foes, men (and women) such as Paladin are held to be our exemplars—those who do what they must, regardless of any rules that stand in the way, to right wrongs and achieve a greater good. Our faith in our technology enables us. Our care for the powerless ennobles us. In the real world, we often fail to live up to those ideals, but we may find comfort in our failures. For, as Paladin quotes Robert Browning, "…a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?"[4]

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[3] Turner, Frederick Jackson. "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." *Proceedings of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin* (1894): 79-112.

[4] "A Matter of Ethics." *Have Gun—Will Travel: The Complete First Season*. Wri. Sam Rolfe. Perf. Richard Boone, Harold J. Stone, Angie Dickinson. Dir. Andrew V. McLaglen. CBS Broadcasting Inc. 2004. DVD.