

War's terrible toll on 'The Class of '61'

ABC film joins impressive roster

By Steven Alan McGaw

The land is scarred, ravaged. Homes and churches are destroyed, shops are looted and burned. Works of art are lost forever to senseless violence, and cemeteries are glutted with the newly turned graves of those lucky enough to receive proper burial.

Sadly, these are the familiar consequences of war. But war's highest toll is always its human cost and it is from a nation's young population that the greatest number of lives are always lost. It's an old idea - and a bitter truth - that old men send young ones to fight the wars they wish to wage.

And like an individual, a nation's darkest hour comes when it is at war with itself. Such a time came for the United States in the years 1861 to 1865, the period of conflict and horror known as the Civil War. Slavery was not the only issue - some historians say states' rights was bigger - but the moral weight of that subject overshadowed everything else.

On Monday, April 12, ABC presents *Class of '61*, adding another title to the distinguished list of films about the Civil War that includes *Gone With The Wind*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *Friendly Persuasion*, and *Glory*. Produced by Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment, the powerful made-for-television movie focuses on the early days of the war and how it affected the young men in the 1861 graduating class at West Point.

Tensions were already high at the prestigious military academy by the spring of 1861. The seceded Southern states had announced the formation of the Confederacy on Feb. 8, the Union stood firm in its positions, and both sides were readying troops for the inevitable conflict.

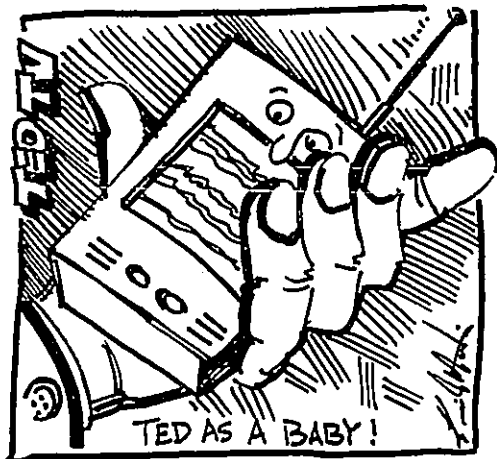
Still, the sons of Northern senators and abolitionists sat side by side with the sons of Southern planters in the classrooms of West Point. Some of them, like young Shelby Peyton (Dan Futterman) of Virginia, felt deeply torn between staying the final two months until graduation, or leaving immediately to assume a place in the Confederate army.

Then comes April 12 and the at-

tack on Fort Sumter. The war had begun and student and teacher alike left the safety and civility of the classroom for the rage and carnage of the battlefield.

Futterman offers a fine portrayal as Shelby, whose showy loyalty to the Confederacy seems at odds with the warmth he privately shares with his father's slaves, Lucius and Lavinia, powerfully played by Andre Braugher and Penny Johnson. Clive Owen is dashing as battle-hungry Irishman Devin O'Neil and Joshua Lucas is winning in his portrayal as the young George Custer. Len Carlou, Dana Ivey and Christian Anhalt all lend able support.

Class of '61 features a fine script by Emmy and Peabody Award winner Jonas McCord and skillful direction by eight-time Emmy recipient Gregory Hoblit. Noted historian Shelby Foote served as a consultant.



Cable/TV Weekly

is published every Monday by the Suburban Communications Corporation, 36251 Schoolcraft Road, Livonia, MI 48160.

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