

The image shows the Hollywood sign on a hillside in Los Angeles. The sign is made of large white letters and is set against a backdrop of dry, brownish vegetation and a clear blue sky. The sign is slightly tilted and appears to be on a hillside that slopes downwards from right to left.

HOLLYWOOD

A JAG IN LA LA LAND

BY MAJOR GENERAL CHARLES J. DUNLAP JR., USAF

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, 1994
1000 HOURS (PST)

“COLONEL, THEY’RE READY FOR YOU,” the receptionist said smoothly. I was about to “take” my first Hollywood meeting. *How hard could this be? After all, I had made it out of Somalia in one piece.* But as my eyes surveyed the meeting room I felt a panic rising as people began filing in. No, an armed madman hadn’t penetrated HBO’s lush forty-first floor Century City offices. *That* I might have been able to handle. The truth was scarier: *where the heck was I supposed to sit?* JASOC prepares you for a lot of things, but the protocol of a Tinseltown meeting was not part of the curriculum when I graduated. Even if it was, I doubt I would have paid much attention. I had a four-year military obligation to fulfill and moviemaking was the furthest thing from my mind. All that changed in the summer of 1994, but I’m getting ahead of myself.

The road to La La Land was a long one. With a draft-motivated ROTC commission and a freshly minted law degree, I entered the Air Force in early 1976. Frankly, I only intended to fulfill my four-year ROTC commission and head directly back to Philadelphia, dreaming of rejoining my Wildwood Crest lifeguard buddies. Of course, the Air Force had other ideas. The military is a beguiling institution,

especially for lawyers. Freed from the tyranny of billable hours and the pressure of finding clients, even the greenest attorney gets to practice what most laymen would recognize as the real “law” — plenty of courtroom time! And much of that is done in unusual, if not exotic locations around the world. The notion of new places, new people and new issues every few years is seductive. Suddenly, it was fifteen years later and I was headed to National War College in the fall of 1991. War College provides wonderful opportunities to do some serious writing. Some struggle for topics, but a prior tour in the Pentagon gave me lots of ideas. I was concerned about the long term effect of the growing proliferation of what was then considered the “nontraditional” mission, e.g. peacekeeping, disaster relief, drug interdiction and so forth. The problem was devising a vehicle to talk about these seemingly diverse topics. My first attempt was an academic paper that charitably could be described as “turgid” — I couldn’t even stand to read it! So I asked myself, what would people read? A brief glance at the bestsellers list showed techno-thrillers filling the top spots. Fine, but what would be the storyline?

I think it was Faulkner who said something to the effect that a contrary view well expressed will reward a writer. Applied to my project it struck me that the antithesis of the American

military culture was a military coup. By extrapolating current trends twenty years into the future I conjured up a world where the U.S. armed forces, distracted by a proliferation of nontraditional missions, had lost its ability to fight authentic military opponents. Though defeated in what I called the “Second Gulf War,” the highly politicized military escaped culpability by blaming the already discredited civilian leadership. Following the mysterious death of the President and the “retirement” of the Vice President, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (who I unimaginatively called “General Brutus”) seized power. As one more twist, I had the coup approved in a national referendum by a public fed up with traditional politicians. The narrator in my tale was a War College graduate two decades hence who was about to be executed for opposing the coup. Identified only by a number, the prisoner argued in a letter smuggled to a classmate that the origins of the coup should have been evident in 1992, the same year they graduated from war college. This, in turn, generated the title of the story: “The Origins of the American Military Coup of 2012.” I entered the paper in an essay contest that included offerings from all the war colleges (in addition to the National War College, each service has its own). To my great surprise, it was named co-winner. Besides a plaque, a gold coin, and a set of books, the award ceremony brought a memorable photo opportunity with then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell.

Naïveté can be a great advantage in the publishing world. Not knowing any better, I sent a copy of my paper to James Fallows, the Washington editor of *Atlantic* magazine. As a longtime *Atlantic* subscriber, I knew that Fallows had written on defense issues and I greatly admired his work. A few weeks later, I received the “bad/good” news from Cullen Murphy, the editor: *Atlantic* would not publish the essay but had hired a writer – Tom Ricks of the *Wall Street*

Journal—to do a piece about it. Ricks produced an extremely flattering article with the somewhat disquieting title of “Colonel Dunlap’s Coup.” By the time that Ricks’ essay appeared in the January 1993 issue, my paper was receiving some notice elsewhere in the media including comment in the *Washington Post* and a short piece on NBC Nightly News. Unfortunately, I wasn’t around to enjoy my “fame”—I had been deployed to Africa in support of relief operations in Somalia.

When I returned to the States that spring I was approached by a number of people who said they were Hollywood producers. One such contact was a letter from Pierce Gardner of Jacobs/Gardner Productions. Pierce (in Hollywood everyone is on a first-name basis!) and his partner had seen the *Atlantic* piece and wanted me to team with a professional writer to produce a script that he, in turn, would “shop” around L.A. Eventually, we linked up with HBO who had launched a project to remake the 1964 movie *Seven Days in May*. The HBO project—called *The Enemy Within*—already had a script by Ron Bass (a former entertainment lawyer who won an Oscar for *Rain Man*) and Darryl Ponicsan. However, HBO—who very much wanted the film to be authentic—hired me as a consultant (yes, I did get permission for off-duty employment!).

Work began in earnest in March of 1994 with a long phone call with the director, a brilliant young Englishman named Jonathan Darby. Darby was full of great ideas for the film and had remarkable grasp of the American political scene and the U.S. military. We would have many phone calls over the next months. In addition, I worked with another writer, Jon Maas, who HBO hired to provide what is called “production polish.” One of my initial tasks was to review the script and make suggestions to Jon. Later, I would answer specific questions from Darby, Maas, and others connected with the “project.” Typically, I would follow-up with

a faxed or express-mailed response to Jonathan's most helpful assistant, Candace Geggenberg. Sometimes I even wrote a little dialogue for parts of scenes. I'd like to tell you that everything I suggested was adopted. Of course, it wasn't. But in retrospect, I was pleased by how seriously my suggestions were taken—considering that so many were naïve. Nevertheless, bits and pieces were incorporated here and there. I learned, as every writer does, that Hollywood is, after all, a commercial enterprise and not every idea from an amateur like me is going to be embraced. These people are pros and know their business.

The filming itself took little more than a month and was in post-production when my wife and I flew to Hollywood for the Television Critics' Association convention. The TCA gathering is where all the networks showcase their fall lineup for TV reporters across the country. Nancy Lesser, HBO's VP for media affairs, arranged for a limo to meet us at the airport, and HBO put us up in a beautiful suite in University City.

My "Hollywood meeting" was to plot strategy for discussing the film with the critics. I would be on a panel with Peter Douglas (son of the legendary Kirk Douglas, star of the original *Seven Days in May*), Jonathan, and actor Forest Whitaker—the hero of *The Enemy Within* (Jason Robards, Dana Delaney, and Sam Waterson) also starred. Additionally, attending the meeting were HBO film executives including Richard Walzer who headed this particular project. As typical military practice, I had prepared some talking points based on my analysis of the film. Bob Cooper, the top HBO person at the meeting, quickly spied the notes and had copies made. Somehow, these notes became the starting point for discussion—I would not only survive the meeting, but actually made a small contribution.

I really shouldn't have worried. I had envisioned my contact with Hollywood to be a scene out of Robert Altman's sardonic 1992 film *The Player*. Though people in La La Land do lapse into a weird "let's do lunch" language from time to time, contrary to the film I found virtually everyone to be very bright, extremely hard working, and quite friendly. For instance, Forest Whitaker turned out to be the antithesis of the Hollywood movie star; he could not have been more gracious, patiently posing for photos with my wife and I. I also thought I might run into a chilly, anti-military bias from the Hollywood crowd. Actually, my experience proved to be the opposite: many of the people I

Though people in La La Land do lapse into a weird "let's do lunch" language from time to time...I found virtually everyone to be very bright, extremely hard working, and quite friendly.

came into contact with were fascinated to meet someone actually in the military. Peter and Forest had worked with military people before, but few others had. I was amused when HBO officials became extremely embarrassed when a young assistant used some salty language while telling a joke in earshot of me, an "officer and a gentleman." As you might imagine, in nearly twenty years in the military, I had heard a few salty words from time to time. Hey, maybe I even used a few. Anyway...the TCA panel went well. The reporters' questions were surprisingly pertinent and no one tried to dominate in the discussion. I also did a couple of newspaper interviews both in L.A. and by telephone from Tampa. Again, much to my surprise I was treated very kindly in the write-ups. In particular, the *Los Angeles Times* and the Associated Press did complimentary pieces on my tiny part of what was a huge effort involving many people.

My wife and I did get to see a little of Hollywood as well. Yes, we took a mini-van tour of the movie star homes, Sunset Boulevard, the whole enchilada. One evening, HBO took us



Director Jonathan Darby, producer Peter Douglas, the author, and Oscar-winning actor Forest Whitaker, star of *The Enemy Within*.

to a party for the television critics at a Beverly Hills mansion. A catered dinner was held in a huge tent set up near the swimming pool. We sat with director Darby as well as some actors from another HBO movie, *Fatherland*. This truly was my idea of how the “other half” lives! At the party, I met Michael Fuchs, then HBO’s chairman (and also head of Time Warner’s music division). Mr. Fuchs—this is one guy I call “Mr.”—was exceptionally hospitable, partly because I think he sensed we were sort of out of our element. I was amazed to learn he had served in the Army as a draftee (Fuchs doesn’t appear to be old enough—the draft ended in 1973). He obviously valued the experience with the kind of nostalgia best enhanced by a healthy dollop of time. After an animated and rather private conversation about all things military, we parted ways—him to a gaggle of people anxious for a few moments of his time, and me to the stares of the Hollywood *glitterati* puzzled as to the identity of this new person on the scene who somehow knew *the* power broker.

The Enemy Within was scheduled to premiere in mid-August, but a lot of very intense work transpired between July’s TCA and the debut. I would only learn later that producing a full-length feature film from script to screen in just five months is an incredible feat. I got a copy of the director’s cut and provided several

recommendations. In addition, HBO arranged for several focus groups to view the film and this generated more changes. Dialogue was added and subtracted and new film was shot. Once again, the fax lines buzzed. How Jonathan finished on time I’ll never understand. Seeing the actual airing was a little tricky—we didn’t have cable in our home, so we had to rent a room in a HBO-equipped motel. It was a thrill to hear a few scraps of what I had written actually spoken in the film and to see my name in the credits. In the following months I was astonished at how many people called to tell me they saw my name in the credits—I didn’t think anyone watched them! Most of the reviews gave the movie two or three stars, just above average. Given the relatively short time involved in the film’s making, I was extremely happy and proud of what I saw on the screen. I was pleased when Delta Airlines showed the film on their transatlantic flights in the spring of 1995.

My whole experience in La La Land was a lot of fun, and in a way, intoxicating. According to Andy Warhol, everyone is famous for fifteen minutes. What Mr. Warhol—or “Andy” as we Hollywood types say—forgot to add is that fifteen minutes is not quite enough, especially if you think you have another great idea. So far, I’ve managed to keep my day job; but—and please don’t tell anybody—I have been dabbling in what some people might call, ah, a *script*. It’s about...well, let’s do lunch and I’ll pitch it to you.



Major General Charles J. Dunlap, Jr. (B.A. St. Joseph’s University, J.D. Villanova) is the Deputy Judge Advocate General, Headquarters U.S. Air Force, Washington, D.C.