

New US television series

Rubicon: On the other side of the secret door

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Rubicon, which premiered on US cable network channel AMC (American Movie Channel) August 1, is one of the crop of more interesting programs recently appearing on American television. Interestingly, it drew the AMC's largest audience for any of its original series debuts. While *Rubicon*, which takes an insider and supposedly critical look at the "war on terror," is a further sign of intelligent life on US television, its assumptions and trajectory need to be scrutinized carefully.

Rubicon has been praised by a number of critics. The *Chicago Tribune*, for example, asks rhetorically and somewhat cynically—"Is *Rubicon*—the excellent AMC spy drama where characters puzzle things out rather than blow things up—too smart for TV?" The answer is no, and indeed that's not where problems associated with the program are likely to lie, in its being "too smart" for the American public. It is safe to say that, on the contrary, the program is a response to widely held suspicions about the intelligence apparatus.

The show's debut, which comprised two episodes, was intriguing. *Rubicon* is clearly influenced by films made in the 1970s, such as *Three Days of the Condor*, *All the President's Men*, *The Conversation*, *The Parallax View* and others. Those films emerged out of popular opposition to the Vietnam War, and general hostility to the CIA and the "Military Industrial Complex." They reflected skepticism as well toward the official version of the assassinations of John Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy.

"Rubicon" refers to the river in ancient Italy whose southward crossing by an army signified an act of war. It has come to mean a boundary beyond which one cannot turn back. The blurring of the line between military and civil society, perhaps between a democracy and a police-state, is the subject of the new cable series.

That's fine. However, when one considers the scope of the criminal enterprises engaged in by the US military and its

intelligence agencies today, one may be excused for paying close attention and being quite critical of a series which ostensibly offers insight into those operations.

The central character, Will Travers (James Badge Dale), an analyst at a federal intelligence agency based in New York, uncovers a disturbing plot following the mysterious and sudden death of his boss, who was also his father-in-law.

The first episode is introduced with a question: "An invisible empire has been set up above the norms of democracy. Who said this? Ted Kaczynski (the Unabomber) or Woodrow Wilson (28th president of the United States)?" The correct answer is Wilson, justifying the mantra of the series, "Not every conspiracy is a theory."

While maintaining a certain subversive veneer, the series introduces a cast of 'brainy,' hip young people who have responded to the claim that "9/11 changed everything" and embraced a lifetime of working for a secret government agency called the "American Policy Institute"—a clandestine government think tank that provides information to all the government spy and "counterterrorism" agencies. As one character expresses it, the API is the one agency where information is freely shared.

Puzzles are a central motif of the series. Its predominant formal technique is rapid cutting between scenes. The tone and general ambience is established at the beginning of episode one when ultra-wealthy businessman Tom Rhumor is seen opening his morning paper in which a four-leaf clover has been placed and promptly putting a pistol to his head and blowing out his brains.

Then, the main character, Will, stumbles upon a conspiracy pointing to a "fourth branch of government"—the shadow branch—in a series of crossword puzzles, each containing the same mysterious clue, with the answer, "Marsilea quadrifolia," the Latin for four-leaf clover.

The clues seem to be everywhere, the mystery deepens and draws in an audience tired of endless CSIs with their pat plots, canned dialog and gorgeous characters, confronting gallons of blood and gore each week in episodes simulating

Quentin Tarantino. Compared to that fare, *Rubicon*'s debut appeared intelligent, thoughtful and a little subversive.

The first few episodes had one thinking that AMC might be sticking its neck out—and indeed different, contradictory impulses may very well be at work. The shadowy director of API, Truxton Spangler (Michael Cristofer), bears an uncanny resemblance to Dick Cheney. His connections to the deceased Tom Rhumor through a mysterious company one is meant to equate with Halliburton—here called Atlas MacDowell—become more sinister in the course of the first few episodes. Will is followed, he is warned by his new supervisor, Kale Ingram (Arliss Howard), that his home and office are bugged (which side is *he* on?). The plot thickens...

But then there is the actual work of Will's team: tracking potential Al Qaeda recruits, sanctioning assassinations by drone thousands of miles away, spying on the private affairs of Arab businessmen, and furthering the interests of the US government in the "war on terror."

In one of the more recent episodes, two members of Will's team are spirited off to a "black site" at an unknown location to assist the CIA in extracting information from a captured suspect being tortured. The now familiar image of the hooded, naked detainee being beaten and prodded with electric probes, should repulse at least the youngest team member, Tanya MacGaffin (Lauren Hodges), who shows signs of having a conscience. She is bothered, but continues her work along with Miles (Dallas Roberts), who makes it clear that he favors torture as one of many means of obtaining information, although the two agree between themselves that the technique is unlikely to get at the truth.

It seems reasonable to question at least one of the premises of this series—why would these apparently brilliant, inquisitive young people go to work for a secret agency of the US government in the first place? Has there been such an influx? We are highly skeptical.

At the time of *Three Days of the Condor*'s release, CIA recruiters were being driven off US college campuses by angry, protesting students. Daniel Ellsberg, one of the Cold War era's bright young people, blew the lid off of CIA deception by feeding the Pentagon Papers to the *New York Times*. *Inside the Company* was published in 1975 by Philip Agee, a former CIA operative in Latin America, exposing hundreds of agents and infuriating the government. Ellsberg, Agee and others were touched by the radicalization of the 1960s and 70s, and felt compelled to expose the crimes of the government they had signed on to serve in the "fight against communism."

And the employees at *Rubicon*'s American Policy Institute? They are played as well-meaning, thoughtful and, in the words of Kale Ingram, "sworn to protect and defend the Constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic."

But the assumption is made, with no criticism raised, that the "war on terror" is an honorable and legitimate struggle. Tanya's character, who frequently questions methods which are employed on the basis of API's "Intel," such as the use of predator drones, renditions and torture, is a foil to the unfeeling automatons at work in the intelligence bureaucracy.

The Spangler character is continually giving signals to his subordinates in the industry that seem ominous to viewers, but team members, the lowest tier in API, seem oblivious. For example, he says, mafia-like, on several occasions, "We take care of our own." Younger employees seem to be primarily concerned about keeping their jobs at API, and even though they are supposed to be highly intelligent, they are clueless apparently about the fact that getting *out* of API would, at best, be harder than getting in.

In the second year of the Obama administration, with erstwhile liberal critics of the Bush administration's policies in Iraq and Guantanamo now in power, there is notably less media commentary on the continuation of these same operations. Along these lines, *Rubicon* contains a pernicious element, the assumption that the "fourth branch of government," which is illegal and unconstitutional, is necessary to conduct the "war on terror."

The AMC series has moments where it smacks of real life, and the intrigue continues to draw the viewer in from episode to episode, but if it sometimes approaches, it too often pulls back from the logic of its starting point—that there is a conspiracy being hatched against the American people.

The comments provided by executive producer Henry Bromell on the *Rubicon* web site focus on the dramatic relationships between the characters, not on the implications of the story line. One feels impelled to ask: do the series creators take the threat of authoritarian rule and related conspiracies seriously, or is it merely fodder for a "good drama"?



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