

The cancellation of AMC series *Rubicon*: Too close to home?

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2 December 2010

US cable network AMC announced November 11 that *Rubicon*, its provocative series about the American intelligence apparatus, has been pulled from its roster after one season. AMC only offered a tersely worded statement as explanation:

“*Rubicon* gave us an opportunity to tell a rich and compelling story, and we’re proud of the series. This was not an easy decision, but we are grateful to have had the opportunity to work with such a phenomenally talented and dedicated team.”

At the center of *Rubicon*’s storyline is Will Travers (James Badge Dale), a brilliant, but disillusioned, employee of an intelligence think tank, the American Policy Institute (API). His wife and daughter have been killed in the September 11, 2001, terror attacks. His dead wife’s father apparently obtains the job for him at API and becomes his boss. In the first episode, the latter dies in a train crash, but Will has reason to think he has been murdered. (See our review.)

The series had numerous shortcomings, but the plot provided some genuine insight into the workings of the US intelligence community and the so-called “war on terror.”

An element of *Rubicon*’s drama paralleling reality is the sinister role played by a company called Atlas-McDowell. The firm’s tendrils reach into the US intelligence apparatus, through which high-level government policy decisions are influenced. One can’t help but think of Dick Cheney’s Halliburton and its real-life connections to American intelligence and government policy. Atlas-McDowell profits enormously from being “in on the know.” *Rubicon* depicts incidents that are entirely the company’s creation.

In Episode 12, the second to last, after Will and his API team are too late in their desperate attempt to

uncover a terrorist plot, they see on the television news that an oil tanker has been blown up in a strategic shipping lane off the Texas coast. Truxton Spangler (Michael Cristofer), the API chief connected to Atlas-McDowell (who bears a remarkable resemblance to Cheney), smugly congratulates himself in private. The newscasters intone, “Once again, America is under attack.”

Viewers would find it difficult to avoid making the connection to September 11, when the world watched, stunned, the events at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Of course, this raises serious questions about the so-called war on terror. A weakness of *Rubicon* is that it did not openly make a connection to the highest levels of government itself, but limited the conspiracy to a few well-placed “bad guys.” One wonders where the series would have gone if there had been a second season or more.

US television networks, to whom the public airwaves are handed over, are private entities, answerable to no one. Their programming decisions are made in the interest of profit. There is not the slightest trace of democratic control by the American population.

That being said, *Rubicon* received positive reviews. And looking at the numbers alone doesn’t explain the show’s fate. The series’ opener attracted more than 2 million viewers—higher than for either of AMC’s previous originals, *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*. By the series finale, viewership had dropped to just over 1 million. *Mad Men*’s first season’s ratings were comparable to those of *Rubicon*, but the network opted to continue production of the former series for a second season. It completed its fourth season in October.

AMC (originally American Movie Classics) started life as a commercial-free classic movie cable channel,

but in 2002 began interrupting its broadcasts with advertisements and lost much of its appeal. In 2007, AMC began airing its own original series, starting with the much-celebrated *Mad Men*. *Rubicon* is the first of the series to be cancelled.

At the very least, AMC officials have shown they are not willing to make the sort of commitment to *Rubicon* they did to *Mad Men*. Why not? The show had a significant following as evidenced by the hundreds of posts on AMC's blog, praising the series and protesting against its cancellation.

Questions arise: Was there direct or indirect pressure applied to AMC? Did the series make certain people nervous or unhappy? Was it hitting too close to home?

For now, these can only be posed as questions. Consider, however, the deep and universal hostility of the political establishment to the WikiLeaks revelations. *Rubicon*'s tagline, "Not every conspiracy is a theory," may have some validity in this case.



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