

# Netflix's US remake of *House of Cards* stands up despite weaknesses

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Netflix, the US provider of on-demand Internet streaming media and DVD-by-mail, released season one of the political drama *House of Cards* on its web site February 1.

A remake of the 1990 BBC miniseries, the production—starring Kevin Spacey as Congressman Francis Underwood, Democrat from South Carolina, and Robin Wright as his wife—is a largely well-translated version of the UK original. The series has this much going for it. In the face of ongoing efforts by the political establishment and media to paint the two-party system in the US as a legitimate and even “democratic” enterprise, *House of Cards* more or less takes for granted what everyone knows: that American politicians are corrupt, treacherous and unprincipled, and that the political system is entirely dominated by money and corporate power. That already lifts the series above the run of the mill, whatever serious weaknesses it may have, and also hints at changes both in public perception and the mood in the film and television industry.

Netflix has so far ordered 26 episodes of the series to be aired over two years. Spacey functions as executive producer, along with filmmaker David Fincher, who also directed the first two episodes. Fincher has a history of making “dark,” but often murky films, which seem to be fumbling around in terms of a social perspective, including *Fight Club* (1999), *Zodiac* (2007), *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008) and *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* (2011). *The Social Network* (2010), about Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg, was one of his more pointed efforts.

With *House of Cards* and the politicians in Washington, Fincher has found something to be legitimately nasty about. The darkness and austerity here suggest at the very least a certain seriousness. The director has indicated that he feels a “long-form” television series is more appropriate to the development of characters than a film. Whether the protagonists sufficiently evolve in *House of Cards* is an issue, but this sort of extended drama presented to a mass audience is an undoubtedly powerful format.

The performers have clearly made an effort. Beginning

with Underwood’s strangling of a dog that has been hit by a car in front of his house, Kevin Spacey takes hold of his heartless, calculating character; his matter of fact reference to the necessity of doing “the unpleasant thing, the necessary thing” is made directly to the audience. It is a powerful start, and power—as Underwood asserts a number of times throughout the first season of 13 episodes—is what endures.

Underwood, with 22 years in Congress, and now the Majority Whip with close ties to incoming President Garrett Walker (Michael Gill), is expecting to be named secretary of state. When the promised post is denied him, Underwood sets out to turn the situation to his advantage—and ascend to a position of greater power—by destroying various careers and lives. “Never again,” he declares to his faithful and ruthless assistant, Doug Stamper (wonderfully played by Michael Kelly), “will we allow ourselves to be put in such a position.”

The expansion of the role played by Underwood’s wife, Claire (Wright), from its original in the BBC series is apt, reflecting the “power couple” phenomenon in DC circles. Her non-profit organization, Clean Water Initiatives, benefits from and is used in Underwood’s machinations. Claire is drawn with some complexity; at one point, coldly axing the person she had forced to fire half the staff, at another, taking up origami in response to a swan made from a twenty-dollar-bill thrown at her by a homeless man. There is an unanswered yearning for a life unlived, which Wright portrays well, even as events take a few predictable turns.

In season one of *House of Cards*, since education overhaul is the focus of the incoming Walker administration, Underwood is determined to undermine the man tapped to write the bill, Donald Blythe. The latter is a “tax and spend liberal,” arguably patterned on the late Sen. Paul Wellstone, whose approach is described by Underwood as “left of Karl Marx.”

Underwood passes Blythe’s initial draft of a bill to ambitious *Washington Herald* reporter Zoe Barnes (Kate Mara), who has approached the congressman with a proposal to be his pipeline to the press. A story about Blythe’s bill is

plastered on the *Herald*'s front page under a headline calling it "Very Far Left of Center." Zoe's career gets a boost, Blythe's takes a hit and Underwood steps in to take over the process of "education reform."

The bill ultimately presented by Underwood expands charter schools, teacher performance testing and has a great deal in common with Barack Obama's own education plans. This leads to the threat of a strike by major teachers' unions.

This is one of those moments when the series hits a false note. The portrayal of the unions as fighting the onslaught against education (to say nothing of their lobbyist punching a congressman) stands in stark contrast to the cooperation given by their real-life representatives every step of the way. Indeed, union leaders are portrayed throughout the first season of *House of Cards* in a positive and somewhat naive light—as relatively intrepid fighters for the rank and file, who share in their misfortunes and are only stymied by a few venal government officials.

Most prominent in the initial season is the relationship between the press and politicians, both professional and personal (if sex-for-insider information can be called personal). Underwood's use of (and by) Barnes, the issues of the quick news cycle demanded by the introduction of the Internet and the declining readership of newspapers are central components of the plot here and handled with varying degrees of success.

The series also falters in its overall treatment of the media, given such scandals as the part played by the *New York Times*' Judith Miller in funneling misinformation in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the current puff pieces about Obama's drone program and "kill list" and the general role of the corporate-owned media as the propaganda arm of the White House and Pentagon. The notion that a reporter being used to leak stories to the public for devious purposes is an exception, or that a bigger journalistic name than Zoe's could not be found to do Underwood's dirty work, requires the suspension of disbelief.

Barnes is a near-nothing reporter at the *Herald*—an obvious stand-in for the *Washington Post*, complete with an Iron Lady owner à la the late Katharine Graham—when she approaches Underwood at his home with a pretty tame "incriminating" photo on her cell phone. Why he decides to go with her as his outlet, rather than a more established reporter, seems a rather random act, considering his love of careful plotting.

It will be interesting to see if Zoe Barnes meets the same unhappy fate as her BBC counterpart, though this reviewer would not be deeply moved if that proves the case. Kate Mara's interpretation is a weak spot in the production. She is in strong acting company, and, unfortunately, too often comes off as wooden and blank. Where others are

sometimes able to make do with sub-par dialogue, Mara saps some of the better-written scenes of their energy.

The destruction of Congressman Peter Russo (Corey Stoll), by contrast, is quite well done. Stoll and his assistant/girlfriend Christina Gallagher (Kristen Connolly) present the most realistic couple in the work. Russo's descent into Underwood's clutches, seeming recovery from addiction and ultimate orchestrated fall are largely convincing and painful to watch, even for those who knew of his character's fate from the UK production. Gallagher is one of the more fully developed characters, and Connolly captures the conflict of a person who loves a troubled man very well.

There is some unfortunate dialogue in *House of Cards* that at times tips into the ham-fisted. "This is how you devour a whale, one bite at a time," says Underwood at one point, referring to the series of takedowns he and Stamper are planning. "My god, all I ever amounted to was chitlins," he mocks the incoming president's imagined future thoughts. Other characters are likewise given to hackneyed phrasing, and this detracts from the overall power of the series. The actors involved deliver the lines with conviction, which only points up the fact that they deserve better material to work with.

Film and television artists who wish to do something critical and sharp-edged come up against many obstacles at present, including, of course the inadequacy of their own views and knowledge. The makers of *House of Cards*, including Spacey and Fincher, deserve praise for depicting American politics in a deservedly negative light, helping to further discredit the powers that be.

Leaving aside the almost inevitable limitations of the liberal outlook on display, the sharpest criticism one could make of *House of Cards* is this, as the comments above about the media and the unions suggest: that the series does not savor sufficiently of American life in 2013, that it fails to deal with the post-9/11 world in a concrete and convincing manner, a world where drones and "kill lists" are defended by publications like the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*, where not a shred of concern for democracy is demonstrated by the establishment. We shall watch the further installments with interest.



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