

# *Homeland, Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*: US television increasingly jettisons democratic rights

Christine Schofelt  
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Television programming in the US is currently—and disturbingly—dominated by the presence of series featuring the police, intelligence and military. One would be hard-pressed to turn on a television and not encounter a show wherein the central characters are engaged in one form of “crime fighting” or another.

Almost without exception, the programs adopt the standpoint of the authorities and their “law and order” agenda. An all-too common feature of these shows is a disregard—if not flat-out disdain—for civil and human rights. No matter the genre, from fantasy (*Sleepy Hollow, Grimm*) to straight procedurals (any number of *CSI* iterations), a recurring theme is the need to operate outside of the “usual bounds,” and generally, when present, defense attorneys are portrayed as standing in the way of justice.

In *Homeland*, a series about the CIA now in its third season, and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, based on Marvel Comics, for example, we are treated—with varying levels of realism—to spectacles of brutality against the citizenry in pursuit of supposed “bad guys,” as well as the abandonment of due process. *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (on ABC), created by Joss Whedon, and written by Whedon, his brother Jed Whedon and Maurissa Tancharoen, carries on the franchise seen in recent films set in the “Marvel Universe,” most specifically *The Avengers*, directed by Joss Whedon. Though the bulk of the writing outside of the pilot episode seems to have been handed off to others, the latter’s involvement in the franchise at all is itself troubling.

Whedon has created such relatively worthwhile projects as a recent version of Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* and developed interesting worlds of his own in the series *Firefly*, on the one hand, and yet

engages in such flat and rote work (however bombastic) as this show and its parent movie, on the other. In light of certain themes advanced in *Firefly*, including resistance against an omnipresent and draconian government, his work on *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* seems particularly incongruous.

In a future world where contact has been made with aliens, the secretive S.H.I.E.L.D. (Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division) agency recruits and oversees individuals with special abilities—some super-heroic—in service to the government, though without regard to Constitutional or international law or budgetary considerations.

The show centers around the possible recruitment (after kidnapping) of Skye (Chloe Bennet), a member of the Rising Tide, a group loosely modeled on Anonymous and WikiLeaks, who is foremost in the field of underground hacking. The pressure put on Skye to join is made sharper by the revelation that those whom the agency tries to recruit but who are unwilling have precious few choices left, and often wind up dead.

The more complex *Homeland* (Showtime), which first aired in 2011, is based on the Israeli show *Prisoners of War* created by Gideon Raff and developed for Showtime by Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa.

The show stars Claire Danes as CIA agent Carrie Mathison, who suspects returning POW Nicholas Brody (Damian Lewis) of having been “turned” while held by al Qaeda for eight years. Their personal and professional lives form the nucleus of the show. Intended to keep the audience guessing as to who should be trusted, the program has a soap operatic quality that prevents it from reaching the level of

authenticity for which it strives. This is not, however, the most serious of *Homeland*'s problems.

Mathison's bi-polar disorder is an added twist. From a dramatic standpoint, the mental illness is handled well by Danes, who does not overplay the changeability of her moods. Early on in the series her character makes a plea for sympathy, when she explains how precarious her job would be if she were to go to a counselor about her condition or if her bosses knew. *Homeland* often invokes the need for strict secrecy in the post-9/11 world. Yet here we have a loose cannon who is never truly reined in and who jeopardizes the lives of agents and contacts alike through her largely illegal shenanigans. The program strains credibility.

Of course, it never poses itself a critical question: how is it possible to celebrate an agency known around the world as "Murder Inc.," responsible for the overthrow of numerous elected governments and the torture and death of countless human beings?

In both these series, as noted above, various illegal acts are treated as par for the course in attempting to "protect the innocent." *Homeland*'s Mathison, for instance, installs illegal cameras in a suspect's house in early episodes and goes on to commit innumerable other violations with the begrudging, resigned nod of her superior.

A recent episode of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* pits the agents against a hacker with whom Skye has had a relationship. A scene that could have been written by the US government officials has one of the Agents decrying Edward Snowden and Julian Assange by name as destructive forces acting against the public good.

The shows in question take different approaches. While *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* makes efforts at humor, *Homeland* does not at all, taking itself very seriously. However, in each case adhering to the Constitution is viewed as hamstringing investigation, prosecution, or—with increasing frequency—execution.

Is there any check on these illegal exploits? Very little, and even then, unconvincing. Perhaps the most ludicrous attempt at portraying a challenge to the lawlessness of the agents occurs in the current season opener of *Homeland*, which involves a Congressional subcommittee assertively questioning CIA agent Carrie Mathison regarding illegalities in her investigation. Such a grilling ranks as high fantasy.

*Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* Skye herself accomplishes conducting illicit operations. While she decides whether or not to join the group, she is handy to have around when the outfit needs an "unaffiliated" person to cross borders or invade people's homes to gain illegal access to their computers or other devices. On such occasions, it is of note that any concern about legality centers on maintaining "plausible deniability" lest the organization's budget be cut.

And yet these figures are intended largely to be our heroes, however personally unsympathetic they may be. While Mathison is certainly flawed—to put it mildly—she fully believes she is working for the protection of the country—as we hear in the opening credits, "I-I'm just making sure we don't get hit again." The activity is vaguely unsavory, but understandable if it's done in the line of duty. The *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* may engage in assassination and theft overseas, and large-scale shoot 'em ups in at home, but here too it's for an amorphous "good cause."

Something more than a lack of imagination and originality and generally retrograde social views are involved in the current dominance of police, FBI and CIA television series. Over a decade of relentless attacks on democratic rights has created widespread distrust and hostility toward the military-intelligence apparatus. Snowden and Assange are heroes to millions. The creators of these programs are seriously out of touch with popular sentiments, especially among the young.



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