

Mad Men, season seven, first half: A step forward for US television?

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AMC has split the seventh and final season of *Mad Men*, its drama centered on an advertising agency in the 1960s, into two seven-episode parts. The series has attracted a great deal of attention for its efforts to recreate the social atmosphere and circumstances of those years.

Treating January to July 1969, the first half of the final season reminds us, among other things, that *Mad Men* takes place during the decade of American liberalism's last gasp. The 1960s also witnessed clear signs of America's declining industrial power, riots in the inner cities, the devastating impact of the Vietnam War and an overall sense that the promise of postwar America had failed the great majority.

The final season has so far been largely successful in suggesting how the events and processes that defined the end of the 1960s influenced the characters' personal and professional lives, however indirectly. In presenting these influences, the show's makers also offer something of a critique of liberalism and the so-called "counterculture."

Still on mandatory leave of absence from the Sterling, Cooper & Partners (SC&P) advertising agency, Don Draper (Jon Hamm) attempts to save his second marriage by visiting Megan (Jessica Paré) in California, where she's trying to revive her acting career. While there, Don quickly discovers that he doesn't "fit" with Megan's friends and her California life style, and a divorce soon follows.

Roger Sterling (John Slattery) finally tells Don he can return to the agency, but only under terms that Don finds humiliating, including working under his former protégé, Peggy Olson (Elizabeth Moss). This and other changes, e.g., the installation of the agency's first computer and the new, strictly "bottom line" business model (personified by recently added partner Jim Cutler, played by Harry Hamlin), leave Don feeling that he no longer fits here either, and he considers quitting until a friend, a fellow war veteran, convinces him otherwise.

Roger is also frustrated by the new business model, and, like Don, he tries to escape during a road trip with his former wife, Mona (Talia Balsam), to rescue their spoiled daughter, Margaret (Elizabeth Rice), who has abandoned her husband and small child for an upstate New York commune. At first, Roger enjoys the "anything goes" atmosphere, especially indulging in marijuana, but when his daughter practices free love, he leaves in disgust.

Peggy Olson (played with increasing complexity by Moss) and Joan Harris (Christina Hendricks) have managed to fit into the new business model, but at a personal cost. Where they were once the most likable characters on the show, they have now become brusque with their underlings (and with Draper, whom they do not welcome back) and unhappy in their personal lives.

The first half of season seven ends on an ambiguous note.

Making Don Draper the series' protagonist sets *Mad Men* apart from most television fare. He has risen from a Depression-era, orphaned childhood (his prostitute mother died in childbirth and his abusive father died when his son was ten) to a leading position in a New York ad agency. Moreover, his ascension allows him to marry a former model, Betty (played in an understated, at times robotic manner by January Jones), father three children and own a Cadillac and a suburban home complete with a maid. Draper, in short, is the Everyman living the postwar American Dream.

There is, however, a nightmarish side to this: endless drinking (at home and at work), extra-marital affairs in dimly lit rooms, and the growing, dispiriting suspicion that everything is a lie. In short, Everyman Draper is not the usual, likable television protagonist, but his often unsuccessful battles with inner demons remain compelling because the audience is allowed to glimpse some of the social processes out of which these demons have arisen.

By the sixth season, his need to own up to his personal lie—he reveals the reality about his childhood to a client in front of the other partners—and the new ruthless business model result in Don temporarily losing his job.

Mad Men portrays another budding cause of 1960s liberalism, gender equality, as being problematic at best within the existing social set-up. Peggy and Joan Harris have earned the hard shells each wears in the first half of the final season. In order to reach the executive level at the agency, each has endured cruel and sexist remarks (from those below and above them at the agency), and worse.

By the late 1960s, Vietnam had become the first televised war in American history. The conflict became known as “the living room war,” because every night families watched terrible images from the war zone itself, as well as body bags and coffins coming home to the US. Indeed, Peggy’s idea for a Burger Chef commercial comes from her realization that American families no longer enjoy eating dinner together at home because they are “watching the Vietnam War on television.”

More damaging than the drinking and the drugs, which had now become ubiquitous, was the sense that not only the war but also the claims American society made about itself were based on falsehoods. Many in the younger generation, outraged by the savagery of the US war in Southeast Asia which resulted in the deaths of millions of Vietnamese, felt this keenly.

Draper’s inability to stomach his own personal lie any longer may in some way be identified with the larger and more general disgust.

Questions are certainly raised by *Mad Men* about the counterculture that claimed to represent an alternative. We watch as the marijuana-smoking creative team reach dead ends or spend most of their time making silly jokes. Moreover, the commune where Sterling’s daughter is living exemplifies the self-indulgence and laziness of a portion of that generation. Elizabeth Rice does an excellent job portraying what would define the “me first” individualism promoted during the following decades.

The final episode—one of the better hours on recent television—is built around the US moon landing in July of 1969. But what has come to be known as perhaps the last time Americans felt unified around a progressive goal is here treated in an ambiguous manner.

Real families and make-do families, i.e., Don Draper, Peggy, Pete Campbell (Vincent Kartheiser) and a few other employees, manage to come together around a television set to watch humanity’s first steps on the

moon, but they do so in a setting that does not encourage optimism. Its darkness seems rather to foreshadow perhaps not only the coming demise of the space program, but also the end of the postwar American liberal project with which it was associated.

The same sense of uncertainty invests the scene in which Don’s daughter Sally (played by 14-year-old Kiernan Shipka with preternatural control over her emotions) kisses a young male houseguest in total darkness outside her mother and stepfather’s house.

Then, the episode ends with a marvelous coda that undermines any hope for resolution.

One problem with the final episode of this first half of *Mad Men*’s season seven is that a number of the characters seem too accepting of changes in their lives that have been essentially forced on them. Draper, for example, comes to regard his leave of absence and demotion as a kind of cleansing, humbling experience that, as he tells Roger, made him realize, “I just want to work.”

Peggy and Joan also appear to be content with their present situations, even though this contentment is based on accepting substitutes for what they are missing in their lives. Joan, for instance, learns that she will receive \$1 million as the result of a buyout. Apparently, this sum makes up for what she went through to gain her partner position. This all smacks too much of making a virtue of necessity.

In any event, the second half of the final season is entitled “End of an Era.” One hopes the series will offer an honest appraisal of its characters’ lives and the period as a whole. That would be a step forward for American television.



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