

House of Cards collapses

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2 March 2015

In reviewing television programs, it has become customary to give readers a “spoiler warning” before discussing specific details of the plot. In the case of *House of Cards*, Season 3, this will not be necessary, because the season has no significant plot to speak of.

The program, produced by Netflix, began as a sharp and scathing portrayal of the violence and corruption behind the official facade of American politics. It has been turned into an utterly trite and complacent celebration of the political establishment.

In the first season of the show, Democratic Congressman Francis Underwood, snubbed in his nomination to a cabinet post in a presidential administration he helped put in power, orchestrates his own appointment as vice president through conspiracy, in the process murdering a junior congressman.

In the second season, Underwood secures his ascension to the presidency through a plot to have the sitting president impeached. The body count rises: Underwood personally throws his mistress, reporter Zoe Barnes—whom he was using to plant stories in the press—under a subway train. He has the FBI entrap Barnes’s fellow reporter, who suspects Underwood in the murder, and convict him on trumped-up charges, locking him up for decades.

In the third season, Underwood somehow emerges from this baptism of blood as a thoroughly conventional president, although with his fair share of personal and political difficulties. The “drama” of the season largely revolves around petty, boring and completely unconvincing squabbles between Underwood and his wife, in the context of geopolitical and domestic events drawn uncritically from contemporary headlines.

The first two seasons presented a story that was half *Macbeth*, half *Richard III*. The show’s dramatic success depended on Underwood’s sangfroid, ruthlessness, cynicism and lack of sentimentality, which made for a believable character. At the same time, there were human, and even sometimes humane elements to Underwood that gave his character a certain complexity and richness.

A viewer watching season three will proceed through the first few episodes waiting for the shoe to drop, asking: When will the narrative resume? But at some point, he or she will

realize that the third season bears no significant relationship to the first two. The characters are the same, the cinematography similar, but any trace of political criticism has been entirely removed, and the direction and purpose of the show have changed. The whole thing unfolds as one big bait and switch.

The political content of the show ends up supporting and justifying various pressing policy interests of the American ruling class. In dealing with international geopolitics, all the tropes of American foreign policy are parroted uncritically. The Russian state is painted as a totalitarian autocracy, clamping down on gay rights and political dissent, while the US seeks to counter Russian “aggression” while working for stability and peace in the Middle East.

Members of the pro-US, anti-Russian protest group Pussy Riot make a cameo when they are invited to a state dinner at the White House with Russian President Victor Petrov (a stand-in for Vladimir Putin). And after a jailed American political dissident in Russia commits suicide, Claire Underwood throws caution aside and does the “right thing,” denouncing the authoritarianism of the Russian state in a press conference. The irony of a First Lady of a country whose policy is torture and extrajudicial murder denouncing Russia for authoritarianism is not even considered.

Underwood’s ordering of assassinations—a reference to the unconstitutional drone murder program of the Obama administration—is presented in uncritical fashion and largely in passing. To the extent that the moral or constitutional questions involved are even considered, it is to justify these crimes.

A scene in which the Supreme Court hears testimony from the civilian survivor of a drone strike is counterpoised to a scene of Arlington National Cemetery, perpetuating the lie that drone murders are necessary to save American lives. The viewer is meant to draw the conclusion that, though drone assassination and the dozens of civilian casualties each one entails may be somewhat distasteful, they are ultimately necessary, and the real victims are the politicians and soldiers who have to carry out the killings.

Underwood’s main piece of domestic legislation, a proposal aimed at eliminating the “entitlement programs” of

Social Security and Medicare, is presented as visionary, aimed at cutting through the “gridlock” of Washington and finally “getting something done.” The makers of the show seem to assume that this measure would be broadly popular, and rule out the possibility that it would evoke social opposition from the tens of millions of people who would find themselves cut off from their only source of income.

In the original 1990 British television show *House of Cards*, Francis Urquhart, on whose character Underwood is based, is ultimately undone both by his own crimes and the social forces he has unleashed. But in the third season of the American show, there is no consideration of any broader social forces outside of Washington.

Instead, Underwood and his wife, who once threatened to let an unborn child “wither and die” inside a woman who crossed her, are recast in the mold of affluent middle-class professionals. The action might as well have taken place in the home of a high-powered husband and wife team of proctologists.

The show’s executive producer, Beau Willimon, basically said as much in an interview with *Variety* magazine, declaring, “All we’re trying to do is tell the story of Frank and Claire Underwood. They happen to be politicians. Their story of ambition and power hunger is a story you could have told on Wall Street or in a law firm or in a lot of different worlds. I don’t think *House of Cards* is about politics at all.”

This conception, that the broader social and political context is irrelevant to understanding the personal actions of anyone, much less of politicians, is stupid and childish, and applying it to *House of Cards* results in a show that resembles a daytime soap opera with desaturated colors.

All of this speaks ultimately to the views and values of the show’s affluent, well-connected actors and creators, who have accepted uncritically the broader views of the American ruling class. It has become a production of *the political establishment*. Indeed, it has incorporated much of the state apparatus, with cameos from major figures in the American media establishment, including Comedy Central’s Stephen Colbert and NBC special correspondent Meredith Vieira.

In the process, the criminality that lay at the center of the first two seasons has been sanitized. In the first season, Underwood remarked that he came into high office with “not a single vote cast in my name,” declaring “democracy is so overrated.” But the horrible crimes committed by Underwood on his road to power have almost no relevance to the entire third season. Could there be any doubt that Underwood’s presidency would bear the marks of the crimes he committed to obtain it?

For the ruling elite and its media hangers-on, a crime, even

a high crime, if committed by the rich and powerful, is seen largely as a public relations issue. If it is spun right, or even ignored, it simply goes away.

This past December, the US Senate released portions of its report on government torture, decisively proving the personal culpability of the entire Bush administration in planning and orchestrating the most horrific crimes, of which “rectal feeding” was only the most memorable. The *New York Times* called for criminal prosecutions of top officials in the Bush administration. And what now? The media has stopped reporting on it, and politicians do not raise the issue. Life goes on.

One could envision a different trajectory for *House of Cards*, one that would also be closer to the reality of American politics. Let us imagine for a moment what would happen if the show’s creators had held true to the characters and approach they created in the first two seasons.

In the third episode of the third season, Underwood displays his “toughness” by cancelling a scheduled joint press conference with Russian President Petrov, instead holding his own press conference where he denounces the Russian government. But to be true to his original character, Underwood should have been able to display a degree of criminality in his interaction with Petrov that would have left the Russian leader frightened and horrified. For example, taking Petrov through a secret corridor below the White House to an interrogation room where Underwood personally tortures and murders a “terrorist” suspect.

But nothing like this ever occurs. The show’s creators are afraid of what would happen if they carry Underwood’s bent for murder and terror into the White House: they would have approached a realistic depiction of the sadism and violence that pervade the highest levels of the American state. It would have been too close to the truth for comfort.



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