

“We make the terror:” Season four of *House of Cards*

Andre Damon
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The US streaming television drama *House of Cards* returned for a fourth season on Netflix this month to a muted reception in major newspapers and media outlets.

The series, particularly in its mediocre and complacent third season, had been championed as the fictional representation *par excellence* of the American political system, with its producers and leading actors paraded and celebrated on news programs and Sunday morning talk shows.

One would have expected, based on the trajectory of the previous season and its warm reception by the establishment, that the fourth season would have settled into a self-satisfied stride, content with its role as light entertainment for America's political elite.

Intriguingly, this season has taken a different turn. To be blunt, *House of Cards* strongly suggests that the US government sponsors radical Islamist terrorism to keep a lid on domestic crises, spies on the American population for political gain and conspires to go to war, while claiming high ideals, for purely Machiavellian ends.

There are certainly elements to criticize, from the simplistic and very limited presentation of geopolitics and class relations to an overly personalist presentation of political life, centered around the tyrannical impulses of President Francis Underwood (Kevin Spacey), who is tellingly presented by one of his political opponents as the cancer at the center of the Democratic Party and the source of *all* corruption in the state.

However, *House of Cards*' dramatic limitations, some inherent in its chosen format, some resulting from the creators' social and political outlook, fade away to a considerable extent in the face of what the show gets right: a chilling portrait of something “rotten in the state” of America.

In the first season, premiering in 2013, Democratic House Majority Whip Underwood, is denied the promised post of Secretary of State by the incoming administration of President Garrett Walker (Michel Gill), also a Democrat. Underwood conspires with his wife, Claire (Robin Wright), to destroy the administration in retribution for the slight.

He orchestrates a series of political debacles for the Democratic administration—personally carrying out a pair of murders in the process—resulting in his appointment as vice president. In season two, Underwood continues his

machinations, manipulating Walker into a series of disastrous political missteps that end in the latter's impeachment, resignation and replacement in the White House by Vice President Underwood.

Season three concentrates on Underwood's abbreviated presidency and his domestic political initiative, a right-wing “populist” program called America Works that aims to pay for jobs by gutting entitlements. Tensions between Francis and Claire Underwood, caused by the consequences of her desire for political office—in the form of a failed recess appointment as ambassador to the UN—lead to her insistence on a separation.

The dominant feature of the third season was its turn away from the lingering consequences of Underwood's crimes and its focus on his domestic problems and the personal struggles of his chief of staff, the thuggish Doug Stamper (Michael Kelly). Although the third remains the weakest season, the estrangement of the Underwoods lays the groundwork for the administration's subsequent crisis.

The fourth season begins with the political dilemmas created by Claire's “rebellion.” The first lady, the partner in all of Underwood's crimes, is no less ruthless than her husband, and her lifelong alliance with him is contingent on the fulfillment of her own ambitions. She sets out to deliberately sabotage Underwood's nomination in the Democratic primary process.

Season four takes many twists and turns that it would be inappropriate to reveal. Suffice it to say that those include major scandals, innumerable political maneuvers, an assassination attempt and a terrorist episode.

A central issue is Claire's increasing independence. While Underwood is seriously convalescing at one point, she outmaneuvers his staff to dominate the interim presidency of feckless Vice President Donald Blythe (Reed Birney). This culminates in her strong-arming Russian President Viktor Petrov (Lars Mikkelsen) into releasing oil reserves through the threat of a US-backed destabilization operation.

Mid-season, Underwood comes to the realization that despite her betrayals, his wife is a shrewd and ruthless politician, and the only individual who can guarantee the safety of his person and legacy, provided he does not cross her. He therefore accedes to an extraordinary and unprecedented demand ...

With their alliance renewed, the Underwoods turn to confront pressure from the official political right. Underwood's Republican Party opponent, Will Conway (Joel Kinnaman), relentlessly denounces him as being "soft" on terrorism.

In the final episodes of season four, the Underwoods finally recognize that the only solution to the administration's apparently terminal crisis is a turn to the military and the repressive apparatus of the state. Underwood complements his earlier murders with even greater and more "believable" crimes.

Without giving away the nature and content of these illegalities, we can point to the series of chilling monologues and dialogues, which essentially present in fictional form the real crimes committed by the Bush and Obama administrations:

Underwood: Imagine a duel. Me and [Republican frontrunner] Conway... I have an even bigger gun. It's called the NSA. It's one of the perks of being president... Your phone, the phone of the person sitting next to you, your neighbor's phone and everyone you know and the 300 million Americans you don't know.

Now, of course, a weapon like that, well, you can imagine how risky it is. It might have even given pause to an old crook like him [pointing to a portrait of Richard Nixon]. They roasted him on the spit for tapping into a few rooms at the Watergate. I'm talking about tapping into every single home in America.

The climax of the season takes the form of the aforementioned terrorist incident during which Underwood learns of the imminent publication of an unanswerable exposé of certain of his past misdeeds.

For the first time, the couple appear powerless. "I feel... numb," declares Claire. "I do too," says Underwood. They decide to take the offensive:

Claire: We can't fight everything off one by one...
But if we make this... we make it work for us.
Francis: Create chaos.
Claire: More than chaos.
Francis: War.
Claire: Fear.
Francis: Fear. Brutal. Total.
Claire: I'm done trying to win over people's hearts.
Francis: Let's attack their hearts.
Claire: We can work with fear.
Francis: Yes, we can.

Underwood gives a televised address declaring "total war."

"We must move beyond reason. We will respond with force... the time for conversation is over, regardless of consequences. We are at war. It will be a war more total than anything we have waged thus far in the fight against extremism. Soldiers will die, civilians will die, there will be pain, there will be suffering."

In the White House situation room, Francis and Claire gaze steely-eyed at a live television feed. As the camera moves toward them, Underwood calmly tells the viewer:

"That's right. We don't submit to terror. We make the terror."

None of the themes treated in *House of Cards* will come as a surprise to any attentive reader of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

But to have them given flesh and blood so dramatically, without equivocation or hesitancy, by Spacey and Wright, is shocking and disturbing.

We have written on the cinematic and dramatic merits of *House of Cards* in previous reviews, and those strengths are present. But the fourth season in particular should be seen in objective political terms.

The narrative fabric of the "war on terror" has worn thin. It has become impossible to assert, with a straight face, that the motives of the United States' intervention in the Middle East and its destabilization operations against Russia and China stem from altruistic or humanitarian motives. Millions of people see through all this.

Even the semi-fascistic Republican presidential frontrunner Donald Trump has pointed out that the invasion of Iraq was based on lies. Meanwhile polls show most Americans do not believe the official narrative about the September 11, 2001 attacks.

With Underwood's declaration of a "war on terror," *House of Cards* catches up to the American political reality ... of 2001. The fact is that the actual crimes of the American state are far greater, bolder, bloodier and more generalized than those depicted in the Netflix drama.



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Even before the terrorist incident has reached its conclusion,