

# *House of Cards*, Season 5 and the “death of the Age of Reason”

Hiram Lee  
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In Season 5 of the Netflix drama *House of Cards*, the administration of President Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey) manufactures a terrorist threat to influence an election, orders the assassination of an American citizen who has been detained and tortured in secret, makes regular use of sex scandals and secret recordings to blackmail congressman and engineer public opinion, and is finally confronted by factions within the military and intelligence apparatus who oppose the Underwood presidency.

Had the show’s creators begun each episode with a title reading “Based on a true story,” they would have been entirely justified. There is nothing about *House of Cards* that is remotely far-fetched. With successive US administrations implicated in the most barbaric crimes, and openly fascistic elements now roaming the halls of the White House, no one approaches *House of Cards* with shock or incredulity. It is all entirely recognizable.

The events depicted here are not set in some far-off dystopian future but in the present day. The show’s criminal elite is easily identifiable as the very same one now dominating official life in the United States. If anything, the chief difficulty facing the show’s creators is keeping up with the depravity and criminality of real-life Washington.

At the conclusion of Season 4, Underwood and his wife—and running mate—Claire (Robin Wright) were engaged in a bitter reelection campaign against Republican challenger Will Conway (Joel Kinnaman). At risk of losing the election and suffering the exposure of their crimes, the Underwoods resolved to come out fighting. Determined to use the terrorist threat of ICO, the show’s fictional stand-in for ISIS, to sway the election, Frank Underwood looked directly into the camera and warned his audience, “We don’t submit to terror, we make the terror.”

Now in Season 5, the Underwoods fulfill this promise.

They take various measures in regard to the election. Citing terrorist threats (of their own invention), the Underwoods impose martial law in urban areas and consolidate the number of polling places in key states, ostensibly in the name of providing security, but in reality to disenfranchise rural Republican voters.

Aidan Macallan (Damian Young), the data scientist and hacker who in Season 4 gave the Underwoods access to the personal information of US citizens, goes to work for the NSA to help the Underwoods “from the inside.” He plays a key role in the final days of the election campaign when he uses his access to the NSA to stage a phony ICO cyber-attack on Washington, D.C. telecommunications. After he’s completed his work in the election, Macallan, realizing that he’s now disposable, flees the country.

On Election Day itself, faced with possible defeat, Underwood engineers the shutdown of voting altogether in Tennessee and Ohio through another fake terrorist threat, and ultimately wins the re-vote in Ohio after leaking an audiotape damning to his opponent Conway, which he obtains through Conway’s top aide. The latter, Mark Usher (Campbell Scott), then takes a position as a top adviser in the Democratic White House. The program captures something of the extreme cynicism of American capitalist politics, and the ability of political operatives to change candidates, policies and parties as easily as they change their ties.

The Underwoods’ efforts to disrupt the election create a situation in which no clear winner can be determined, leaving it up to Congress to decide who becomes the next president. The Underwoods launch a campaign of blackmail, spying and murder to obtain the outcome they want.

Journalist Tom Hammerschmidt (Boris McGiver) is also continuing his investigation into the Underwoods, receiving information from a leaker within the White House. But even as the noose tightens around them, the Underwoods prove once more their ability to gain the upper hand.

On the whole, Season 5 is a success. Spacey continues to be excellent as Underwood, and Patricia Clarkson is especially memorable as the mysterious Jane Davis, someone with ties to the intelligence community and in whom everyone foolishly confides. She knows more truths and tells more lies than anyone in the show. Her character represents a deep-state faction that seeks to shift US foreign policy in Syria and favors the installation of Claire in the oval office. She encourages the Underwoods to permit a gas attack in Syria so that it can be used as a pretext to launch a war in opposition to Russian interests in the country. These elements of the show are the most intriguing and the most convincing.

The series' weakness remains what it always has been: a tendency to confine itself to immediate palace intrigue at the expense of broader social questions. Efforts to supply an explanation for the corrupt personalities of the Underwoods and their underlings by referring to the repressed or otherwise disturbed sexuality of this or that character—the closeted homosexuality of Frank Underwood, the joyless affairs of his wife, the obsessions of top aide Doug Stamper (Michael Kelly)—are misguided.

Whatever its limitations, however, one finds more truth about Washington in *House of Cards* than in all the lying commentaries found in the major newspapers and cable news channels put together. Here the open secrets are just that, out in the open.

One moment from Season 5 stands out above all others. During a Congressional hearing into the crimes committed by his administration, Frank Underwood breaks the fourth wall to make this extraordinary declaration to viewers: “The deck is stacked. The rules are rigged. Welcome to the death of the Age of Reason.” It is a line that powerfully alludes to the terminal crisis of bourgeois democracy.

It comes at the end of a lengthy aside in which Underwood articulates his contempt for ordinary people: “Oh, don’t deny it,” he tells the audience, “you’ve loved it. You don’t actually need me to stand

for anything. You just need me to stand. To be the strong man. The man of action. My god, you’re addicted to action and slogans. It doesn’t matter what I say. It doesn’t matter what I do. Just as long as I’m doing something, you’re happy to be along for the ride. And frankly, I don’t blame you. With all the foolishness and indecision in your lives, why not a man like me? I don’t apologize. In the end, I don’t care whether you love me or you hate me, just as long as I win.”

It arrives as something of a challenge to the viewer. The Underwoods of the world have been operating with a free hand for much too long. Their brutality is matched only by their arrogance, by their confidence that they can get away with anything. It is time to prove them wrong.



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