

Fascism and big business in *Succession*'s "America Decides" episode

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21 May 2023

"America Decides," the latest episode of the popular HBO series *Succession*, which aired May 14, is a chilling account of an election night, drawing on recent and not so recent history.

The episode reveals the corporate-media Roys, the family at the center of the series, conspiring to steal an election by crowning its preferred candidate, the fascistic Jeryd Mencken (Justin Kirk). The title of the episode itself is loaded with irony. In fact, as we see, big business has a large hand in "deciding" who becomes the next US president.

The 62-minute episode has an unquestionably unnerving quality. It provides an artistic and accurate depiction of the breakdown of democracy and the lurch toward fascism by the American ruling elite.

The drama portrayed in "America Decides" draws elements from the hijacked 2000 presidential election, in which Fox News played a major role in solidifying the false claims of George W. Bush, the rise of Donald Trump in 2016 and the 2020 election, which resulted in a fascist mob attacking the Capitol on January 6, 2021 in an attempt to establish an authoritarian dictatorship. Writer and showrunner Jesse Armstrong has also indicated that certain incidents are intended to bring to mind the infamous 1933 Reichstag fire provocation carried out by Hitler's Nazis.

Written by Armstrong and directed by Andrij Parekh, Episode 8 of *Succession*'s fourth and final season takes place on an election night in the Fox News-like newsroom of ATN News, the network owned by the Rupert Murdoch-esque tycoon Logan Roy (Brian Cox). Logan has died suddenly in a previous episode this season.

The atmosphere in the newsroom is extremely tense. The Republican Mencken, something of a latter-day Charles Lindbergh, obviously meant to suggest Trump as well, prone to using fascistic dog whistles, is engaged in a close contest with the Democratic Party's Daniel Jiménez

(Elliot Villar).

The various Roy family members side with either Mencken or Jiménez, each scheming and maneuvering in his or her own self-interest. Ultimately, the majority of the Roys land on the fascist as their candidate of choice to advance their business and political interests.

Following Logan Roy's death, two of his sons, Kendall (Jeremy Strong) and Roman (Kieran Culkin), have emerged temporarily as joint CEOs of Waystar RoyCo. The vacuum has set bitter power struggles into motion. Logan's daughter Shiv (Sarah Snook), however, has been sidelined and begins to conspire against the brothers with their business rival Lukas Matsson (Alexander Skarsgård), the head of the tech company GoJo in talks to acquire the Roy's media empire.

The previous episode "Tailgate Party" sets the stage for the events in "America Decides." Occurring on the eve of the election, it is also a taut and explosive episode, as a number of luminaries from the media, venture capitalists, liberals and fascists co-mingle. Despite the political warfare within the ruling class, their economic interests, as we witness, are largely shared.

At one point, Kendall responds to Shiv's concerns about the presence of the far right at her house party, "Come on, they're not all crypto-fascists and right-wing nutjobs. We also have some venture capital Dems and centrist ghouls. Dad's ideological range was wide." Kendall and Roman use the opportunity to try and get the Jiménez camp to use regulatory interventions to block the GoJo deal. "OK. I'll hit the libtards, you go help the Nazis," Kendall tells Roman as they scheme to shape the political landscape to suit their needs.

On election night, everything comes to a head. Initially, it appears that Jiménez is on course to win the vote. Mencken summons Roman to his election headquarters to ensure that even if he loses, "I want it correctly characterized as a huge victory. ... I want to be the

president. I want you to be a partner in that, and if it isn't tonight, it will be next time."

Meanwhile, the more liberal-minded Shiv's fears about Mencken are dismissed by Roman. "It's fun, my team's playing your team," Roman tells her with sociopathic blitheness. "It's only spicy 'cause if my team wins, they're gonna shoot your team." The atmosphere evoked by the episode suggests a country on the verge of massive violence and civil unrest.

As the night proceeds, what are clearly far-right extremists set fire to a "vote counting center" in Milwaukee, destroying over 100,000 absentee ballots, in an area that regularly votes Democratic. ATN's fascist spokesperson Mark Ravenhead (Zack Robidas), a Tucker Carlson type, openly blames the blaze on supporters of the Democrats, using the language of QAnon-style conspiracies.

Things spiral out of control, and Roman proceeds to convince Kendall, who has been vacillating between the two candidates, to back Mencken and declare that the latter has won Wisconsin and eventually the election itself. Shiv's own secret maneuvers with Matsson play a role in Kendall's going along with his vile younger brother. Shiv's husband Tom (Matthew Macfadyen), the CEO of ATN who was on the verge of being canned, is asked to make the network's call that Mencken wins the election.

At one point, Kendall, watching the sinister Mencken speaking in public ("Don't we long sometimes for something clean once in this polluted land?"), concludes, "He's a guy we can do business with." Roman concurs ("He'll play ball"), knowing he now has the upper hand in the business through his alliance with Mencken.

Episode 8 is a nightmarish portrayal of a social order in the process of disintegration. It cuts through the official lies about "American democracy" and reveals a country run by a criminal oligarchy, distant from and despised by the vast majority.

The Roy family's inexorable turn toward fascism, even in the face of doubts and hesitations on the part of some family members, reflects something profoundly true about the American ruling elite and its intractable crisis.

In preparing "America Decides," Armstrong and the other *Succession* writers consulted with various political consultants who provided real-life anecdotes about the sort of election "tailgate party" dramatized in Episode 7, which bring together a wide swathe of the ruling elite. They also researched the behind-the-scenes realities of

newsrooms on election nights. The striving for artistic truth and resulting realism of these recent episodes are remarkable.

In an interview with Kara Swisher on HBO's *Succession* podcast, Armstrong said he felt compelled to depict a presidential election in the show. He revealed that in writing Episode 8 he had in mind not simply previous US elections—Bush versus Gore in 2000 and Trump's role in 2016 and 2020—but also, as mentioned above, the Reichstag (German parliament) fire episode.

The February 27, 1933 Reichstag fire was an operation carried out by the Nazis, four weeks after Hitler came to power, and blamed on Communists in order to impose a regime of dictatorial terror against left-wing opposition and the working class throughout Germany.

Two more episodes remain before *Succession* concludes, but the show has significantly elevated itself with the past few episodes as it tackles larger issues of American social life with remarkable honesty. It is to the great credit of Armstrong and the writers' room along with the gifted directors and actors that they have taken on life-and-death political and social questions.

More than that, the fact that the connection between big business and the fascist right has become the subject of a widely watched and widely discussed television series has an objective significance. The depiction unquestionably deepens popular hostility to the political and economic elite, but it also speaks to the far-reaching radicalization *already* under way. There is a substantial audience and receptivity for this material. What Trotsky described as "the molecular work of revolutionary thought" is in progress.



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