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Fictional Foreign Policy: How Madam Secretary and House of Cards Depict United States Foreign Policy

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the ways that United States foreign policy is depicted in two prominent current television programs: *House of Cards* and *Madam Secretary*. Both of these programs have had frequent plots in which the fictional foreign policy of the U.S. deals with issues very similar to those that the United States has actually confronted in recent years. Examples include nuclear proliferation negotiations with Iran and U.S. concern over anti-gay legislation in Russia. Several of these fictional stories are analyzed here to consider how processes and policies of the U.S. are portrayed. *Madam Secretary* does much more to demonstrate the give and take among executive and legislative branch actors that result in foreign policy, while *House of Cards* shows the president as dominant. Neither program fits very well into the realist paradigm of international relations; *Madam Secretary* fits the liberal idealist model well in most regards. Both shows include commentary on specific U.S. foreign policy issues, such as the *House of Cards*' criticism of the Russian legislation and *Madam Secretary*'s endorsement of negotiation with Iran.

I. Introduction

Il fiction, of course, relates to the real world to varying degrees. Despite the growth of fantasy in television and film (consider, for example, the huge number and popularity of Marvel and DC superhero television shows and films), there are still plenty of fictional worlds that are more closely grounded in reality. Some fictional television shows make a point of running story lines that parallel recent his-

tory and current events. Doing so adds an aura of verisimilitude to these programs, and it also allows them to comment fairly directly on current political issues and governmental processes. It is the latter that particularly interests me in this project.

House of Cards and *Madam Secretary* have several commonalities that make them intriguing in this regard. Both are shows that focus explicitly on American

politics and include considerable discussion of U.S. foreign policy. *Madam Secretary*, centered around a fictional U.S. Secretary of State, Elizabeth McCord (played by Tea Leoni), is almost entirely about foreign policy, along with a healthy dose of domestic family drama and some inside-Washington, D.C. politics. *House of Cards* features U.S. politician Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey), who becomes president in the third season of the show. From that point on, foreign policy is a major emphasis of the program. Both shows started in the past few years and recently ended. *House of Cards* streams on Netflix, which released an entire season at a time; it ran from 2013 through 2018.¹ *Madam Secretary* ran in the traditional television format on CBS; it began showing in the fall of 2014 and concluded in 2019. Thus, both programs began well into the Obama presidential administration and continued into that of President Trump.

Televised fiction commenting on foreign policy is not new, but most of the famous examples involve more oblique references. Decades ago, the popular comedy/drama *M*A*S*H*, set during the Korean War, was widely seen as broadly anti-war and specifically anti-Vietnam War, as the U.S.' involvement in the latter conflict overlapped with the start of *M*A*S*H* in the early 1970s (Schochet, 2007). Scholars have found metaphorical content on U.S. foreign policy even in science fiction

such as *Star Trek* (Neumann, 2003; Inayatullah, 2003).

In contrast, the two shows studied here have both had foreign policy plotlines that ran very close to events in actual U.S. foreign policy: some of these will be discussed in the next section. They are also both successful shows that have relatively large audiences. No audience share ratings are available for Internet streaming shows, but *House of Cards* is one of the first and most successful of Netflix's original programs, it was the first web-streaming series to receive major Emmy nominations, and it has won seven Emmys ("List of Awards...", 2018). *Madam Secretary*, while not as critically acclaimed, was a highly-rated program in terms of viewership: it was the tenth, fourteenth, and eighteenth highest rated program on all of broadcast television in its first, second, and third seasons.²

The main goal of this paper is to examine the ways in which these fictional plotlines, running closely parallel to U.S. foreign policy events, portray U.S. foreign policy, and its aims and processes. Among the main questions to be addressed are these:

- What specific commentary about these current events are these shows making with these parallel plotlines?
- How do these portrayals of foreign policy relate to prominent academic

¹ In late 2016, news of lead actor Kevin Spacey's alleged sexual assaults and inappropriate behavior led to his dismissal from the program, but Netflix continued the show for one season without him (Spangler, 2017).

² The sources are de Moraes (2015, 2016, and 2017.)

frameworks, such as realism and liberal idealism?

- What is the nature of the U.S. foreign policy processes shown?

This analysis is significant because media socializes viewers, and such socialization is not limited to news coverage of actual political events. There is considerable evidence of these effects, especially for repeated exposure to similar messages, as one might receive on multiple episodes of a television program or on different shows with similar messages (Morgan and Signorelli, 1990, as cited in Carlson, p. 50). And on foreign policy, where there is usually less public knowledge, one might expect effects to be greater than on other issues where people are more likely to have strong opinions already³. Despite the fact that political science studies of media politics are overwhelmingly focused in news media (see for example texts such as Graber (1997) or Iyengar (2019)), Graber and Carlson both argue that fictional sources are more widely used for political information than are non-fiction sources (Graber, 1997, p. 194; Carlson, 1995, p. 49).⁴

II. Four Examples from Two Shows: a Brief Overview and the Main “Lessons” of Each

The analysis in this paper will focus on four topics emphasized in the two shows: two each from *House of Cards* and *Madam Secretary*. As mentioned above,

³ For example, Ole Holsti, while arguing that U.S. foreign policy opinion is not merely random and irrational, acknowledges that “there remains little doubt that most Americans are poorly informed about world affairs” (2014, p. 153).

⁴ See Heyrman for more extended discussion of significance of non-fiction (2018, pp. ix-xi).

these four were chosen because they each contain significant commonalities with what has been occurring in actual United States foreign policy in recent years. These topics are also significant in each program, taking up many episodes. In this section, I will present a relatively brief overview of the four topics. The four topics include one fairly linear arc plot on U.S.-Iranian relations from Season One of *Madam Secretary* and three somewhat more diffuse topics: U.S.-Chinese relations on *Madam Secretary*, U.S.-Russian relations on *House of Cards*, and U.S. dealings with “ICO,” a fictionalized version the Islamic State/ISIS also on *House of Cards*. I will consider some parallels with real-world foreign policy and what the two programs are trying to say about the real-world parallels to these plots.

U.S.-Russian relations on *House of Cards*

The focus of this topic is the Russian president, Viktor Petrov (Lars Mikkelsen). Petrov is deliberately drawn as a very Vladimir Putin-like figure. This is apparent in his firm, autocratic grip on Russia, his KGB background, and his colorful, prickly personality that makes him a formidable adversary for President Frank Underwood and his wife, Claire Underwood (Robin Wright). *House of Cards* gives us a world in which the tough, amoral Frank Underwood deals with this Putin stand-in instead of George W. Bush,

Barack Obama, and Donald Trump doing so. We meet Petrov in the third episode of Season Three, soon after Frank Underwood becomes president. Several Russia-U.S. plots unfold thereafter.

Perhaps the most memorable episode (“Chapter 32”) involves Frank and Claire Underwood travelling to Russia to negotiate the release of an American gay rights activist, Michael Corrigan, who was arrested for violating Russia’s “gay propaganda law,” which criminalizes pro-gay rights activism. Such a law was passed in reality by Russia in 2013 (“Russian Anti-Gay Bill...,” 2013) and has been opposed vocally by many American politicians. In the show, Frank Underwood and Petrov are also working on a deal for U.S. and Russian troops to jointly act as peacekeepers in the Middle East. Petrov and Underwood, after much posturing by Petrov, seem to be on the verge of an agreement that would also release Corrigan, but the deal includes Corrigan apologizing, which he will not do. Claire tries unsuccessfully to persuade Corrigan to do so, but she fails, and Corrigan kills himself in prison.

This and other episodes show Petrov as at least as cunning as the Underwoods are, sometimes more so. The episodes also serve to put actual Russian policies in a bad light. In addition to the anti-gay law at the heart of the above episode, another one features the real-life anti-Putin Russian activists Pussy Riot denouncing Petrov when he visits the White House.

Thus, even the amoral Underwoods look good compared to this Putin-like leader. *House of Cards*’ purpose with the Petrov

plot is in part, perhaps, simply to show Frank Underwood dealing with a foreign leader who is just as shady and clever as Underwood is. But the Russian-related plots also portray Russian policies negatively and human rights activists in Russia more positively. Thus, there is direct commentary on Putin’s Russian government and the U.S.’ unsuccessful attempts to reign in its abuses. Underwood finds it as difficult to deal with Putin as Obama did. Most of these fictional plots were written before the controversies occurred in real U.S. politics about whether President Trump is too close to Putin, and no such issue arises in *House of Cards*.

ICO on *House of Cards*

“ICO” on *House of Cards* stands for Islamic Caliphate Organization, which is clearly a fictional stand-in for ISIS/The Islamic State. Both ISIS and its fictional counterpart operate in and around Syria; ISIS sprung to international prominence in 2014 and 2015, and *House* began its ICO plot in “Chapter 46” in 2016. This plot was arguably the dominant policy issue that the Frank Underwood administration dealt with in the latter Frank Underwood seasons of the show (before his character stopped being president.)

ICO is a radical Islamic terrorist organization, with which US politics quickly becomes greatly concerned, which tracks well with ISIS as a U.S. foreign policy concern in the 2010s. The presidential election between Underwood, the incumbent Democrat, and Republican nominee Will Conway (Joel Kinnaman) includes debate over whether the current policy is tough enough. Similarly, President Obama

ma faced some criticism for ISIS' territorial acquisitions on his watch.

While ICO is brought up many times in recent seasons, there are two particularly important plot threads regarding it. First, domestic ICO sympathizers kidnap a U.S. family and eventually execute the father, all during the presidential election campaign. This plot shows how the two candidates must appear to not be playing politics with the crisis, even while they each try to spin it to their advantage. This becomes particularly tricky when Conway goes to the White House to assist in talks with the terrorists.

Despite the above, ICO is not shown in *House of Cards* to be a major domestic threat. The above incident is not inconsistent with the ways that a few domestic terrorists in the U.S. have claimed allegiance to ISIS, while ISIS itself has not shown significant organizational reach into the U.S. But Frank Underwood, the ultimate cynical manipulator, invents and exaggerates ICO threats to help him win reelection.

What is *House of Cards* trying to say about ISIS and current U.S. foreign policy? One thing is certainly the use of security issues as political footballs. These ICO episodes emphasize the huge knowledge advantage that presidents still have over Congress and ordinary citizens, even with modern communications and the Internet available to most citizens. The public cannot know the whole picture of international terror threats and relies on the executive branch for information. Thus, Frank Underwood manipulates the public through their desire for security, and so

recent and current U.S. administrations could be doing so as well. President George W. Bush relied much on his image as a fighter against terrorism, for example, although in practice this was an international more than domestic focus.

Iran on *Madam Secretary*

The Iran-U.S. story on *Madam Secretary* is rather remarkable in that it is at once idealistic and paranoid. It parallels the nuclear deal struck among Iran and six nuclear powers in 2015 that was opposed by many Republicans. In that agreement, the United States and other countries sought to allow Iran's nuclear power development but prevent it from developing nuclear weapons ("Iran Nuclear Deal," 2017). Iran has consistently denied that it seeks the latter, but it is widely assumed that it was doing so, in part to balance the nuclear weapons that Israel is assumed to possess. President Trump, as he promised he would, withdrew from the treaty in 2018, leaving its fate and the possibility of Iranian nuclear weapons development uncertain (Liptak and Gauette, 2018).

In the television show, the deal is similar, and, as in reality, the U.S. and Iran do not have diplomatic relations, so negotiations between the two are difficult. The opposition to the real-world deal was fierce among some Republicans, with most Senate Republicans even signing a letter to Iran reminding them that any permanent deal would need the ratification of the Senate ("Letter From Senate Republicans...", 2015). In *Madam Secretary*, however, U.S. government plotters, including McCord's Secretary of State predecessor and the head of the Central Intel-

ligence Agency, actively worked to undermine the deal, and even supported regime change in Iran. These actions led to violence within Iran and some deaths of U.S. officials, painting a rather extreme, paranoid view of conspiracies within the government. At the same time, the show portrays Secretary McCord and the Iranian foreign minister meeting secretly to thwart this conspiracy, thus giving us a very hopeful picture of peace-seeking by members of both governments.

The rather over-the-top conspiracy, bordering on paranoia, can be seen in part as a way to have a dramatic plot. However, the frequency of such plots on recent television and films might have an effect on viewers. Gregg Easterbrook recently tallied several of these in his column and wondered, perhaps in jest, if President Trump, who apparently watches a great deal of television, might be influenced by “show after show that depict the United States government in the hands of traitors. Perhaps there is a link between Trump telling voters that Washington, D.C. was actively trying to ruin the United States” and these shows (Easterbrook, 2017).

On this specific U.S. foreign policy, *Madam Secretary* is pretty clearly endorsing President Obama’s pursuit of the Iran treaty. This was not a particularly controversial view in most of the world, but the Israeli government and Congressional Republicans vehemently dissented. Little did the showrunners know during the first season that an open opponent of the treaty would be the next U.S. president and that he would pull out of the deal. The show portrays its plotting opponents of the treaty as perhaps well-meaning (one of

them is an old CIA friend of Secretary McCord), but they are also dangerous, and they even kill to keep their secrets.

China on *Madam Secretary*

This is a more general topic, rather than a specific plot like the one above. It is given some continuity by the many appearances on the show of Chinese Foreign Minister Chen (Francis Jue). He sometimes meets Secretary McCord in person and more often via video-call. Chen is shown as a formidable negotiator, representing a rising world power. But most episodes show him as rational and reasonable; by the end of each of his appearances, he and McCord have almost always reached a deal or understanding. Chen can be described as a humanized character, sometimes an ally and sometimes an adversary.

An example of some of the above can be seen in the Season Two episode “Render Safe.” In this story, the government of Pakistan has been overthrown in a coup, ultimately leaving Pakistan on the verge of becoming a failed state. Thus, its nuclear arsenal is left vulnerable, and it is revealed that the U.S. and Russia have a plan in place to capture and disarm all of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons in case of such an event. But, for regional political reasons, Russia backs out of the deal, and the U.S. is left attempting to do the job on its own. Chinese Minister Chen comes to McCord to express his government’s official condemnation of U.S. interference in the internal affairs of Pakistan. However, unofficially, he offers to help, and China assists in preventing a nuclear disaster. This is one of several times that China is

portrayed on the show as a more stable and predictable country than is Russia in its relationship with the U.S.

This example and many others on *Madam Secretary* depict China in a nuanced way; the quality of its relationship with the United States depends on the issue. And many of the China examples demonstrate that this television program, unsurprisingly, places great faith in diplomacy. Most episodes end with a diplomatic resolution of a crisis or international issue. The examples of the U.S.-China relationship seen on the program contrast markedly with the real-world deterioration of the countries' relationship, especially during the Trump presidency, during which China was often painted as the U.S.'s most dangerous adversary. Thus, *Madam Secretary* seems to be advocating a possible alternative, more hopeful, relationship with China, the rising global power.

III. How Foreign Policy Processes are Portrayed

Roles of Key Executive Branch Actors

One of the ways in which political programs such as these can matter is in the ways that they show to audiences who makes crucial decisions and how. In doing so, they demonstrate which political actors are important and should be closely observed by citizens. They also paint a picture of how the foreign policy process works that might or might not be accurate.

The most predictable observation that can be made in this regard is that *House of Cards*, whose lead character is the president, focuses overwhelmingly on the pres-

ident's role in making foreign policy, and *Madam Secretary* emphasizes the secretary of state. Beyond that obvious point, it is interesting to analyze the ways each shows the interactions among the president, the secretary of state, and other key actors such as the national security advisor and secretary of defense.

House of Cards is a very personality-driven show. Frank Underwood is shown consistently making bold, controversial decisions in foreign policy, just as he does in other areas. His cabinet members and other advisors often try to dissuade him from these, but they rarely succeed in doing so. Thus, he is the one with power, and he seems not to be influenced much by advisors. Examples can be found in his Russia policies. His initiative to put U.S. and Russian peacekeepers in the Middle East was seen by his Secretary of State, Catherine Durant (Jayne Atkinson), as too risky and unlikely to be agreed to by all parties. He pursued it nonetheless, and it led to problems when Russian President Petrov tried to maneuver Russia out of the agreement.

Another risky choice Underwood made against advice from advisors was to name his wife Claire ambassador to the United Nations, despite her lack of foreign policy experience. When the Senate balked, he used a recess appointment to make it happen. The potential cost to the president's political capital of such moves is seldom explored. Claire, however, was not just Frank's puppet or clone. While Frank Underwood mostly steamrolled Durant over disagreements, Claire sought to win Durant over and not step on her toes. In the long run, however, Claire Underwood

had to resign as ambassador, largely on Russian president Petrov's insistence. One could conclude that, while *House of Cards* often shows Frank Underwood as a very successful and shrewd political operator, his tactics and lack of respect for other actors sometimes backfire in foreign policy.

While the prominence of Secretary of State Elizabeth McCord is a given in *Madam Secretary*, there are some more significant conclusions to draw from that program's process portrayal. *Madam Secretary* shows U.S. foreign policy much more as an outcome of a collective, complex process than does *House of Cards*. The Iran plot provides an example. More hawkish and dovish voices on the potential nuclear treaty with Iran compete through many episodes of the first season. The president ultimately backs Secretary McCord's more conciliatory approach, and a treaty is signed. But, as discussed above, others in power are actively working against this outcome. This process is worth exploring in slightly more detail.

Secretary of State McCord's backstory includes the fact that she used to work for the current president in the CIA (he was the CIA director) before she retired into academia and then later was hired to head the State Department. Her husband, Henry (Tim Daly) was a Marine and eventually winds up working for the CIA in the show. These backgrounds serve in several instances of the program to show these protagonists as tough, realistic, seasoned professionals, and this balances against the generally idealistic outlook of the show.

In the Iran plot, Elizabeth McCord works with a colleague from her days in the CIA, as well as her husband, to analyze and eventually uncover a plot by many in government, including her State Department predecessor, the current CIA director, and another of her former CIA friends, to undermine the U.S.-Iran negotiations and encourage the overthrow of the current Islamic regime in Iran. This plot characterizes both the U.S. and Iran as having complex, multifaceted governments and societies, and these facets battle for dominance in the foreign policy sphere.

In this sense, *Madam Secretary's* foreign policy world resembles Graham Allison's "government politics" model of foreign policy decision-making in his classic work, *The Essence of Decision*. In this book, Allison presents three different models for foreign policy decisions making. In the government politics model, powerful actors such as cabinet members and other key advisors jockey for position and influence, and the personalities of these actors matter (Allison, 1971, pp. 144-147). *House of Cards* also sometimes adheres to this model, although it is top-heavy with the influence of the president. *Madam Secretary* certainly corresponds as well to the "organizational politics" model, which focuses on governmental bureaucracy and its standard operating procedures. The organizational politics model emphasizes the well-known idea that government bureaucracies are inherently conservative in their adherence to traditional ways of dealing with problems, and they resist presidents or other outsiders who try to impose innovations upon them (Allison, 1971, pp. 67-69).

An excellent example of the latter is an episode in which Secretary McCord, staff members, and reporters are jetting around West Africa attempting to make deals on economic development and women's empowerment, all the while competing with China, which is also seeking to aid and influence the region. McCord's airplane breaks, and the State Department cannot easily obtain repairs because of the bureaucratic rules that do not prioritize her plane. Only considerable persistence and resourcefulness by her staff rescue the situation after she is forced to fly commercially around Africa for a while.

Neither show relies as much on Allison's "rational actor" model, in which governments are seen as unitary and rationally pursuing their interests. The rational actor view says that, unlike in the above two models, differing views within the government matter less than what is in the country's best interest (1971, pp. 10-14). This model shows states as rationally seeking to maximize their power, wealth, etc. in a way parallel to how economists often assume individuals act. *House of Cards*' foreign policy is essentially driven by the personalities of its main actors. One gets the impression that US relations with Russia, for instance, hinge on the extent to which the two presidents get along. When President Petrov snubs President Underwood's overtures in their first meeting, at the White House, he seems to want to put Underwood in his place as a newcomer and foreign policy neophyte who was not elected.

On the other hand, *Madam Secretary*'s foreign policy plays more heed to the rational interests of countries. China seems to be, for the most part, rationally pursuing its goal of a peaceful rise. Foreign Minister Chen can be counted on to object to any U.S. policy that might threaten China's interests, such as when Secretary McCord meets with the Dalai Lama and when a new Lama might be chosen that China cannot control. This, by the way, perfectly parallels China's current policy of attempting to use its power to isolate the Tibetan religious leader and, thus, maintain dominance over the disputed Tibet region ("Q&A: China and the Tibetans," 2011).

While it might be quixotic to seek realistic portrayals of governmental processes on popular television programs, one could reasonably conclude that *Madam Secretary* provides more useful education on U.S. foreign policy processes overall than does *House of Cards*. I say this in light of the preceding analysis: *Madam Secretary* does regularly demonstrate some of the complexity of competing voices from different agencies of government and bureaucratic procedures. Of course, its main emphasis as a show is on foreign policy, while *House of Cards* is more driven by the power-acquisition strategies and their personalities of Frank and Claire Underwood.

One piece of current reality that *Madam Secretary* completely avoids is the weakening of the U.S. diplomatic apparatus. There have been several news articles written in the past year on the Trump Ad-

ministration's de-emphasizing of the State Department.⁵ These reports tell the story of a department with many unfilled vacancies at the top, facing large budget cuts, and, unsurprisingly, with low morale. With President Trump's plans to vastly increase the military budget, these changes could significantly shift U.S. foreign policy away from diplomacy and towards use of force (or its threat.) These current trends contrast sharply with fictional Secretary of State McCord coming to the rescue every week and preventing conflicts, signing new treaties, etc. The divergence of current events from fictional ones in this regard could not be starker.

The Role of Congress

While *House of Cards* does show Frank Underwood overwhelming his cabinet and advisors and underplaying the complexity of the executive branch, both programs have plots in which Congress' role as a potential check on the executive is shown.

Congress does appear to be a larger impediment to President Frank Underwood's plans than are others in the executive branch, which would make sense, since he appointed the latter. However, Underwood still mostly defeated Congress in the plots focused on in this study. Two major conflicts between Underwood and Congress occurred in relation to the Russian plot of *House of Cards*. First of all, as mentioned above, Underwood could not get sufficient support for the controversial appointment of his wife as ambassador to

the United Nations. (Such a move sounds like a strange television plot, but there is the precedent of Robert Kennedy serving as his brother John Kennedy's Attorney General.) However, as mentioned above, Frank Underwood got around that by making a recess appointment of Claire Underwood. It was the Russian president, rather than Congress, that ultimately forced Frank Underwood to ask for her resignation, so Congress' powers were not much on display in this plot.

That concession to Petrov was part of President Underwood's efforts to save his Middle East plan, for which he needed Russia to commit troops. It is worth mentioning that many in Congress opposed this plan as well. Underwood's ability to make international deals with or without Congressional support is not necessarily unrealistic, given general presidential advantages in the foreign policy realm. Presidents can make executive agreements without Senate ratification, and their commander-in-chief power often has wide scope, especially in committing troops (Davidson, et.al., 2018, pp. 310-312).

With its greater focus on foreign policy and tendency to show interplay of many actors discussed above, it is perhaps unsurprising that *Madam Secretary* shows a more regular role for Congress in policy-making. Also, many of the more routine programs that the Secretary of State oversees depend heavily on Congress for funding, as opposed to the crises and big-power diplomatic issues that *House of Cards*

⁵ Two good examples are "Neglecting the State Department..." (2017) and Zengerle (2017).

is more likely to deal with.⁶ Thus, the greater reliance on Congress in *Madam Secretary* makes some sense.

In several *Madam Secretary* episodes, members of Congress and/or committees threaten specific or broad cuts to State Department funding. The drama needed for television comes in when Secretary McCord sometimes solves these with theatrical testimony to Congress. Actual drama that leads to policy changes is unusual in real committee hearings, which tend to be more predictable. An example of a more mundane and realistic interaction occurs when McCord makes complex deals in a successful effort to get the Senate to ratify a ban on landmines.⁷ Swing voters in the Senate need reassurance from the Secretary of Defense to support the treaty. The Secretary wants China to ratify the treaty, and China wants the Senate to act first. Somehow, McCord gets all these things to happen.

Motivations of Key Players: Power, Policy, and Cynicism

Certainly, one of the starkest differences in the foreign policy of these two fictional worlds is in the basic outlook of their protagonists: Secretary of State Elizabeth McCord, while somewhat hardened by her CIA experience, is an idealist and an optimist who is trying to change the world in every episode of the program. Frank Underwood's overwhelming motivation is personal power, and *House of Cards*

leaves unclear the extent to which he has policy goals beyond that.

In fictional portrayals of the American political process, the most common outlook is a combination of idealism and cynicism: the American political system is most often shown as worthwhile at its core, but infested with politicians seeking their own good at the expense of the public at large. More idealistic individuals, who most often come from outside of politics to be untainted by it, must regularly fight to redeem American politics and government. This is the case, certainly, in the body of films on American politics, as well as many previous television programs (Heyrman, 2018, pp. xvi-xviii).

House of Cards does not follow this tendency at all, fitting much better into a smaller but important tradition of overwhelmingly cynical portrayals of American government (Heyrman, 2018, pp. xvi-ii-xix). The ICO plot demonstrates this point most convincingly. While ICO in this fictional world is a real threat, Frank Underwood initially rules out a military strike against it, despite his military advisors' arguments, for the most cynical of reasons. Underwood's administration is seeking judicial permission for extensive domestic surveillance that he will actually use to manipulate public opinion and help him win the election. His opponent, Will Conway, is already attempting to do something similar with the help of a social media company. If ICO is destroyed in a

⁶ See Hook on Congress' tight purse strings with regard to diplomacy (2008, pp. 157-8).

⁷ There is an actual landmine treaty unratified by the U.S. called the Ottawa Treaty, and in the program it is the "Calgary Treaty."

military strike, Underwood will no longer be able to justify his surveillance request, so he opposes the strike!

Later, when the presidential election appears to be very close and possibly not going his way, Underwood begins exaggerating and inventing ICO threats in what can be called a *Wag the Dog* scenario. In that 1997 farcical film, a president's staff creates an imaginary war with Albania to distract the public from a presidential sex scandal shortly before an election (Heyrman, 2018, pp. 82-83). In *House of Cards*, Underwood falsely claims that there are threats against polling places in several key swing states. In a rather bizarre plot, voting in some of these states is halted and resumed later. Underwood is able to take advantage of the "rally around the flag" effect that political scientists have determined helps incumbent presidents' popularity in the time of international crises (Pika, et al., 2018, pp. 111-113). This is a well-known tendency that can be seen in recent U.S. history in the case of George H.W. Bush's high approval ratings after the first Gulf War and in his son George W. Bush's popularity after the 9-11 attacks. The public tends to unite around the president in such times. Through the manipulations shown in *House of Cards*, and after much complication, Underwood is reelected.

IV. The Role of the United States in the World, Realism, and Liberal / Idealism

This section considers the portrayal of the United States' foreign policy in these two programs in light of the well-known international relations models of realism and liberal idealism. Realism, described by

Steven Hook as the dominant view in the study of world politics, emphasizes the flawed nature of humans and the essentially anarchic international system (2008, p. 66). Similarly, Kegley and Wittkopf state that "the primary obligation of every state" in realism is to promote its own interests, and allies' reliability cannot be assumed. In such a world, states seek to protect their security by maintaining a balance of power (Kegley and Wittkopf, 2008, pp. 22-25). This theory corresponds somewhat with Allison's rational actor model, in that both generally assume that states will rationally pursue their own interests.

The major competing theory is often called "liberalism" and sometimes "idealism," so I will label it here as "liberal idealism." Hook emphasized the more positive view that liberals have of human nature and the ability of states to develop norms of behavior that avoid war. They argue that the type of states matter; for example, democracies have usually been at peace with each other (2008, pp. 68-69). Kegley and Wittkopf add that flawed institutions rather than simply flawed human nature cause violence, and these institutions can be improved. Multilateral cooperation is possible and necessary to decrease the likelihood of war (1999, pp. 19-22).

Madam Secretary is much easier to classify in terms of these models than is *House of Cards*: its plots clearly fit into the liberal idealist model. That does not mean, of course, that everything is positive, for that would not be dramatic. There are serious

international crises and/or problems on every episode, but they are most often resolved, Secretary McCord and the U.S. do so through diplomacy much more often than through hard military power, although there are certainly examples of the latter in the show. Furthermore, McCord works with the United Nations and seeks to establish relationships with other world actors to reduce conflict, just as liberal idealism posits it is possible to do.

As mentioned above, China is shown as a largely rational actor seeking to increase its power, and its attitude toward the U.S. varies by issue; these characteristics could be described as a realist aspect of *Madam Secretary*. But Secretary McCord diffuses tension with China in part through establishing a personal relationship with Foreign Minister Chen. And the U.S. is shown pursuing a human rights agenda and not simply its narrow interests. In one conflict with China over developing Ecuadoran oil, McCord succeeds in getting a private foundation to pay Ecuador to not develop, thus helping the environment and angering both China and U.S. oil companies. The Iran plot also demonstrates that states' leadership matters, and states are not simply pursuing one objective version of their self-interest.

The cynical worldview of *House of Cards*, in which individuals seem to be almost completely selfish, could indicate that it would also depict a realist view of foreign policy. To some extent that is certainly the case, in that neither the Underwood administration nor its international adversaries such as Russia seem to be working to improve international institutions. On

the other hand, the Underwoods do appear to be promoting the rights of the gay activist imprisoned in Russia, and they might be seeking peace in the Middle East through their initiative to send peace keeping forces there. It is hard to tell because, given the ways these characters are generally shown, they might only be pursuing these goals instrumentally, to gain more political support.

It is also worth emphasizing the degree to which, in *House of Cards*, international politics is personality-driven, as mentioned in my discussion of Graham Allison's models. The U.S.-Russian relations depicted in the program appear to hinge not as much on an alignment of interests, as realist theory would predict, as on the characteristics of Underwood and Petrov, and the extent to which they can get past their macho posturing and strike a deal. Petrov pointedly puts out his cigar on the wall of a stairwell in the White House at the end of an unsuccessful bargaining session with Underwood, leaving a mark so we know he was there! And when Claire Underwood (or Vice President Donald Blythe) must negotiate in Frank's place when Frank is incapacitated, Petrov is dismissive towards them and hesitant to seriously negotiate, indicating the international relations might hinge on lack of personal respect. Neither model seems to be a clear fit with *House of Cards*.

V. Conclusions

These fictional plots that skate close to the reality of United States foreign policy are significant in several ways. The two programs, as mentioned in the introduction, are fairly popular. The typical television

audience member for American politics and foreign policy-related programming is likely older and more educated than the average American, and thus more likely to vote. I suspect that these audiences are somewhat more liberal than average, which, in the case of *Madam Secretary*, might mean a fair amount of preaching to the converted on that show's liberal values about international human rights and the U.S.' role in the world.

Even relatively educated audiences could learn something from these programs. American's knowledge of foreign policy details is low (Hook, 2008, pp. 209-210), so any significant discussion of other countries and U.S. policies toward them that is closely related to real U.S. policy issues might be educational. And, unlike some programs and films, these two feature real countries, not invented ones (although *House of Cards* did invent ICO, an ISIS-like group.) As discussed above, *Madam Secretary* more than *House of Cards* features relatively realistic process details that could be educational. Presumably, most viewers would be sophisticated enough to recognize that the television secretary of state rescues the world a fair amount more often than the actual one does.

The points of view these shows express might also have some impact, although, as discussed at the start, this is more likely through repeated viewing of these or other shows that reinforce messages than through an occasional viewing of an episode. Some of the interesting points of view mentioned above are these:

House of Cards:

- The Russian government is oppressive, especially toward the LGBT community.
- International terrorism is less of a real threat to the U.S. than is implied through its exploitation by American government for political purposes.

Madam Secretary:

- The U.S. can keep peace and make deals even with historical enemies such as Iran.
- China is an international competitor to the U.S. and its interests. However, it is usually possible for the U.S. to make deals with China and avoid conflict.
- The U.S. State Department can be and often is a force for good in the world, not to mention an important voice within the U.S. government for diplomacy and avoiding conflict.

That last point is especially interesting considering the de-emphasis on diplomacy that the Trump Administration has attempted *Madam Secretary* continued until its conclusion to present an interesting alternate reality of an active State Department that increasingly diverged from what was happening in Washington. The show does feature politicians of a more hawkish or isolationist bent with whom Secretary McCord must deal, but never was there a scenario with a Trump-like president while she held that job. In fact, towards the end of the series, McCord became president.

House of Cards is the more stylish and cinematically bold of the two shows, hence its favorable critical regard. The

acting is also superb. But, as mentioned previously, its foreign policy process portrayal is not very sophisticated. Its view that almost all political actors are cynical and self-serving is not bold or innovative at all: that is the dominant view of political films and television, and, arguably, of the public, although *House of Cards* lacks the hero that usually defeats these corrupt forces in political fiction (Heyrman, 2018). *House of Cards* has always done

well at having over-the-top plots, such as the wild confrontations between President Petrov of Russia and President Underwood. The show ultimately had trouble keeping up with the outrageousness of current U.S. politics. Both of these programs have been interesting in their foreign policy portrayals, but political fiction in the world of a Trumpism poses new challenges.

TABLE 1: COMPARISON OF FOREIGN POLICY IN TWO SHOWS

	<i>House of Cards</i>	<i>Madam Secretary</i>
Executive Branch Actors powerful	Dominated by president	Many important &
Graham Allison Model itics)	Government politics	Government politics (& organizational pol-
Congress' Role less	Present but limited	More significant, but than executive
Idealism & Cynicism	Cynical	Idealistic/Cynical
International Model	Unclear	Liberal idealism

APPENDIX: LIST OF EPISODES ANALYZED

The preceding analysis considers the overall body of work of these two series, but the following episodes were viewed most carefully (and multiple times) because of their concentration on the plotlines discussed above.

House of Cards (Netflix: released for viewing from 2013-2017)

Episodes of *House of Cards* are all titled simply with chapter numbers.

Season 3: Chapters 28 through 36.

Season 4: Chapters 41 through 52.

Season 5: Chapters 53 through 65.

Madam Secretary (CBS: aired from 2014-2017)

Season 1: Episodes 1, 2, 4-6, 8-11, 14-16, 21-22

Season 2: Episodes 1, 9, 11, 22

Season 3: Episodes 3, 11, 12, 16, 21

Season 4: Episodes 1, 9

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