

House of Cards, season 2: The American politician as conspirator and murderer

By Joanne Laurier
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“All politicians are murderers or have to be willing to be murderers. Here you have a dramatization of that thing in them which allows them to do the unspeakable, whether that is facilitating the death of a congressman or sending 100,000 troops to war”—Beau Willimon, creator of *House of Cards*

On February 14, Netflix, the US provider of on-demand Internet streaming media and DVD-by-mail, released season two of the political drama *House of Cards* on its web site. The 13 chapter per season series, based on the 1990 BBC miniseries, follows a ruthless American politician in his grab for power.

For good reason, the series has generated great popular interest. *House of Cards* is highly unusual in its realistic and hard-hitting presentation of American political life. US television for the most part at present offers fantasized versions of politicians, CEOs and law enforcement officials. These thoroughly false depictions and narratives are those the American establishment wants the population to accept. The success of *House of Cards* is a further indication of the huge divide between the establishment and the population.

The series centers on the figure of Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey), when we first meet him, a Democratic congressman from South Carolina and House Majority Whip. In season one, having been passed over for the post of secretary of state by President Garrett Walker (Michel Gill), Underwood plots revenge and positions himself to become vice president. In his quest for retribution, Underwood, whose Machiavellian endeavors are always supported by his cold-blooded wife Claire (Robin Wright), allies himself with journalist Zoe Barnes (Kate Mara) and ends up murdering a protégé, Congressman Peter Russo (Corey Stoll), who is running for the governorship of Pennsylvania.

“For those of us climbing up to the top of the food chain, there can be no mercy. Hunt or be hunted,” says Underwood in chapter one of season two. As he is being sworn in as vice president, he wryly tells the audience (speaking directly to the camera is a technique borrowed from the British original, starring Ian Richardson) that he is “one heartbeat away from the presidency—and not a vote cast in my name. Democracy is so overrated.”

Underwood is first obliged to tie up some loose ends resulting from the death of Russo, which a number of journalists, including his former lover, Zoe Barnes, are looking into. It is not giving too much away to reveal that in little more than half an hour, in a fit of pique over the inconvenience of Zoe’s questions, Underwood pushes her into the path of an oncoming subway train. This swift and diabolical execution serves as a kind of prologue and sets the tone for the rest of the season’s drama.

“And the butchery begins ...”

The second season of *House of Cards*, once the investigation of Russo’s death is viciously suppressed, focuses on Underwood’s efforts to weaken the influence of multi-billionaire Raymond Tusk (Gerald McRaney) over the president, and strengthen his own. In a complicated fashion, the power struggle between Underwood and Tusk also implicates the Chinese government and a leading Chinese businessman. Meanwhile, Claire Underwood reveals during a television interview that she was raped by a future Marine general, in part to provide an explanation for an abortion, and that sets off a chain of unexpected events. Another strand of the narrative, in which Underwood’s replacement as Majority Whip, Jackie Sharp (Molly Parker), plays a leading role, involves “entitlement reform,” a possible government shutdown and the role of the ultra-right Tea Party.

Both due to the complexity and length of the 13-chapter series and out of a desire not to reveal too much of the plot for those who have not yet had the opportunity to watch *House of Cards*, this review will merely highlight a number of the more telling moments.

The relentless and vindictive FBI persecution of journalist Lucas Goodwin (Sebastian Arcelus), who is seeking to tie Underwood to the murders of Russo and Barnes, is disturbing in the extreme. In fact, it is one of the most frightening such sequences ever presented on American television. Underwood oversees the victimization, which involves entrapping Goodwin on fraudulent “cyber terrorism” charges.

Again, the contrast between the sanitized, lying version of the FBI generally presented on US television and the reality hinted at here of an anti-democratic secret police force enthusiastically serving the rich and powerful is striking. The sting operation that demolishes Goodwin’s life and career and puts him behind bars appropriately brings to mind the activities of the Gestapo or the KGB.

In addition, the federal police agency sadistically tries to break the will of a talented hacker—obviously meant to conjure up an Edward Snowden and a Julian Assange—whose technical skills are then used to invade the homes and lives of government officials, as well as selected targets in the civilian population.

Underwood and his enemies alike cynically manipulate the mainstream media and gutter tabloids, who are all too eager to be manipulated, to pulverize each other in public. Innocent bystanders—such as Claire’s former lover, a photographer, and Freddie, the poor, black owner of a barbecue joint—suffer the disastrous consequences. Their fates, and those of others even more vulnerable, are chalked up to collateral damage.

Underwood explains to us how he sees making use of the media to protect himself from his opponents: “From the lion’s den to a pack of

wolves ... when you're fresh meat, kill, and throw them something fresher."

Overall, season two of *House of Cards*, which delivers a harsher view of the American political system than the initial season, offers several important insights to the viewing public:

- The White House is a hothouse of political conspiracy, whose perpetrators' behind-the-scenes doings are illegal, undemocratic and bloody. The most criminal rise to the top. And it always helps to have a calculating, heartless partner like Claire ("Let's make him suffer"), the Lady Macbeth of *House of Cards*.

- Powerful corporate and financial interests determine which of the two big business parties will come to power through their support and cash. Switching allegiance is no big deal for the corporate aristocracy because the differences between the Democrats and Republicans are insignificant. Money commands, either by direct manipulation of the Oval Office or through lobbyists like Remy Danton (Mahershala Ali). The Tea Party is simply one part of an orchestrated political game that always benefits the wealthy.

- *House of Cards* effectively shows that the use of sex scandals, cyber attacks, phony terrorists threats, FBI spying and sting operations has helped to produce a deeply polluted political climate and a virtual reign of terror against democratic rights.

From the haunting score and elegant, atmospheric cinematography to the drama itself, the Netflix series engenders a virtually continuous sense of dread and apprehension. The worst motives are nearly always at play and, wherever and whenever Underwood and his filthy accomplices gather, something horrible is generally about to happen.

The series takes a scathing look at the rise of the political underworld, as well as the latter's hypocrisy and official piety. America's political leaders make holiday speeches about the greatness of democracy even as they sharpen their long knives. And all the while, of course, the US is "liberating" the rest of the world in its own greedy, geopolitical interests. These are the truths that millions of people have come to understand and this understanding finds expression in *House of Cards*. The series is less of an astonishing intellectual breakthrough than a recognition of clearly established and widely recognized facts.

In an interview in the March 13 edition of *Empire*, Willimon responds to the notion that America does not have a class system: "That's always been a lie. The founding fathers were aristocrats. Look at [historian Charles Austin] Beard's analysis of the constitution and you can actually look at that as a very classist document in which the upper classes were trying to find ways, in a democratic model, to ensure that their property and their power was not diminished ...

"The fact that slavery is written into the constitution is about as entrenched a form of classism as you could possibly imagine. So it's a myth, but it's a powerful myth and one that we define ourselves by. But the notion that we don't have classes is absurd ...

"And when it comes to the Middle East we're not interested in freedom. We're not interested in democracy. But that is our "reason" for going in. It's how we justify things to ourselves ... But the big problem with that is you can't force democracy. Democracy is only democracy if it's organic."

There are, inevitably, limitations and weaknesses in *House of Cards*. The producers, writers and directors have hardly sorted everything out.

Chapter 16 of season two, for instance, which ends with a bipartisan "compromise" on entitlements, seems to argue that raising the retirement age to 68 will save Medicare and Social Security for years

to come. In fact, such a retrograde move would generate mass suffering and undoubtedly hasten the deaths of large numbers of people. To imply that America, a country plagued with multi-billionaires, cannot afford to provide its population, present and future, with decent health care and social benefits is ludicrous.

More persistently, the show's creators indicate a troubling ambivalence about the character of Underwood himself. In the same *Empire* interview cited above, Willimon discusses the problems of bringing someone like Underwood to life: "The question is how do you dramatize that in a way that you see the complexity of that and the reasons for that and the efficacy of that, actually: where you lift the veil up in such a way that you can somehow empathize with that sort of brutal pragmatism."

In an interview with ABC's George Stephanopoulos, Kevin Spacey, who is remarkable as Underwood, absurdly compared his character to Abraham Lincoln, also "a very effective politician."

This muddle-headedness translates at times into an almost open admiration for Underwood—as a "Superman" who weathers every political storm through sheer willpower and ingenuity. In particular, the series stacks the deck in such a way that an audience member would find it difficult not to root for Underwood when he is doing battle with the odious Tusk. The worst villains are entitled to human characteristics, even endearing qualities, but *House of Cards* at times steps over the line.

Nonetheless, in the series' defense, certain of Underwood's more awful crimes are well documented, and their horrors and victims represented. This sharply distinguishes *House of Cards* from such a deplorable, celebratory work as Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street*.

In the end, what's most lacking in *House of Cards* is any sense of the driving forces behind the corruption and rot it graphically portrays. Why is America in such a state? Why has the establishment lurched so far to the right and toward authoritarianism? The burning question of social inequality and the conditions of broad masses of the population are largely absent, except by a hint here and there.

It is not the fault of the series' creators that the class struggle has been artificially and forcibly suppressed in recent decades, which helps explain the absence of the working class as an active social element in the drama. The show tends to focus on political wrangling at the expense of a more profound appreciation of the economic and social interests at work.

On the whole, however, in its appraisal of American reality, and in what it encourages viewers to consider and ponder, *House of Cards* is highly admirable and nearly unprecedented. It stands as a damning and unanswerable indictment of the existing political and economic system, and as such, will help to undermine it.

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