

ABC's *Designated Survivor*: The US government in crisis, onscreen and off

By Carlos Delgado
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The ABC television drama *Designated Survivor* is currently wrapping up its first season. The series has garnered mostly favorable comments from critics since its September 2016 debut and has managed to build a fairly sizable weekly viewership. Its depiction of a US government wracked by crisis no doubt resonates with viewers in the current political climate.

The “Pilot” episode begins on the night of the annual State of the Union address. The opening sequence informs us that, “During the State of the Union, one cabinet member is taken to an undisclosed location. In the event of a catastrophic attack on our government, that cabinet member becomes our new President.”

We are introduced to Tom Kirkman (Kiefer Sutherland), the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, who has been selected as this year’s “designated survivor.” Believing he has been sidelined by the administration, Kirkman watches the address on television, expecting that his days in Washington are numbered.

Suddenly, the camera feed cuts out, and a security detail storms into the room. Kirkman opens the blinds to see a massive explosion rising up over the US Capitol building. In the ensuing chaos it becomes clear that an attack has wiped out nearly the entire US government, including the President and his Cabinet, the Supreme Court, and virtually every member of both houses of Congress. Kirkman is the lone survivor of the previous administration, and he is sworn in as the new President of the United States.

Political crises erupt in rapid succession. The Governor of Michigan imposes a curfew on a Muslim community and declares martial law, claiming that his authority supersedes the federal government’s. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff plots to remove Kirkman from office in order to place the country under military rule. The election of a new House of Representatives is faced with threats of chemical attacks from a right-wing antigovernment group. Kirkman’s staff, largely made up of political neophytes, struggle to keep pace with events.

Meanwhile, FBI agent Hannah Wells (Maggie Q)

investigates the attack. Terrorist organization Al-Sakar claims credit, but Wells’ investigation reveals that the true perpetrators belong to a shadowy network of ex-military operatives, private defense contractors and multimillionaires who have adopted an ultra-right ideology. Led by former private military firm CEO Patrick Lloyd (Terry Serpico), the network aims to overthrow the “corrupt government” and, in the words of one of their operatives, “Restore this nation to the empire it once was, and can be again.”

While Kirkman struggles politically in Washington, Wells races to uncover the perpetrators—who include high-ranking government officials—before they launch another attack.

As noted before, the depiction of an American government embroiled in mortal crisis certainly has a ring of truth to it. The show creators have managed to turn their attention to some important questions, including the threat of dictatorship, the collapse of democratic forms of rule, the rise of the far right and the growth of fascist-militarism within sections of the wealthy elite.

The scenes featuring the ultra-right conspirators behind the attack are generally chilling and convincing, and a welcome change from the chauvinistic depictions of “foreign terrorists” or Islamist militants who tend to inhabit such roles. The Lloyd-Serpico character, who in addition to plotting attacks from his sprawling and lavish ranch is also shown giving fascistic diatribes on the “alt-right” speech circuit, captures something of the repugnance of such figures in and around the military-intelligence community.

Kevin McNally is effective as General Harris Cochrane, who is seeking to overthrow the Presidency, and the story arc revolving around the right-wing governor of Michigan, whom Kirkman ultimately has arrested, is intelligently written. Various characters give voice to democratic sentiments in favor of the rights of refugees, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, etc.

However, these elements are too often relegated to the background, and the foregrounded elements contain much that is quite rotten and retrograde. The show takes a fawning (and contradictory, given its choice of antagonists) attitude

toward the US military, with countless scenes and speeches paying homage to the “bravery” and “patriotism” of “our troops.” Soldiers, policemen and Navy SEALs parade across the screen at various points to surges in the music and the occasional fluttering flag. Scenes set in the aftermath of the attack, where security forces are depicted as being on guard to “defend our freedoms,” carry a stench. There is more than a little nostalgia for what Hillary Clinton once referred to as “the spirit of 9/12.”

This is at least partly attributable to the show creators’ clear orientation toward the Democratic Party, which has only become more pronounced in the episodes aired since the election of Donald Trump. The Democratic Party is here shown fighting to defend “ordinary Americans” against the onslaught of the Republicans. They struggle heroically to prevent cuts to arts funding, to block attacks on health care, etc. When one leading Democrat remarks that the party will not tolerate a bill that includes “tax cuts for the rich, or cuts to Medicare or Social Security,” one can only scoff.

The Washington-set scenes in the second half of the season are often tepid and absurd. They often seem tailored to appeal to the interests of sections of the liberal middle class. An extended strand of the drama has Kirkman pushing a gun control bill through an intransigent Congress. We are subjected to numerous self-righteous monologues on the need for “sensible gun control,” delivered with such overwrought emotion that one would think it were the defining issue of our time.

Another story arc presents the bombing of an impoverished African country as a courageous act in defense of “human rights.” We are assured that the country has “no strategic value,” and that the bombing is conducted purely to stop a crazed warlord from committing genocide. In perhaps the series’ most preposterous moment, Kirkman and his Secretary of State gaze out over the White House lawn discussing the bravery of Abraham Lincoln, before concluding that the deployment of Navy SEALs and the launching of drone strikes constitute a similar kind of courage on their part.

The character of Kirkman also carries a few problems. A political “independent,” Kirkman is described as someone who values “service over ambition” and “integrity above expedience.” He represents “the kind of America you want to believe in.” His “ethics are above reproach,” and so forth. The show creators go through great pains to paint Kirkman as a model of integrity, honesty, and moral character, whose only flaw is that he is *too* honest, and therefore unsuited to the dirty game of DC politics.

The show creators seem to be attempting to fashion a kind of model president who embodies the “ideals” of “American democracy,” apparently as a deliberate foil to Donald

Trump. It would be difficult for any actor to breathe life into such a character, and Sutherland’s performance often comes off as awkward and affected, particularly when Kirkman is attempting to empathize with “ordinary people” or brooding over the weight of his decisions. Sutherland seems much more in his element when he is in “war president” mode, barking orders and issuing threats against “America’s enemies.”

As it is, “ordinary people” rarely make an appearance on *Designated Survivor*. The series almost never leaves the insular world of official DC politics. Masses of people are seen or referred to only in passing, as panicked crowds, poll numbers or in the occasional brief town hall meeting. There is no indication that the creators understand (or even seek to understand) *why*, exactly, right-wing populist demagogues have found a footing in the US, or why a disgruntled faction of the wealthy elite would turn to such drastic measures to reshape the government. Scenes of mass suffering or unrest are totally absent. The crisis appears to be located entirely within this small collection of “traitors” and their sinister machinations.

The creators seem to be somewhat stupefied in the face of a real-life crisis that has, in many ways, outstripped their imaginary one. Rather than exploring the deeper political implications of a right-wing plot to overthrow the US government, they seem content to fall back into the comforting clichés of the “political action thriller,” padding out episodes with gunfights, car chases, sinister meetings in parking garages, etc.

Again, *Designated Survivor* does touch on some important matters, and the development of the storylines surrounding the far-right conspirators could prove fertile ground. But the show creators’ narrow social outlook and their clear support for the wretched and discredited Democratic Party block them from reaching the most critical and insightful conclusions. At this point it seems as likely as not that the whole plot will end up being the work of “Russian conspirators.”

ABC has recently announced that the series has been renewed for a second season. Time will tell how the deepening crisis outside the show affects its inner direction.

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