

House of Cards Season 6: The King is dead, long live the Queen!

By Joanne Laurier
10 November 2018

The sixth and final season of *House of Cards*, inspired by the 1990 British BBC miniseries (based on the novel by Michael Dobbs), is now streaming on Netflix.

House of Cards is set in Washington, D.C. Its first five seasons center on Congressman Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey), a Democratic Party politician, who, with the help of his scheming wife Claire (Robin Wright), lies, manipulates and kills his way into the White House.

At its most hard-hitting, the series exposed the mendacity and corruption endemic to the American political system, the overwhelming influence and power of big business in Washington, the suppression of political opposition, the use of frame-ups and murder to get rid of “troublesome” journalists and the cold-blooded willingness of the American government to invent “terrorist attacks” for its own criminal purposes.

In the year and a half that has passed since the release of Season 5 in May 2017, however, a good many things have occurred both in the world at large and in the more immediate confines of the series itself. It’s impossible, first of all, to seriously discuss the drama and development of the new season without referring to the #MeToo campaign and the fate of Kevin Spacey, who starred in the initial 65 episodes of the series, first streamed in February 2013.

For better or worse, the US version of *House of Cards* was very much dominated by the actor’s bravura performance. Underwood’s relentless and cheerfully transparent dishonesty, hypocrisy and thuggishness clearly said something to the American viewing public about the various recent Democratic and Republican administrations. He unquestionably struck a chord.

That contribution to popular awareness of course counted for nothing when Spacey became one of the first major performers to be swept up in the sexual allegation witch hunts. This led, disgracefully, in October 2017 to his removal from and the subsequent reshooting of Ridley Scott’s movie *All the Money in the World*.

Filming had already begun on Season 6 of *House of Cards* at the time the allegations were made against the actor. On November 3, 2017, Netflix announced that Spacey had been fired. A month later, the company made known that filming on the final season would start over again without him.

In other words, the Season 6 currently available was shot and released under conditions of gross opportunism and bad faith. The creators’ agreement with or capitulation to the anti-democratic

and repressive #MeToo campaign, endorsed to the hilt by significant sections of the American ruling elite, had to have the effect of orienting the series in the wrong direction.

But the dismissal of Spacey is only the most obvious and brutal expression of the manner in which the gravitational pull of the major events of the past 18 months—the aftermath of Hillary Clinton’s electoral defeat and the subsequent #MeToo and anti-Russia hysteria—affected the Democratic Party supporters who wrote, directed and produced *House of Cards*.

When Season 6 season opens, Claire Underwood has become US president after the death of her husband Frank, supposedly from natural causes. As the country’s first female president, the series writers imagine her subjected to anti-woman hostility and a barrage of death threats (“God never intended a woman to rule this land. She is the anti-Christ—and a Jew.”). Steely-eyed Claire in unperturbed in the face of what we are expected to view as widespread misogyny in the American heartland.

She also coolly faces off against Annette (Diane Lane) and Bill Shepherd (Greg Kinnear), siblings and heads of the rapacious Shepherd conglomerate, who have Vice President Mark Usher (Campbell Scott) firmly in their pocket. The Shepherds, and Usher, want to deregulate big business, but Claire has so far refused to sign the bill they’re pushing.

At a military base, she proclaims that the “fight against tyranny is the only justification for war,” i.e., she is a proponent of the war on terror. Claire is addressing a group of young soldiers about to be sent off to Syria. When one female soldier asks if the president has a plan, “one that won’t get us all killed.” Claire replies, “Would you have asked me that if I were a man?” Poor Claire faces universal misogyny and underestimation. The new president even has to survive an assassination attempt.

Meanwhile, Frank Underwood’s closest aide (and hitman) Doug Stamper (Michael Kelly) exits a psychiatric facility. As Season 6 progresses, Doug shows himself to be generally unhinged and obsessively devoted to Frank. He is prepared to take the most deranged measures to defend the former president’s legacy.

Flashbacks show Claire, as a girl, being tormented by a group of young boys. This is another source of considerable self-pity and presumably helps explain, or even justifies, her willingness to treat various males in a murderous fashion.

When a Shepherd-owned oil refinery explodes and Bellport, Ohio is poisoned, Claire forces the state’s reluctant governor to declare a state of emergency and visits the town to support its

residents. (The series' creators are no doubt uncritically referencing President Barack Obama's condescending and dishonest 2016 visit to beleaguered Flint, Michigan.) It also comes to light that the Shepherds have developed a spy app with vast powers: "These oligarchs, through an innocent seeming app, have been trying to steal the midterms by crawling your phones, invading your privacy and telling you how to vote."

The lawyer of an American-supported terrorist outfit, ICO, makes an appearance to secure the group's future in Syria. Claire proposes a deal to the Mephistophelian Russian president, Viktor Petrov (Lars Mikkelsen), that involves carving up that country between the two "imperialist" powers. At one point, Jane (Patricia Clarkson), a shady figure connected to the intelligence community, confronts Petrov and hisses furiously, "You're just a Communist in a handmade suit ... Bastard!" The series thus adds Cold War anti-communism to its #MeToo feminism.

The cunning Claire, perpetually a step ahead of her enemies, fakes erratic behavior that pushes her rivals to invoke the Twenty-fifth Amendment to the US Constitution, whose Section 4 allows for the vice president to become "Acting President" if the elected president becomes unfit to fulfill his or her duties. When the dust settles, President Underwood has fired her predominantly male cabinet and replaced it with an all-female one of varying ages and colors.

Now reclaiming her unmarried name, Hale, Claire announces she is pregnant with Frank's child. This development conveniently provides the dead man an heir and prevents the provisions of Frank's secret will from coming to light, a document that apparently determines, among other things, the fate of an anti-Claire diary. Nonetheless, whether Frank is her baby-daddy or not, Claire now wants to expose all of his many "crimes and misdemeanors."

From here the bodies simply pile up. Jane has to be "burned" for security reasons, and a journalist and a former secretary of state too must be dispatched. With a 70 percent approval rating, Claire now has the American public eating out of her hand. Apoplectic, the Shepherds first try, without success, to kill Claire's unborn child and then plan to assassinate her. In the final scene, Claire demonstrates that an advanced state of pregnancy won't stop her from eliminating anyone who gets in her way.

The plot of Season 6 is often absurd. To cite a few examples: how on earth did Claire's pregnancy materialize from the permafrost of the Underwoods' relationship? And when? Does the timeline of the conception even make sense? Claire's confrontation with Annette concerning the attempt on the life of her fetus is ridiculous (she holds up her phone so the other woman can hear the fetus's heartbeat, while screaming insults at her!), as is the final face-off between Claire and Doug Stamper, a *High Noon* showdown with letter openers instead of six-shooters.

However, the preposterousness of the storyline does not come out of the blue. It has some connection to the reactionary fairy-tale peddled by Democratic Party officials, the *New York Times* and other media outlets about recent events. According to their official narrative, Clinton's defeat in 2016 was not due to the hostility aroused by Obama's anti-working class policies and Clinton's own right-wing campaign, but was the handiwork of the allegedly

racist white working class and Russian meddling. Along these same lines, Claire is presented as a staunch defender of the "CIA, FBI and Homeland" against the oligarchs, a scenario ripped in part out of the current Democratic Party playbook.

All in all, the Claire Underwood-Hale story is a fantasized, "Hollywoodized" version of the Hillary Clinton story, one that involves, above all, overcoming white men's anger and opposition. This is the administration, in other words, perhaps minus some of the homicides, that might have been! Claire too believes that "the arc of history is long, but the reign of the middle-aged white man is over." And Claire, like Clinton, is ruthless and even guilty of certain misdeeds that come back to haunt her.

Artistically, Season 6 of *House of Cards* is a flop. Because the series' creators have moved far away from concrete social reality, and turned instead toward gender-based explanations of events, explanations entirely rooted in the actions of bad men (and women), they cannot provide the characters with convincing, authentic motives, actions and dialogue. Many scenes are impossibly elliptical and conspiratorial, and some are downright incomprehensible.

This story of a female Bonaparte engaged in a life-and-death power struggle takes place in a social and historical vacuum. Even the "big business" element does not involve genuine moguls, but merely individuals who oppose "strong women" like Claire. In the end, the battle between the most powerful Shepherd—Annette—and Claire, is a conflict, not between government and big business, but one to determine the fittest of the species. As Claire explains to the viewer: "Francis gave me permission to hunger. Because he felt it himself. All the time. Insatiable. Everyone thinks I should feel sated. Then he said, 'No, Claire, be as hungry as me.' And so I ate him."

Thus, *House of Cards*, which once skewered the American establishment, ends with neither a bang nor a whimper, but a cannibalistic grunt!

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