

“Madam President: Changing Depictions of Female Presidents in American Popular Culture”

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Abstract: Film and television, as forms of popular culture, have the ability to both reflect and shape attitudes about a wide range of topics, including the American presidency. The role of popular media in shaping attitudes about political phenomena is particularly relevant in democracies where public opinion drives both the election and policy-making processes. Drawing on literature in political science, communication studies, and women’s and gender studies, this article analyzes fictional portrayals of female presidents since the 1920s, as they both represent and challenge prevailing national attitudes about gender and the American presidency. The article identifies three key messages derived from popular cultural depictions of women presidents between 1980 and 2008, including how women presidents gain access to the nation’s highest office, the ways in which masculine traits are valued in the administration of that office, and the unique challenges of negotiating the gender “double-binds” that women presidents are subject to beyond the Oval Office.

Keywords: American popular culture, fictional female presidents, the U.S. presidency

Introduction

In 1924, the silent science fiction film *The Last Man on Earth* depicted a woman as President of the United States (POTUS). Released five years after women were granted suffrage, the filmmakers drew on the political culture of the day to design scenarios illustrating what a ridiculous world it would be if a woman were president and the States were run by “Senator-esses.” Beyond the science fiction genre, Polly Bergen played President Leslie McCloud in *Kisses for My President* (1965). While her work was pioneering, the movie’s plot focused on her spouse, Fred MacMurray, as a

“First Husband” struggling to find his identity while his wife leads from the Oval Office. In the end, his concerns were alleviated when she resigned after learning of her unplanned pregnancy. This pattern of farcical and wildly fictitious scenarios continued in popular culture until the early 2000s, when film and television begin to shift in its depiction of Madam President. Cherry Jones as President Allison Taylor in *24:Redemption*, Julia Louis-Dreyfus in *Veep*, Robin Wright in *House of Cards*, and Tea Leoni as Elizabeth McCord in *Madam Secretary* played competent candidates and politicians in their depictions of the nation’s highest office.

Although more recent fictional depictions of women presidents attempt to reinforce the proposition that women are qualified and capable to lead from the Oval Office, they still struggle to escape cultural expectations regarding both the U.S. presidency and women’s roles in society. Some scholars attribute this to the lingering cultural perspective that “every woman is the wrong woman—and will be until cultural understanding of the presidency changes.”¹ Although a 2007 Gallup poll found that 88 percent of Americans said they’d vote for a well-qualified female candidate, a 2015 Pew study revealed that just four in 10 Americans hoped to see a woman president in their lifetime—with the numbers diverging dramatically along gender and party lines.² Among the most prominent examples of fictional female presidents, not one is an obvious Democrat, despite polls revealing Democrats are most enthusiastic about the idea of a female commander in chief. Further, few fictional female presidents are elected entirely on their own merits—they are either part of political dynasties or were vice presidents who filled vacancies when the need arose.

Other scholarship cites the limited power of popular media to mediate representations of women, as studios focus on creating profitable products and avoid alienating audiences, even as those audiences continue to fracture across new technologies when consuming media. As complex, mediated texts, television and film are also interpreted differently by members of active and diverse audiences. As Bonnie J. Dow writes, “the meanings offered

- 1 Karin Vasby Anderson, “Every Woman is the Wrong Woman: The Female Presidentiality Paradox,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 40, no. 2 (2017): 134.
- 2 Clare Malone, “From 1937 to Hillary Clinton: How Americans Have Felt About a Woman President,” *538 Blog*, June 9, 2016. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/from-1937-to-hillary-clinton-how-americans-have-felt-about-a-female-president/>.

by television are rarely direct, often contradictory, and never final.”³ This article will draw on literature in political science, communication studies, and women’s and gender studies, to analyze recent fictional portrayals of female presidents as they reflect and challenge prevailing national attitudes about gender and the American presidency. The analysis is predicated on the understanding that “persuasive function of television is not so much to provide solutions to cultural conflicts but...rather to negotiate the parameters for the debate.”⁴ With attention to propositional and suppositional arguments in recent fictional representations of female U.S. presidents, as well as themes that reinforce the dichotomies of the double-bind for women in politics, this article elucidates the ways that film and television reflect or challenge cultural anxieties regarding gender and the American presidency.

Political Film and Television

Film and television are important, accessible forms of popular culture. Annual ticket sales to movie theatres in American continued to exceed \$11 billion in 2019, and nearly 120 million households own at least one television, where Americans watch more than 7.5 hours per day.⁵ Watching TV is quantifiably America’s favorite pastime, according to data from the American Time Use Survey (ATUS). With nearly 80 percent of the population watching TV on a given day, and accounting for more than half of all the time Americans spend in leisure and sports, watching TV is the preferred leisure activity for many Americans.⁶

Media studies scholars have shown how popular culture has the power to both shape and reflect our understandings of society, cultural values, politics, and the human experience. Given how wide-reaching popular films and television shows are, they have the ability to convey broad messages, to influence society, and often choose to reflect sociopolitical conversations to capture audiences. Nimmo and Combs write that “those movies that sell

3 Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women’s Movement Since 1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 8.

4 Kristina Horn Sheeler and Karrin Vasby Anderson, *Woman President: Confronting Postfeminist Political Culture* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2013), 41; Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism*, 8.

5 Alexis Madrigal, “When Did TV Watching Peak?” *The Atlantic*. May 30, 2018. <https://research.wou.edu/c.php?g=551307&p=3785496>.

6 Rachel Krantz-Kent, “Television, capturing America’s attention at prime time and beyond,” *Bureau of Labor Statistics: Beyond the Numbers*, September 2018. <https://www.bls.gov/opub/btn/volume-7/television-capturing-americas-attention.htm>.

and those few that endure do so because they have treated selected cultural themes that were on the minds, or in the back of the minds, of large numbers of people.”⁷ Popular movies can invoke popular ideas about a wide range of topics, including politics.

Movies, from inception to production, “reflect political choices.”⁸ Scholars argue that to create film, television, or other popular media is to participate politically, whether or not the film contains overt political content. Political content, which includes depictions of some aspect of political reality, resembles empirical political theory. Films, for example, that emphasize describing political institutions, processes, and actors—rare as they may be—help audiences to understand political phenomena.⁹ Political intent, on the other hand, generally resembles normative political theory in that it seeks to judge, prescribe, and/or persuade audiences about political phenomena. Popular media that feature intentional political messages explicitly challenge the values of the audience and may attempt to incite political action.¹⁰ These two dimensions, empirical and normative theories of political media, led Haas, Christensen, and Haas (2015) to organize typologies of political media (Figure 1).

Taken together, these different forms of political media and their diverse purposes illustrate the nexus between popular culture and politics—reflecting, reinforcing, or affecting public opinions.

The role of popular media in shaping attitudes about political phenomena is particularly relevant in democracies where public opinion drives both the election and policy-making processes.¹¹ Popular media can provide audiences with information about specific issues and events, or prime their thinking on such issues, influence the knowledge and behavior of specific groups, spark public debate or interest in specific issues, and, in more limited cases, influence specific political behaviors (i.e. voting in election).

7 Dan Nimmo and James E. Combs, *Mediated Political Realities* (New York: Longman, 1983), 105.

8 Beverly M. Kelley, *Reel Politik: Political Ideologies in '30s and '40s Films* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998).

9 Elizabeth Haas, Terry Christensen, and Peter J. Haas, *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 9-10.

10 Haas, Christensen, and Haas, *Projecting Politics*, 10.

11 Joseph E. Uscinski, “Gendering the Presidency without Gender in the Presidency,” in *Women and the White House: Gender, Popular Culture, and Presidential Politics*, eds. Justin S. Vaughn and Lilly J. Goren (Louisville: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 121-134.

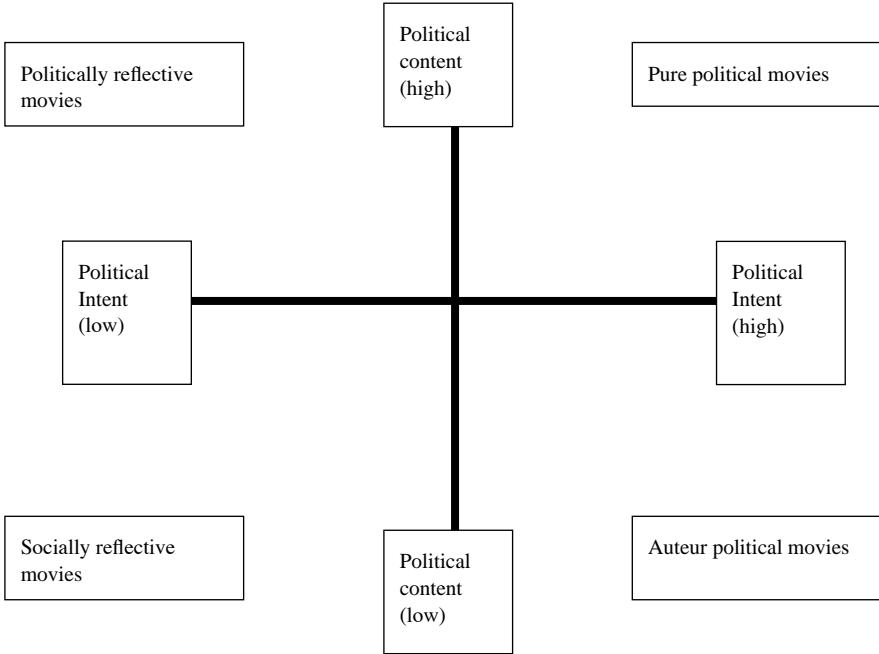


Figure 1. Types of Political Films Suggested by Dimensions of Content and Intent
Source: *Projecting Politics*, “Setting the Scene: A Theory of Film and Politics,” p. 11

Many Hollywood actors, producers, directors, and creative agents regularly donate money to campaigns and causes that help elect candidates they support. Some even campaign with candidates. The personal political tendencies of these groups can also shape the political and artistic choices of film and television. While filmmakers and television producers may have progressive political ideas that shape the intent of their work, the reality is that studios and networks also still need to produce a profit. Those who work in the entertainment industry understand that there is a monetary bottom line, ratings and advertising proceeds count, and for producers that means making money with a product that will be consumed by the biggest possible audience. Entertainment industry executives try to gauge what is acceptable to the public and what is beyond the pale.

Media scholars agree that in some form, popular media contributes to general social and political learning, including affective patterns related to American expectations of U.S. presidents. As Trevor Parry-Giles and

Shawn Parry-Giles write, fictionalized representations of politics are powerful and accessible rhetorical forms, increasingly influential as they improve in technological sophistication and mimetic capacity. Such discourses play a central role in the definition and expression of political culture and political leaders.”¹² Lynda Horowitz and Holly Swyers, likewise, argue that the role of television as a “mythmaker” has had significant influence on public opinion in the United States. They note that women appearing in many roles previously reserved for men has helped change social expectations of women, but caution that it is equally important for the critic to acknowledge lost opportunities and failures to challenge the status quo.¹³

Terry Christensen and Peter J. Haas concur with Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles, and others who cite the societal functions of political film, but they also acknowledge the challenges inherent in demonstrating or quantifying the extent of political film and television’s influence on cultural attitudes and political action.¹⁴ As noted previously, diverse audiences respond to political films in varied and often contradictory ways. Preliminary research attempting to quantify the effect of political popular media suggests people are least susceptible to persuasion by movies that they expect to be political; they are most open to influence when they are least aware of political messaging. When films overtly align with a partisan cause or party affiliation, they are less likely to influence viewers. There is also evidence that audiences, like voters, are micro-targeted based on geography and other demographics. Studios and their distribution networks exhibit and heavily promote movies in areas where they think the audience will be the largest, while cable television networks, streaming services, and other forms of digital media have further segmented television audiences.¹⁵

(Re)Imagining the American Presidency

The symbolic nature of the presidency attracts our attention as citizens and as voters—and Americans pay attention to how that office is portrayed in

12 Sheeler and Anderson, *Woman President*, 42.

13 Linda Horowitz and Holly Swyers, “Why Are All the Presidents Men? Televisual Presidents and Patriarchy,” *You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby. Women, Politics, and Popular Culture*, ed. Lilly J. Goren (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2009), Kindle edition, loc 1532.

14 Haas, Christensen, and Haas, *Projecting Politics*, 14, 16.

15 Haas, Christensen, and Haas, *Projecting Politics*, 21.

popular culture because, as Lilly Goren writes, “we have spent more than two hundred years attaching all kinds of desires, hopes, demands, and requirements to the office of the president.”¹⁶ Jeff Smith argues that “imaginings of presidents, like imaginings of the nation itself, are not just significant artifacts of American’s cultural history, and not just reflections of the conflicting fears, hopes, and beliefs of its people(s)...they also participate in the ongoing ‘fiction’ that is America.” He concludes: “They are grounds of its existence, one layer of soil out of which the nation has grown. The stories that Americans tell and have told about presidents are part of what makes America the nation that it is.”¹⁷

Smith and scholars of popular culture and political communication emphasize the strong relationship between contemporary pop culture and the transmission of historical and political understandings of the American presidency, and the increasing number of fictional portrayals of the presidency in a variety of cultural forms further reflects audiences continued interest and curiosity in the nation’s highest public office.¹⁸ American fascination with the political and personal aspects of the presidency includes the question of when America will elect its first female president. Polls consistently show that registered voters would vote for a woman for president and prior to Hillary Clinton’s campaign in 2008, most voters expected the Democratic nominee for president to be a woman. Polling and speculation continued through the 2016 election cycle when Hillary Clinton secured her party’s nomination, but eventually lost the general election.¹⁹ Given that a woman has never served as president of the United States, and therefore women have no track record indicating how they would lead once elected to serve in the White House, what informational cues shape the nation’s perception of how a woman would govern if elected president?

16 Lilly J. Goren, “Fact or Fiction: The Reality of Race and Gender in Reaching the White House,” in *Women and the White House: Gender, Popular Culture, and Presidential Politics*, eds. Justin S. Vaughn and Lilly J. Goren (Louisville: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 112.

17 Jeff Smith, *The Presidents We Imagine: Two Centuries of White House Fictions on the Page, on the Stage, Onscreen, and Online* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).

18 Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn J. Parry-Giles, *The Prime-Time Presidency: The West Wing and U.S. Nationalism* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

19 Although Hillary Clinton received more than 65,000,000 votes, 2.87 million more than her political opponent Donald Trump, the significantly higher vote totals in the popular voting did not earn candidate Clinton the majority of Electoral College votes needed to declare her the election winner. See: “Presidential Election Results: Donald J. Trump Wins,” *New York Times* August 9, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/elections/2016/results/president>.

Here again, political movies and television play an important role within a broader cultural conversation about women in politics. Haas, Christensen, and Haas (2015) argue that “one of the most common means by which political messages seep through Hollywood films is through portrayal of sex, race, and gender roles.”²⁰ Uscisnki agrees, and finds that portrayals of women in popular culture, whether they include the office of president or other gendered roles, perpetuate stereotypes and the notion that a woman is an “unsafe” choice for the nation’s highest office.²¹ Marie C. Wilson, president of the White House Project, a national nonpartisan organization dedicated to advancing women’s leadership, believes “You can’t be what you can’t see. Once people see women in top leadership roles on the screen, they can imagine it happening.”²² Melanie McFarland, a television critic, reinforces Wilson’s position, writing “if viewers buy a female president in primetime...perhaps electing a female president isn’t such a distant reality after all.”²³

In an attempt to quantify representations of women in popular culture, The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media studied representation of current and/or former “female political powerbrokers worldwide” in film. Their study of 120 films between 2010 and 2013 found that only 12 women were shown at the highest levels of local, state/provincial, or national governmental authority, versus 115 males, a gender ratio of 9.6 to one.²⁴ These 12 women represented the actual or fictional equivalent of: legislators, ministers/secretaries /chiefs, ambassadors/international council members, or mayors. Only 3 female characters governed at the very apex of political leadership. One, a fictional representation of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, had no speaking parts. Finally, the only female protagonist who wielded power on the world stage was Margaret Thatcher in *The Iron Lady* (2011). Due to the framing of Thatcher’s political career during the time period studied, she accounted for 3 of the 12 high-powered political depictions. This translates to just 10 unique women in political authority across 120 films (2010-2013) and 5,799 speaking characters. Based on this

20 Haas, Christensen, and Haas, *Projecting Politics*, 15.

21 Uscinski, “Gendering the Presidency,” 122.

22 David Zurawik, “Power Suits Her: Geena Davis as Commander in Chief Leads an Army of Strong, Smart Women into TV’s Fall Lineup,” *Baltimore Sun*, September 15, 2005.

23 Sheeler and Anderson, *Woman President*, 40.

24 Stacy L. Smith, et al., “Gender Bias Without Borders: An Investigation of Female Characters in Popular Films Across 11 Countries,” *The Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media*, (accessed December 12, 2019), <https://seejane.org/wp-content/uploads/gender-bias-without-borders-executive-summary.pdf>, 10.

evidence and the study of other roles performed by women in international films, the authors conclude: “young viewers are missing the opportunity to see powerful female role models in leadership positions within their own countries...it appears that female executives are an endangered species in international films.” Geena Davis, the actor who played POTUS in *Commander-in-Chief* and for whom the Institute is named, adds that Hollywood is “missing a tremendous creative opportunity” by not depicting more strong women presidents onscreen. “I think we have a moral imperative now, after this election, to step it up.”²⁵

The quantity of fictional portrayals of female executives, however, does not necessarily reflect a shift in deeply-held cultural beliefs about the American presidency, nor is it a sufficient as a singular solution to change cultural attitudes. As Kristina Horn Sheeler and Karrin Vasby Anderson argue, “how women presidential figures are portrayed is consequential as well.”²⁶

Women Presidents in Popular Culture – Just Science Fiction?

Depictions of women serving at the highest national executive office in the United States are limited. Table 1 provides information on films and television shows that feature a woman in the role of president, either as a central character of the show or in a single episode.

Though this article focuses primarily on more contemporary examples of fictional female presidents, *The Last Man on Earth* (1924), *Project Moonbase* (1953), and *Kisses for My President* (1964) are worth mentioning briefly as historical antecedents. Loosely based on Mary Shelley’s 19th century dystopian novel, *The Last Man*, “The Last Man on Earth” (1924) was released by Fox Studios four years after women received the right to vote and is considered the first film depiction of a female U.S. president. The movie, remade in 1933 as the musical “It’s Great to Be Alive,” imagines a world in which a plague known as “masculitis” has eradicated the entire male population over the age of 14. The matriarchy resulting from the eradication of nearly all men on Earth is played for laughs and the film is

25 Lorena O’Neil, “A Closer Look at Female Presidents in Movies, TV,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, December 7, 2016. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/women-presidents-hollywood-movies-tv-female-characters-representation-945297/item/women-potus-hollywood-allison-taylor-cherry-jones-24-945310>.

26 Sheeler and Anderson, *Woman President*, 40.

Table 1: Popular Film and Television Depicting a Woman as President of the United States

| Films | Television |
|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| The Last Man on Earth (1924) | Hail to the Chief (1985) |
| Betty Boop for President (1932) | Sliders (1995), “The Weaker Sex” episode |
| Olive Oyl for President (1948) | The Simpsons (2000), “Bart to the Future” episode |
| Project Moonbase (1953) | Arthur (2000), “The Election” episode |
| Kisses for My President (1964) | 24 (2008-2010) |
| Whoops Apocalypse (1986) | Century City (2004) |
| Les Patterson Saves the World (1987) | Battlestar Galactica (2004-2009) |
| Mars Attacks! (1996) | Commander in Chief (2005-2006) |
| Air Force One (1997) | Prison Break (2005-2017) |
| Mafia! (1998) | Homeland (2011-present) |
| Perfect Lover (2001) | Scandal (2012-2018) |
| Iron Sky (2012) | Veep (2014-2016) |
| Justice League: Gods and Monsters (2015) | House of Cards (2013-2018) |
| Independence Day: Resurgence (2016) | State of Affairs (2014-2015) |
| Hunter Killer (2018) | Supergirl (2015 - present) |
| Long Shot (2019) | Quantico (2015-2018) |
| | Madam Secretary (2014-2019) |

filled with condescending role reversals drawn from 19th Amendment gender panic. Following the film’s restoration in 2017, critic and film historian Farran Smith Nehme noted, “what’s depressing are the plot circumstances that got her into office. For a woman to be elected president, literally every single man on earth — save one tree-dwelling hermit who presumably wasn’t registered to vote — had to die first.”²⁷

The Last Man on Earth (1924) was followed by a handful of cartoon-ish depictions and not until the 1953 science fiction film *Project Moonbase*

27 Michael Phillips, “‘Last Man on Earth’: 1924 Silent Relic Imagines Matriarchal Dystopia, for Laughs,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 9, 2017. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/movies/ct-mov-last-man-on-earth-1109-story.html>.

(1953) did a woman again appear in the presidency. A sci-fi adventure set in futuristic 1970, the film features a group of explorers who leave their space station and go to the moon. Unfortunately, something goes wrong and they end up marooned. *Project Moonbase* is unusual for its time in both attempting to portray space travel in a «realistic» manner and for depicting a future in which women hold positions of authority and responsibility equal to men, including the American presidency. The film is not without limitations, however; the main female protagonist, Colonel Briteis (Donna Martell), is portrayed as a nice but incompetent female who is easily frightened and turns to her male colleague and love interest, Major Bill Moore (Ross Ford), as soon as the situation become dangerous.

In *Kisses for My President* (1964), Leslie Harrison McCloud (Polly Bergen) is elected the first female President of the United States. Her husband Thad McCloud (Fred MacMurray) and two children accompany her to the White House where she is immediately confronted with powerful congressional opposition and crises in Central America involving dictator Raphael Valdez, Jr. (Eli Wallach). A good portion of the film focuses on Thad's struggle to find his way in his new role (referred to as both “first lady” and the “president's husband”, never “first gentleman”), Leslie's struggle to balance demands of her new position and family. Her political opposition aggressively portrays President McCloud as weak in resisting Communism, though she manages to resolve a “foreign aid” controversy diplomatically that is at the heart of the Cold War subplot. In the end, however, Leslie discovers that she is pregnant and resigns the presidency to devote herself full-time to her family. At the time of the film's release, reviewers criticized the movie for its “corny” and gimmicky comedic devices. In a review for the *New York Times*, Bosley Crowther quipped, “Curtis Bernhardt, who directed, evidently takes a dim view of the prospect of a woman as President. It wouldn't be funny! That's what his picture says.”²⁸

The films and series noted above served as part of a public discourse on women's role in politics and society, from suffrage and conversations about equal rights, to their capacity to lead from the Oval Office. Such popular cultural images of the presidency contribute to an ongoing gendering of the

28 Bosley Crowther, “The Screen: ‘Kisses for My President’: Fred MacMurray and Polly Bergen Star,” *New York Times*, August 22, 1964.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1964/08/22/archives/the-screen-kisses-for-my-presidentfred-macmurray-and-polly-bergen.html>.

office that “both reflects contemporary political reality and shapes public understanding and expectations about politics.”²⁹ Fictional representations of women in presidential and executive leadership roles grew in frequency and began to evolve slightly starting in the 1980s (see Table 1), perhaps influenced by the visibility of real life presidential and vice presidential candidacies of women in the national Democratic Party, specifically Shirley Chisolm in 1972 and Geraldine Ferraro in 1984. The next section of this article will identify three key messages derived from popular depictions between 1980 and 2008, including how women presidents gain access to the nation’s highest office, the ways in which masculine traits are valued in the administration of that office, and the unique challenges of the gender double-bind that women presidents are subject to beyond the Oval Office.

Message #1 - Women are Presidents by Accident

With the exception of *Kisses for My President* (1964), most women who made it into the Hollywood or prime time Oval Office did so not through election, but through other means of ascension. In some ways, this reflects the reality that most earlier women in Congress were appointed after their husbands had died in office; often these wives were viewed as place keepers until a “real” candidate could be elected. Fictional female presidents, likewise, have generally attained their positions because of the death or incapacity of their male political partners (elected presidents), which draws more on historical precedent than on the state of politics between 1980 and 2008, when more women ran for public office in their own right, independent of their husband’s careers.

Hail to the Chief (1985), a notable exception, aired as an ABC sitcom one year after Geraldine Ferraro’s run for vice president on the Democratic ticket. The show featured recently elected, first female U.S. President Julia Mansfield (Patty Duke) and was created by Susan Harris for producers Paul Junger Witt and Tony Thomas--the same team responsible for *Soap*, the ABC comedy that ran from 1977 to 1981. Like *Soap*, *Hail to the Chief* used a serialized format, mixed a variety of comedic forms, and seemed to intentionally be “as inflammatory as it was entertaining.” There were jokes

29 Justin S. Vaughn and Stacy Michaelson, “It’s a Man’s World: Masculinity in Pop Culture Portrayals of the President,” in *Women and the White House: Gender, Popular Culture, and Presidential Politics*, eds. Justin S. Vaughn and Lilly J. Goren (Louisville: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 137.

about religion, race, politics and sex—or, as one ABC executive suggested, “something to offend everyone.”³⁰ While the show attracted 32% of the available viewers and won in its time slot for the April 9 premiere episode, viewership slowly declined over the following six weeks.³¹ ABC cancelled the show after only seven episodes.

Following *Hail to the Chief*, women serving in the White House, even temporarily, achieved their positions first as elected Vice Presidents—Glenn Close in *Air Force One* (1997), Geena Davis in *Commander in Chief*, Joan Allen in *The Contender* (2000), and Julia Louis-Dreyfus in *Veep*. As a technicality, Vice President Kathryn Bennett (Glenn Close) in *Air Force One* (1997) refuses to sign required documentation to comply with the presidential cabinet’s request to invoke the 25th Amendment, making her an unofficial presidential placeholder. Senator Laine Hanson (Joan Allen) in *The Contender* is elevated as the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee with the blessing of outgoing President Jackson Evans (Jeff Bridges), who encourage Congress to “do the right thing” and support her election.³²

Similar to *Hail to the Chief*, ABC television launched a second attempt to portray a female president on *Commander in Chief* in the fall of 2006. The show was created by director Rod Lurie, who also directed *The Contender* (2000). Unlike President Julia Mansfield, Mackenzie Allen is elected as a vice presidential candidate and eventually ascends to the White House when the president dies, but not before he tells her that he wants her to “step aside so a real party loyalist (and perhaps a “real man”?) can become president instead.”³³ When interviewed about the decision to set up the narrative in this fashion, Lurie explained, “I thought that it would be more dramatic to have her inheriting the job, because that way more people would be opposed to her.”³⁴ In Lurie’s design, President Mackenzie Allen drew opposition not only as the first woman president, but also a political independent. The show indicates that Allen is invited to the Republican ticket specifically because of her status as an “independent” and a woman, neither of which

30 Lee Margulies, “‘Hail to the Chief’ Goes to a Quiet Death on ABC,” *L.A. Times*, May 21, 1985. (accessed December 9, 2019), <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-05-21-ca-7935-story.html>.

31 Margulies, “‘Hail to the Chief.’”

32 Goren, *Fact or Fiction*, 108. The author notes that in *The Contender* (2000), the audience never actually sees Senator Hanson become vice president. We are only given a framework to imagine her in this role.

33 Goren, “Fact or Fiction,” 109.

34 Neil Genzlinger, “Commander in Chief: Geena Davis as President,” *New York Times*, September 14, 2005. <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/24/arts/television/commander-in-chief-geena-davis-as-president.html>

are intended as compliments. Her character is not ambitious, never sought higher office, but instead had to be drafted to it. This does reflect the reality of many real women's paths to office, both elected and appointed.³⁵ As Jeff Smith writes, she seems to “want only to do what was ‘right’ in some abstract, ad hoc sense—all the hallmarks of a Mr(s). Smith.”³⁶ Reviewers accused the show of focusing too heavily on President Allen's family roles in comparison to world issues or national political events and though the series initially had good ratings, they quickly waned. ABC eventually pulled the show from its lineup and cancelled the program after 18 episodes.

Message #2 - It's a Man's World.

Most depictions of presidents in films and on television are still male, white, generally Christian, and fairly traditional (with few exceptions). Even as more fictional female presidents find their ways on the nation's movie theater and television screens, the portrayals themselves still reinforce masculine norms of power and political leadership. Audiences are exposed to presidents as action heroes, warriors, and tough talking negotiators. Films such as *Air Force One* (1997) and *Independence Day* (1996) depict courage, decisiveness, and strength on the part of male leaders; these leaders are shown for their “actions and not for their physical sexuality.”³⁷ As Joseph Uscinski writes, “when female leaders are portrayed in such positions, they are not portrayed with the same vigorous leadership traits, and they are portrayed with far more overt sexuality.”³⁸ Horowitz and Swyers further suggest that this may be the result of American culture still viewing political legitimacy through the metaphor of family headed by a father. The tradition and legacy of patriarchy in the United States places the president, as a masculine figure, at the head of the state.

35 For more information on studies of gender and political ambition, see for example: Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox, *It Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Richard Fox and Jennifer Lawless, “If Only They'd Ask: Gender, Recruitment, and Political Ambition,” *Journal of Politics* 72, no. 2 (2010), 310-326; Jennifer Lawless, *Becoming a Candidate* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Susan J. Carroll and Kira Sanbonmatsu, *More Women Can Run: Gender and Pathways to the State Legislatures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Kaitlin Sidor-sky, *All Roads Lead to Power: Appointed and Elected Paths to Public Office for U.S. Women* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2019);

36 Smith, *The Presidents We Imagine*, 225.

37 Uscinski, “Gendering the Presidency,” 131.

38 Uscinski, “Gendering the Presidency,” 131.

In early films like *Kisses for My President* (1964) the joke throughout the film was the “upending of gender expectations,” starting with an opening sequence in which we are invited to mistake Fred MacMurray for the “Leslie McCloud” who is being sworn into office.³⁹ The actual President McCloud has a challenge of her own—to prove that a woman need not be “soft” or averse to “showdowns,” as her leading opponent charges, with “those who would destroy our way of life.”⁴⁰ More recently in *Commander in Chief*, Vice President Mackenzie Allen is asked to resign, rather than assume the role of president following her dying predecessor. In a heated debate with the Republican president’s chief of staff, Allen interrupts stating that the real reason they oppose her is that “we don’t need a world to see a soft indecisive woman commanding the troops.”⁴¹ Allen’s interpretation of the situation is confirmed by the female attorney general, who nods her head in agreement. Horowitz and Swyers argue that the impact of this scene in the pilot is that “rather than simply portraying her as the president, they opt to question whether she can be president.”⁴² Her resignation, on the other hand, would hand the presidency to the Speaker of the House, Nathan Templeton, and continue a patriarchal line of succession for the executive office. The show’s writers attempt to counter challenges to Allen’s authority in the show by emphasizing her positive feminine characteristics, but the critics argue that this results in a “sappy, laughably unrealistic depiction of the presidency.”⁴³

The message for audiences viewing popular cultural representations of female presidents in this period is that ultimately, those presidential characters who exhibit masculine virtues are successful, and those that exhibit more feminized traits struggle or eventually fail. Fictional female presidents in each film or television series are caught in a gendered double-bind at some point during their period of leadership, an impossible social construct that includes the dichotomies of femininity and competence, silence and shame, invisibility and aging, and more. Stephanie A. Martin and Andrea Terry, in assessing Hillary Clinton’s “failed narrative” during her 2016

39 Smith, *The Presidents We Imagine*, 186.

40 Smith, *The Presidents We Imagine*, 186.

41 Horowitz and Swyers, “Why are All the Presidents Men,” 1641.

42 Horowitz and Swyers, “Why are All the Presidents Men,” 1647-1648.

43 Caroline Heldman, “Cultural Barriers to a Female President in the United States,” in *Rethinking Madam President: Are We Ready for a Woman in the White House?* eds. Lori Cox Han and Caroline Heldman (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2007), 34.

presidential campaign, echo Susan Fiske's findings that "women who perform in more masculine ways...may be viewed as capable, but not as warm and welcoming. Women really cannot have it both ways."⁴⁴ Although Kathleen Hall Jamieson authored *Beyond the Double Bind* nearly twenty-five years ago, a wealth of research shows that female leaders still face cultural expectations that they need to be warm and nice (what society traditionally expects from women), as well as competent or tough (what society traditionally expects from men and leaders), much more than their male counterparts. The problem is that these qualities are often seen as opposites.

The challenge for filmmakers and television producers is also that, as mediated texts, these popular representations are limited in their capacity to shift cultural attitudes. Further, Jamieson argues that "binds draw their power from their capacity to simplify complexity," which is likewise one of the more appealing aspects of popular culture for some audiences.⁴⁵ Film and television often simplify complex experiences to appeal to broad audiences and avoid alienating potential viewers, to conform to budgetary or time constraints, or to cater to specific subsets or categories of viewers. In doing so, they struggle to unpack the complexity inherent in the contradictions and dichotomies of the double-bind.

Message #3 – Women Presidents still work the “Second Shift.”

Even though fictional women presidents lead the nation's highest office, they are still subject to the gendered "Second Shift" of balancing professional and personal commitments.⁴⁶ Female presidents have to be amazing presidents and amazing mothers, as the "Second Shift" follows them from the West Wing to the President's residence.

44 Stephanie A. Martin and Andrea J. Terry, "Social Media Candidate Attacks and Hillary Clinton's Failed Narrative," in *The 2016 American Presidential Campaign and the News: Implications for American Democracy and the Republic*, ed. Jim A. Kuypers (Lanham: Lexington Books), 137.

45 Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 5.

46 In her 1989 book entitled *The Second Shift*, Arlie Hochschild explains that the household responsibilities that a wife and mother takes care of, aside from working her paid job, add up to at least 40 hours each week. The book and the sociological principle assert that even though Mom and Dad both have careers, it's usually Mom who also works the second shift at home, too. The second shift includes the work performed at home, in addition to the work performed in the professional sector. Arlie Hochschild, *The Second Shift* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989).

Toward the end of *Kisses for My President*, an exhausted President McCloud, already juggling job and family like any harried working mom, suddenly faints from what turns out to be an unplanned pregnancy. Warned that the pressures of office could put her baby at risk, she resigns. As the family departs the White House and the movie ends, President McCloud and her husband joke that it took forty million women to get Leslie into the White House—but “just one man to get me out.”⁴⁷ *Hail to the Chief* focused squarely on President Julia Mansfield’s attempt at balancing her political career while raising her family. Early promotional advertisements for the show opened with a dialogue between Julia Mansfield and her husband:

Narrator: Patty Duke’s a working woman, but there’s trouble on the home front.

Spouse: Work, work, work, work. That’s all you do. Work, work, work, work. George Clayborn’s wife works, but he still sees her at normal hours.

Julia: Well, she opened a boutique. I’m President of the United States.⁴⁸

President Mansfield’s spouse feels that he and other members of the family are neglected and given insufficient attention because of his wife’s professional responsibilities. The message is that discord in the household derives from Julia’s divided attention between her role as president and her domestic roles as mother and wife, reminding viewers that even the most competent women can’t have it all. The series dealt directly with questions related to “family values” through the subplots of her husband’s affair and son’s girlfriend’s pregnancy. In the pilot episode, she worked to prevent a deranged Air Force general from launching a preemptive nuclear strike against the Soviet Union and addresses marital issues with her unfaithful spouse.

Similarly, in the comedic film *Jane Austen’s Mafia!* (also known as *Mafia!*, 1998), U.S. President Diane Steen (Christina Applegate) is on the brink of declaring total world disarmament when her estranged love comes looking for her and persuades her to put world peace on the back burner until after their wedding. And in publicity promoting the new prime time series, ABC blatantly billed the show *Commander in Chief* as focusing on “a

47 Smith, *The Presidents We Imagine*, 186.

48 SeanMC, “Hail To The Chief 1985 ABC Promo Patty Duke,” YouTube Video, 0:37, February 18, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b38gcaSZo5k&feature=youtu.be>.

woman president who has the world on her shoulders and her children on her back.”⁴⁹

Madam Secretary/President, a new paradigm?

Horowitz and Swyers argue the mere fact that “a female candidate was taken seriously in the 2007-2008 campaign suggests that popular culture is shifting.”⁵⁰ In examining popular depictions of female presidents on *24: Redemption*, *State of Affairs*, *Veep*, *Scandal*, *House of Cards*, and *Madam Secretary*, there is some evidence of a paradigm shift.

President-elect Allison Taylor (Cherry Jones) in *24: Redemption* begins to break with expectations of the first female president. Cast in Seasons 7 (2009) and 8 (2010) of the series, actor Cherry Jones tries to clarify early on that the role of Taylor is not based on Hillary Clinton in any form: “She’s not Hillary. She has nothing to do with Hillary. She’s a combination of Eleanor Roosevelt, Golda Meier, and John Wayne.”⁵¹ The fictional President Taylor faces a series of international challenges and her work in the Oval Office comes at a great price. Faced with the dilemma of either concealing her daughter’s crime or turning her over to the authorities, President Taylor decides the latter, stating that she swore an oath when she became President of the United States to uphold the constitution. This leads to her husband filing for a divorce, and in the following season she is no longer married. In interviews, Jones expressed hope that her portrayal of the Republican President Taylor might convince the American public that a woman can be president.

Alfre Woodard continues the trend of evolving the role of the president as Constance Payton, the first black woman to be elected to the nation’s highest office in *State of Affairs*, an espionage thriller originally aired on NBC. The pilot episode began with the story of President Payton on the one-year death anniversary of Aaron Payton, the President’s son and the central character, Charlie’s (Katherine Heigl) fiancé. Yet, President Payton was not the central focus of the show, which centered on the experiences of the character played by Heigl. Critics noted shortly after the airing of

49 Smith, *The Presidents We Imagine*, 344.

50 Horowitz and Swyers, “Why Are all the Presidents Men,” 1517.

51 Justin Ravitz, “‘24’ Star Cherry Jones on Playing the President and What She Thinks of Meryl Streep in ‘Doubt’”, *Vulture*, November 21, 2008, https://www.vulture.com/2008/11/cherry_jones.html.

the pilot that “Alfre Woodard isn’t given a lot to do as President Constance Payton in the premiere, but, unlike Heigl, she does have the gravitas for the role, and the show would be wise to use her more.”⁵² Unfortunately, the writers did little to develop her character and the show was cancelled after a single season.

In yet another model, perhaps inspired by the 2008 presidential candidacy of former First Lady of the United States Hillary Clinton, female presidents are elected following their presidential spouses. Melody “Mellie” Grant (Bellamy Young) in *Scandal*, for example, is introduced to viewers as the spouse of President Fitzgerald Grant. Their relationship is constantly tested due to his infidelity and her betrayal of his trust on various different occasions. Yet, their shared political ambitions continue to unite them in a “partnership of marriage.” When Vice President Andrew Nichols becomes incapacitated, and United States Senator Susan Ross becomes the Vice President, Mellie decides to run and ultimately wins the junior Senate post. As the junior Senator, she famously filibusters for women’s rights, giving her much needed political spotlight and respect from her colleagues. Mellie and President Grant eventually divorce, separating not only their marriage but also their shared political careers. In 2018, Mellie decides to run for president in the Republican Primary. As a result of the political machinations and maneuvers of her political team, she not only wins the nomination, but also carries enough votes in the Electoral College to secure her position as the 45th President of the United States of America.

In a different genre, *Veep* received critical acclaim and numerous awards for its satirical comedy and sharp writing from 2012-2019. Formerly a United States Senator from Maryland, Selina Meyer of *Veep* (Julia Louis-Dreyfus) campaigns for her party’s nomination in the 2012 presidential election and is initially the front-runner; she ultimately loses the nomination to rival Stuart Hughes. Meyer subsequently joins the Hughes ticket as his running mate and is elected Vice President. In the beginning of the series, Meyer finds herself relegated and ignored by President Hughes, who is never actually depicted on-screen. She eventually accrues some power and influence and actively considers challenging the President in the 2016 election. But President Hughes decides not to seek a second term, abruptly resigns, and Meyer assumes the presidency in the third season of the show.

52 Amy Amatangelo. “Katherine Heigl plays CIA analyst in political drama,” Boston Herald, November 14, 2014, <https://www.bostonherald.com/2014/11/14/katherine-heigl-plays-cia-analyst-in-political-drama/>.

Her presidency is fraught with a series of scandals and eventually Meyer will lose her re-election bid to Senator Laura Montez (Andrea Savage) and the last season of the series will follow Meyer's post-presidential attempts to ensure her legacy by authoring a memoir, setting up a foundation, and attempting to establish a presidential library.

In the Netflix series and dark political thriller *House of Cards*, Claire Underwood (Robin Wright) served as the first woman president and 47th President of the United States, assuming office after the resignation of her husband Francis Underwood. When Netflix learned of accusations of sexual misconduct against the series' leading actor, Kevin Spacey, in November 2017, the company fired him from the show and the Frank Underwood character was written out. The show's sixth and final season focused on the political ascension of Claire Underwood who, prior to her election, also served as the 51st Vice President of the United States, Acting President of the United States, and 46th First Lady of the United States.⁵³

With respect to film, science fiction and action-adventure movies such as *Iron Sky* (2012), *Justice League: Gods and Monsters* (2015), *Independence Day: Resurgence* (2016), *Hunter Killer* (2018), and *Long Shot* (2019) incorporated female presidents to varying degrees. In *Iron Sky*, the U.S. leader, a Sarah-Palin lookalike played by New Zealand actress Stephanie Paul, appears seriously outmatched by the invasion of Hitler devotees plotting revenge from the dark side of the moon for the past seven decades.⁵⁴ On the other hand Roland Emmerich, director of *Independence Day: Resurgence* depicted a serious, competent female in the role of U.S. president. The director's previous action films offered African-American presidents — Danny Glover in 2009's *2012*, Jamie Foxx in 2013's *White House Down* — but for *Resurgence*, "it had to be a woman for me," the filmmaker said. "In reality, there's too much testosterone in politics anyway, at least in America.

53 Tyler McCarthy, "'House of Cards' Season 6 trailer sees Claire Underwood declare 'reign of the middle-aged white man' over," *Fox News*, September 27, 2018, <https://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/house-of-cards-season-6-trailer-sees-claire-underwood-declare-reign-of-the-middle-aged-white-man-over>.

54 Sarah Palin is an American politician, author, and reality television personality, who served as the ninth governor of Alaska from 2006 until her resignation in 2009. At the time, she was the youngest person elected and first woman elected as Governor of that state. In 2008, she received the nomination for Vice President of the United States as a running mate to then presidential candidate Senator John McCain. She was the first woman nominated as a vice presidential candidate on the Republican ticket. For a review of *Iron Sky* (2012), including descriptions of the likeness to Gov. Palin, see Hugh Hart, "Sarah Palin Look-Alike Fends off Moon Nazis in New Iron Sky Trailer," *Wired*, February 8, 2012, <https://www.wired.com/2012/02/sarah-palin-iron-sky/>.

It would do this country good if some woman would be president.” Interviews with the film’s cast members directly tied the depiction of President Lanford (Sela Ward) to the impending November 2016 election, stating “While Americans have to wait until November if they choose to vote for Hillary Clinton as the first female president of the United States, they can get a sense of what having a woman in the White House might be like with Ward’s POTUS in *Independence Day: Resurgence*.”⁵⁵ Ward acknowledged that she drew inspiration from candidate Hillary Clinton, noting that she would “look at her [Clinton’s] mannerisms or how she approached the podium, how she greeted the audience and the cadence of her speaking to a crowd, just to give me a handle on stepping into those shoes, the public persona of the highest office in our land.”⁵⁶

More recently, CBS’s prime time political drama *Madam Secretary* starred Téa Leoni as Elizabeth McCord, former CIA analyst and political science professor appointed Secretary of State. Valued by her boss for her apolitical leanings, knowledge of the Middle East, language skills and creative thinking, Secretary of State McCord drives international diplomacy, battles office politics, and circumvents protocol while effectively negotiating national and international issues. At home, she is supported by her combat-veteran-turned-theology-professor husband and three bright kids. *Madam Secretary* outlasted many of its predecessors, premiering on September 21, 2014 and concluding on December 8, 2019 after 120 episodes.⁵⁷ While the first five seasons of the show focused on the intrepid McCord’s career as Secretary of State, she announced at the end of the fifth season that she would run for President of the United States. The season six premiere re-

55 Brett Truitt, “Sela Ward takes the Oval Office in ‘Independence Day’ sequel,” USA Today, June 20, 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2016/06/20/sela-ward-independence-day-female-president/85789656/>.

56 Truitt, “Sela Ward takes the Oval Office.”

57 The show originally debuted on Sunday evenings during the 8:00PM (EST) prime time television slot. Season 1 averaged over 14 million viewers and ranked 10th for the time slot. In Season 3, the show was moved to a later time slot to accommodate Sunday Night NFL football viewing, particularly for games that ran over the scheduled time slot. As *Madam Secretary* moved into later and later slots, finally ending in the 10:00PM (EST) hour, it slowly saw declining ratings. During the 2016 election cycles, the show averaged over 12 million viewers for Season 2 (2015-2016) and nearly 11 million viewers for Season 3 (2016-2017). *Madam Secretary* finally evened out to approximately 8 million viewers in the final seasons at the latest time slot. See: Wikipedia. “Madam Secretary,” Last modified January 13, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madam_Secretary_\(TV_series\)#cite_note-6.10-48](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madam_Secretary_(TV_series)#cite_note-6.10-48).

veals that she won her race to become the first female POTUS, and the limited remainder of the series focused on her new role as President.

The role of Elizabeth McCord in *Madam Secretary*, loosely inspired by Hillary Clinton, further expands the paradigm of female presidents in popular culture by challenging the messages that women cannot be elected president and that women's ability to embrace masculine qualities is a necessary precondition to be effective in the role.⁵⁸ McCord, a Republican turned Independent, is one of the few women in popular culture to be elected president—although not without turmoil as demonstrated by scenes of her political conflicts and difficult campaign woven throughout the last season of the series. McCord has a strong background in foreign policy, with experience as a CIA intelligence analyst. This is particularly important in both challenging and reflecting changing attitudes about women in the role of president. When asked about how a woman would fare in specific aspects of the role of president, 75 percent of poll respondents said that a female president would perform worse than a male candidate in the area of foreign policy.⁵⁹ Scholars who examine foreign and defense policy also remind us that this area of policy is shaped within a highly partisan and gendered political context. Michele Swers (2007) notes that the ability to highlight a background of military service enhances a candidate or politician's credibility on defense issues with constituents, colleagues, and the media in a way that facilitates a political candidate's efforts to emerge as a leader on national security. Individuals who prioritize national security concerns are more likely to favor male presidential candidates, even when taking into account party affiliation and other demographic characteristics.⁶⁰ In this context, a political environment that is dominated by discourse on

58 Shortly after the series' debut, Fox News asked if the show served as a campaign ad supporting Hillary Clinton, but quoted the *Los Angeles Times* saying the lead character was «no Hillary knock-off» and a New York publicist calling the casting of a woman «simple business and smart on CBS» behalf.» Conservative activist organization Culture and Media Institute said “The connections in the show between Elizabeth and Hillary are clear, from the blond hair to the pantsuits.” See, Hollie McKay, “Madam Secretary a campaign ad for Hillary Clinton 2016?”, *Fox News*, September 22, 2014, <https://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/madam-secretary-a-campaign-ad-for-hillary-clinton-2016>.

59 Uscinski, “Gendering the Presidency,” 123.

60 Kate Kenski and Erika Falk, “Of what is that glass ceiling made? A study of attitudes about women and the Oval Office,” *Women & Politics* 26, no. 2 (2004), 57-80; Jennifer Lawless, “Women, War, and Winning Elections: Gender Stereotyping in the post-September 11th Era,” *Political Research Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2004), 479-490; Erika Falk and Kate Kenski. “Issue saliency and gender stereotypes: Support for women as presidents in times of war and terrorism,” *Social Science Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (2006), 1-18.

national security, engaging with defense issues and overcoming stereotypes becomes both necessary and challenging for women candidates and office-holders in real life.⁶¹ Throughout the series, *Madam Secretary* interweaves Elizabeth McCord’s humanitarian initiatives as Secretary of State with her skills and experience as an intelligence officer, as well as her willingness to use military force strategically. Kristina Horn Sheeler and Karrin Vasby Anderson argue that prior depictions of female presidents emphasizing humanitarianism, such as MacKenzie Allen in *Commander-in-Chief*, supported “the suppositional claim that women leaders are primarily motivated by humanitarian impulses and that those impulses may override their political and/or practical sensibilities.”⁶² In the case of *Madam Secretary*, the show engages squarely with this false dichotomy – consistently intertwining humanitarian concerns with other political objectives in foreign policy and defense.

The character of Elizabeth McCord subverts stereotypes regarding national security and foreign policy experience, and the writers for the show present numerous opportunities for her to demonstrate that she is a well-read, intelligent but tough-talking negotiator who understands the complexity of international relations as well as the pressure points of her male challengers. During the first season, McCord stands up, leans over her desk, and with intensity warns her male colleague, “You know, someone recently reminded me that I’m fourth in line for the presidency. So, you don’t get to come into my office and push me around.”⁶³ In the episode “Collateral Damage,” McCord’s record as a CIA intelligence analyst becomes part of a national conversation on torture and methods of interrogation, as she is accused of ordering the torture of a detainee (Safeer) during her time in Iraq. The episode “Break in Diplomacy” also drew significant public attention for a scene in which McCord throws a punch at a character playing Philippine President Datu Andrada, bloodying his nose after he makes sexually suggestive moves toward her during a private meeting. It became controversial in the Philippines where viewers thought there were paral-

61 Michele Swers, “Building a Reputation on National Security: The Impact of Stereotypes Related to Gender and Military Experience,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (2007), 560.

62 Sheeler and Anderson, *Woman President*, 51.

63 *Madam Secretary*, season 1, episode 9, “So it Goes,” directed by James Whitmore, Jr., written by Barbara Hall and David Grae, featuring Téa Leoni, Tim Daly, Bebe Neuwirth, and Zeljko Ivanek, aired November 16, 2014, in broadcast syndication, CBS.

lels between Andrada and real-life Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte.⁶⁴ The Philippine Embassy in Washington went as far as publishing a statement protesting the negative depiction of the presidential character on its Facebook page.⁶⁵

Once McCord is finally elected president in the last season, she balances her foreign policy work with a focus on important domestic issues such as equal pay and reviving constitutional ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment with the support of heavy-hitting actress Cicely Tyson as well as members of the World Cup Champion U.S. Women's Soccer team, Crystal Dunn, Allie Long, Ashlyn Harris and Ali Krieger. McCord solicits advice when needed but continues to trust her instincts when they depart with the traditions of the Oval Office:

Russell: The President's job is to lead, not to explain or ask for support.
Elizabeth: When you put it that way, you sound like the patriarchy telling me to do things the way they've always been done.⁶⁶

While averting crises in the South China Seas and preventing nuclear war, she faces off with the opposition party in Congress and a misogynistic Senator who believes she should never have been elected to the nation's highest office in the first place. Through a series of grueling impeachment inquiry hearings, her "fitness" for office, ethics, and abilities are questioned. The message to audiences is that this questioning is about more than the facts at hand, as the show's writers weave messages about gender throughout the dialogue of the last season in explicit terms. In one exchange during the episode "Accountability," McCord's son admonishes a student newspaper reporter for her lack of gender awareness:

Mia: You know, Jason, your mother is a public figure.
Jason: No other politician is being treated like this.
Mia: No other politician is the President.
Jason: The first female President.⁶⁷

64 Yi Shu Ng, "People are furious that *Madam Secretary* will feature a lecherous Filipino president," *Mashable*, March 7, 2017, <https://mashable.com/2017/03/07/sexist-filipino-president-madam-secretary/>.

65 Embassy of the Philippines, "Embassy of the Philippines Washington, D.C. Facebook page," *Facebook*, March 7, 2017.

66 *Madam Secretary*, season 6, episode 3, "Killer Robots," directed by Rob Greenlea, written by Barbara Hall, featuring Téa Leoni, Tim Daly, Patina Miller, aired October 20, 2019, in broadcast syndication, CBS.

67 *Madam Secretary*, season 6, episode 7, "Accountability," directed by Darnell Martin, written by Barbara Hall and Leland Jay Anderson, featuring Téa Leoni, Tim Daly, and Erich Bergen, aired November 17,

In the end, the congressional hearings and McCord’s unimpeachable character and strong leadership as president draw millions of people to Washington in support of her Presidency— but it actually wasn’t just because of her. She had a little girl to thank for starting a “She’s My President” movement that brought one of the largest gatherings to the nation’s capital in history.

Beyond the substance of her work, McCord’s image is at times masculine, including her body language and fashion, and at times feminine. Her character often wears pantsuits, blazers with squared shoulders, and ties to the office, but still adopts elegant, form-fitting ballgowns for State events. In the first season, the running joke is her resistance to a fashion and image coordinator hired by the West Wing to “polish” her image as the new Secretary of State. McCord has little time and interest in the makeover, as she has important international crises to manage. Her spouse, Henry McCord (Tim Daly), on the other hand, is feminized and his role as supporting spouse and future-First-Gentleman is a departure from previous depictions. Henry actively protects and prioritizes his children, as well as his marriage to Elizabeth. He is tough, yet sensitive; knows how to be sexy and spontaneous. Articles circulating about the show, including the official *Madam Secretary* blog on CBS, refer to him as “great arm candy” who can “handle a powerful woman.”⁶⁸

Yet even with the support of the strong and sensitive Henry McCord, Elizabeth McCord is still bound to the “Second Shift” that most female presidents face in popular culture. The show highlights and at time focuses specific episodes on her relationship with her spouse and children, including the struggles of co-parenting a family in the public eye. Once McCord is elected president in the final season, she is still consumed with planning her oldest daughter’s wedding and imagining the prospect of grandchildren. From the Oval Office to the wedding seating chart, Madam President still does it all.

2019, in broadcast syndication, CBS.

68 CBS, “9 Reasons We Love Henry McCord on Madam Secretary”<https://www.cbs.com/shows/madam-secretary/photos/1005531/9-reasons-we-love-henry-mccord-on-madam-secretary/2/>.

Conclusion

A pattern of farcical and wildly fictitious scenarios in popular culture, from *The Last Man on Earth* (1924) to *Kisses for My President* (1965), continued until the early 2000s, when film and television begin to shift in its depiction of Madam President. The descriptions above highlight the ways in which Cherry Jones as President Allison Taylor in *24:Redemption*, Julia Louis-Dreyfus in *Veep*, Robin Wright in *House of Cards*, and Tea Leoni as Elizabeth McCord in *Madam Secretary* played more competent candidates and politicians in their depictions of the nation's highest office.

As mentioned previously, though more recent fictional depictions of women presidents attempt to reinforce the proposition that women are qualified and capable to lead from the Oval Office, they still struggle to escape cultural expectations regarding both the U.S. presidency and women's roles in society. This is a reflection of cultural expectations regarding women's participation in politics and the U.S. presidency, what Martin and Terry refer to as the "female presidency paradox" and the limited power of popular media to mediate cultural attitudes.⁶⁹ As a medium, popular culture may push boundaries in the treatment of gender, sex, race, identity, or politics, but given the constraints presented above, it is less likely to break down cultural barriers across these areas.

In concluding, the article discussed the most recent paradigm shift in popular cultural representations of women presidents. But the influence of this paradigm shift is difficult to quantify. How can researchers separate the influence of a show or film relative to other aspects of political socialization? What will the impact of technology and market-segmentation be for the shared "popular" culture experience, as the delivery of movies, television, and other digital media continues to evolve? If film and television continue to engage the public discourse on gender and the presidency, those involved with crafting narratives around fictional female presidents need to start challenging cultural assumptions of whiteness, masculinity, militarism, sexuality, and maternalism, among others. Only when these underlying messages are challenged will we be nearer to the day when "a female commander in chief is more than just a prime-time president."⁷⁰ Even so, Nichola Gutgold's observation that more women in the political pipeline equals greater cultural acceptance of non-masculine images of leadership may prove more effective in the long run.⁷¹

69 Martin and Terry, "Social Media Candidate Attacks," 149

70 Sheeler and Anderson, *Woman President*, 88.

71 Nichola Gutgold, *Paving the Way for Madam President* (Louisville: Lexington Books, 2006), 163-4.