Women and the White House

Gender Politics in the American Presidency as Represented in Popular Culture

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Table of Contents

Introduction 3

Chapter One: Gender and the American Presidency 10

The concept of gender 10

Models of masculinity 12

The case of 2016 17

Chapter Two: Premediation and Representation 22

The logic of premediation 22

Premediation in popular culture 25

Chapter Three: The Fictional Representation of Female Presidents 30

The history of fictional female presidents 30

Commander in Chief 33

Rise to power 33

Marriage and motherhood 36

Femininity 39

Issue competency and crisis management 41

State of Affairs 44

Rise to power 44

Marriage and motherhood 46

Femininity 50

Issue competency and crisis management 52

House of Cards 54

Rise to power 54

Marriage and motherhood 56

Femininity 59

Issue competency and crisis management 61

Conclusion 64

Works Cited List 68

Introduction

In January 2019, Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren was the first person to announce her intention to run for President of the United States in 2020. The media coverage of this announcement provides significant insight into how political candidates are evaluated. Warren's gender received much attention in the assessment of her candidacy. Partly, this focus was due to Warren being part of a historic presidential race, as she was only the first of a record number of women expected to run for president in the 2020 election. However, Warren's gender was moreover the object of focus in the assessment of her suitability for the presidential office. Rather than focussing on her political agenda, the media endeavoured to evaluate Warren's suitability for office by assessing her likability. POLITICO, for example, published an article which posed the following question: "How does Warren avoid a Clinton redux—written off as too unlikable before her campaign gets off the ground?" (Korecki, "Ghosts of Hillary"). The article implies that Hillary Clinton's supposed unlikability contributed significantly to her failed bid for the presidency in 2016, and furthermore claims that Warren in this regard resembles her (Korecki, "Ghosts of Hillary"). What the article claims, however, is secondary to what the article does, which is perpetuate the double standards that women face in the media. With regard to this, *The Guardian* columnist Arwa Mahdawi wrote the following response to the question posed by POLITICO:

> I'll tell you how Warren avoids a Clinton redux. It's actually very simple: the media focuses on the issues the Massachusetts senator stands for instead of fixating on her 'likability'. The media stops using 'likability' as lazy shorthand for: 'Is the US too misogynistic to vote in a female president?' The media stops perpetuating the narrative that powerful women are unlikable. The media starts treating her as a candidate, rather than a female candidate. This isn't to say that Warren's gender doesn't matter. Of course

> it does. But there are ways to write about that without perpetuating sexist tropes. There are ways to address that without making her gender overshadow her policies. And there are ways to talk about that without making her gender more of an issue than it actually is. (“Elizabeth Warren’s ‘Likability’”)

Warren’s case is one example of the gendered scrutiny that female presidential candidates face in the media. Other female candidates have received similar treatment. One of the first questions New York senator Kirsten Gillibrand received after announcing her bid was if her perceived likability, as opposed to President Trump’s unlikability, was going to be a selling point in her campaign. The focus on gender in the assessment of a candidate’s suitability extends beyond likeability, however. California senator Kamala Harris, for example, became the subject of controversy when it was revealed that she had been in a relationship with a former mayor of San Francisco, with the implication that she used this relationship to advance her career (Siddiqui, “2020 Candidates”).

These examples illustrate that female presidential candidates receiving gendered media coverage is not an isolated occurrence; it likewise illustrates that men and women are held to different standards when it comes to the assessment of their suitability for the American presidency. The reason for this is that the American presidency is a role that has always been fulfilled by men, and therefore has come to be considered masculine in itself. The same holds true for qualities that are valued in executive leadership, such as strength, toughness, assertiveness, competence, decisiveness, and the ability to handle a crisis (Alexander and Andersen 534; Dittmar 58; Lawless 480). In line with this, the gender-incongruency hypothesis argues that “men running for high-level, powerful, authoritative positions are favoured because these roles are (as a cause or consequence) male-dominated” (Smith et al. 226). The hypothesis furthermore predicts that women who seek to occupy such roles will be perceived as non-

conformant to the inherent demands of the position, and will therefore be perceived as unsuitable by default. The result is gender discrimination, which may take many different forms (Smith et al. 226). Scholarship, for example, has concluded that the media focuses more on the physical appearance, behaviour and personality of female candidates for higher offices than they do for men (Devitt 457; Heldman et al., "Elizabeth Dole" 323; Bystrom 252; Falk 96). For women, the focus is generally on image rather than issue (Bystrom 278). There are gender stereotypes that may work to advantage of female candidates as well, as women are generally considered to be more honest, compassionate, inclusive, collaborative, and more able to compromise (Alexander and Andersen 534; Dittmar 58; Lawless 480). However, voters consider masculine traits to be more valuable in politics than characteristics that are considered to be feminine (Lawless 482).

The 2016 general election in the United States poignantly showed the extent to which the road to the White House is paved with misogyny and sexism. Undeniably, there is a myriad of reasons why Hillary Clinton lost the election, a number of which are outlined in an article by Jonathan Knuckney. First, he cites CNN commentator Van Jones who claims that the widespread support for Donald Trump was a "whitelash against a changing country, it was a whitelash against a black president in part" (Cama as qtd. in Knuckney 343). Related to this is the fact that voter turnout among whites—the ethnic group most loyal to the Republican party—increased by 2.4 per cent, while voter turnout among African Americans—the group most loyal to the Democratic Party—decreased by 4.7 per cent (Fraga et al. "Why Did Trump Win?"). Knuckney moreover notes that Clinton was unable to sufficiently address the feelings of political and economic marginality among white working-class voters (344). A third reason was the FBI investigation into Clinton's use of her personal email server in the month before the election, which resulted in a lack of trust among voters (Knuckney 344). None of these reasons stand on their own and can for that reason be pinpointed as the sole reason behind Clinton's

defeat. Neither can sexism. However, as Knuckney claims in this article, it is an important reason why the "highest and hardest" ceiling of the American presidency has not yet been shattered (Clinton, "Concession Speech"), and it is worth it to investigate the gender-incongruency hypothesis in relation to the presidency (354).

To this day, only in fiction have women taken the oath of office of the President of the United States. Popular culture provides an important platform for imagining and reimagining the American presidency. It has offered many different representations of the President of the United States with characters differing in age, race, and gender. Irving Wallace explored the possibility of a black POTUS in his 1964 novel *The Man,* which was adapted into a film in 1972. The TV series *24* (2001–2010) was the first show to feature a black president in a lead role, the TV series *State of Affairs* features the first African-American woman to be elected to the White House, and the TV series *The West Wing* (1999–2006) featured the first Hispanic-American president of that universe. The ABC series *Scandal* furthermore features its first openly gay male President-elect in season 6, while Netflix is currently developing a film featuring the first gay female President of the United States. Many of these fictional portrayal have little to no precedent in the political reality of the United States of America, and by definition defy reality as they are the product of creative license in many different aspects.

However, despite the real-life improbability of some of these presidencies, popular culture contributes to familiarizing the American public with the idea of a more diverse presidency by introducing them to fictional presidents with different identity markers than the 45 presidents that have served in real life thus far. Popular culture in that way does not solely function as entertainment, it moreover can have a political function. Richard Grusin has theorized this idea of popular culture and media as a familiarizing force. His theory of premediation describes the predominant media practice since the events of 11 September 2001, which is to imagine and anticipate a "multiplicity of futures" in order to manage people's fear

of the unknown, and to prevent "citizens of the global mediasphere" from having to experience again the shock that the events of 9/11 produced (Grusin 2). Premediation moreover works to set up potentialities in the present and create a "collective affective orientation … towards particular futures" (48). Popular culture can play a significant role in premediation, as it imagines and explores many different narrative possibilities and hence a "multiplicity of futures" (Grusin 46). The fictional representation of a diverse presidency should be interpreted within this framework.

This thesis examines the fictional representation of U.S. presidents, with an exclusive focus on the characterization and portrayal of fictional female presidents in popular culture. This thesis asks how these fictional depictions relate to the cultural understanding of the actual office, and in particular how the characterization of these female Presidents reflects and challenges the public perception of the presidency as a masculine institution. The theoretical framework supporting the analysis of fictional depictions of female presidents will comprise two parts. The first part will be an investigation into the cultural understanding and public expectation of the figure of the President of the United States, in particular with regard to gender. This chapter describes how the office of the President of the United States has come to be associated with masculinity, how this finds expression today, and how this hinders women who seek to fulfil the office. This investigation will be informed by theories on gender performance (West and Zimmerman) and gender performativity (Judith Butler). The second part of the theoretical framework will consist of an exploration of the interplay between Grusin's concept of premediation and popular culture, in particular the latter's representation of female presidents. This chapter will argue that the presence of fictional female presidents in popular culture exemplifies Grusin's theory, as such portrayals present a future that may come to pass.

There is an extensive body of novels, films and TV shows that feature a female president. However, not all fictional representations provide the material necessary for a nuanced and useful analysis of female presidents in popular fiction and the extent to which these women reflect and challenge the status quo. Three criteria were maintained in the selection of a corpus for this thesis. First, novels were excluded as in the current cultural climate TV series and films have generally replaced novels as the main source of entertainment. Furthermore, Hollywood is considered a “powerful and influential pedagogical site”, the products of which have a profound influence on the “popular imagination and public consciousness” (Giroux 7, 9). For these reasons, visual storytelling can be considered the site which is most suitable to a meaningful analysis of the presidency in popular culture and the effects on public consciousness and opinion. Secondly, the TV shows and films must have a female president as a protagonist. Fictional works which feature a female president in a minor role were excluded, as these would not provide enough material for analysis. Thirdly, the narrative must be relatively recent and realistic, as well as accurate in its depiction of the workings of the office. For this reason works of science fictions were excluded. Fictional works from 9/11 were moreover excluded in order to reasonably apply the theory of premediation to the corpus. Three TV series adhere to these criteria, and thereby comprise the corpus of this thesis: *Commander in Chief* (2005), *State of Affairs* (2014), and the sixth season of *House of Cards* (2018).

The analysis of the portrayal of the Presidents Mackenzie Allen (*Commander in Chief*), Constance Payton (*State of Affairs*), and Claire Hale Underwood (*House of Cards*) will focus on the textual component of the respective series. This thesis will in particular investigate the representation of the president’s rise to power, her marriage and motherhood, her femininity, and her issue competency and crisis management. This analysis will, where relevant, be supplemented by an investigation into how the series’ cinematography and mise-en-scène

contributes to the portrayal of the female commanders-in-chief, and in that way influences the manner in which these women are perceived. Ultimately this thesis will argue that *Commander in Chief, State of Affairs,* and *House of Cards* contribute significantly to familiarizing the public with a female presidency, but insufficiently to "the production of a collective affective orientation" to this end (Grusin 48). The portrayals of Mackenzie Allen (*Commander in Chief)*, Constance Payton (*State of Affairs*) and Claire Hale Underwood (*House of Cards*) do little to fundamentally challenge the masculine identification of the presidency, the systemic obstacles that women face in their rise to power, and persistent gender stereotypes connected to women in positions of power.

Chapter One: Gender and the American Presidency

The concept of gender

Before the influence of gender on the cultural understanding of the American presidency can be investigated, it is imperative to define the concept as it is used in this thesis. Gender theory is centred on the idea that there is a distinction between sex and gender. Within this dichotomy, sex assignment—male, female or intersex—is based on biological difference. Gender, on the other hand, refers to the "social cultural, psychological constructs that are imposed on … biological differences" (Shapiro as qtd. in McElhinny 22). Gender is thus not something that a person inherently *is,* but rather something that a person *does*. In other words, gender is a performance: it is "the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category", i.e. masculinity and femininity (West and Zimmerman 127). This 'doing' of gender happens routinely: it is a "methodical and recurring accomplishment" (West and Zimmerman 126). It is, however, not a conscious act. Judith Butler argues that gender is performative in the sense that the subject becomes "entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one's belief in its necessity and naturalness" ("Performative Acts" 522). That is to say that people have internalized the "rights, obligations, freedoms and constraints, limits and possibilities, power and subordination" of gender ideology (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 34). Because the performance of one's gender is a subconscious act, gender ideology is strengthened by every performance (Eckert and McGonnell-Ginet 33). Gender ideology is integrated into all social roles to such an extent that gender has become an inescapable reality; it is impossible to *not* perform a gender (Evans and Williams 64). However, a crucial idea that Butler articulates is that gender does not exist outside its expressions: "[gender] identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (*Gender Trouble* 33).

Society's normative assumptions about gender are predominantly based on historical sex role differentiation, which prescribes the polarization of masculine and feminine interests, behaviours and positions in society—in reflection of the 'natural order'. Modern stereotypes surrounding masculinity and femininity date back to the Victorian era. In this time, the idea of the Cult of Domesticity or True Womanhood began to take hold. Barbara Welter defines the values of True Womanhood as "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (152). These virtues were, among other means, advocated in women's magazines. Welter cites Mrs. S.E. Farley who wrote in one such magazine that "as society is constituted, the true dignity and beauty of the female character seem to consist in a right understanding and faithful and cheerful performance of social and family duties" (162). The ideals of manhood were likewise defined in that time, which form the basis for modern conceptualizations of masculinity. These ideals include the rejection of feminine behaviours, the imperative to strive for status and success, the ideal of toughness, confidence, self-reliance and emotional self-control, and the acceptability of violence, aggression and daring (Brannon 12).

One of the aims of feminism has been to reduce this polarization of masculinity and femininity, but in many areas of society the dichotomy is still upheld. An important example of this is the American political arena. A significant body of scholarship has concluded that voters ascribe a distinctive set of character traits, competencies, ideological orientations, and issue positions to male and female candidates respectively (Koch 414; Shapiro 75; Sanbonmatsu 27; Rosenwasser and Seale 596; Huddy and Terkildsen 140; Alexander and Andersen 538). Men are seen as tough, assertive, active, and self-confident, while women are seen as warm, gentle, kind, compassionate, and passive (Huddy and Terkildsen 121; Lawless 480). Men are furthermore associated with competence, agency, and rationality, while women are generally associated with expressiveness and emotionality (Lawless 480; Huddy and Terkildsen 121). In line with this, women are often seen as more liberal and more competent in areas that are linked

to the domestic sphere, such as gender equality, education, health care, and poverty. Men, on the other hand, are considered to be more competent in the areas of the military, crime, the economy, and agriculture (Lawless 480). A body of other studies has moreover shown that masculine qualities are considered to be more important than female qualities (Lawless 482; Rosenwasser and Seale 596). Related to the practise of gender stereotyping is the gender-incongruency hypothesis, which is likewise important when considering the interplay between gender and the American presidency. As mentioned before, the gender-incongruency hypothesis suggests that "high-level, authoritative positions" are gendered masculine, and that gender discrimination will occur when women attempt to fulfil such positions (Smith et al. 226). The remainder of this chapter will analyse the gender-incongruency hypothesis with regard to the American presidency. I will argue that the perception of presidentiality is inherently linked to certain forms of masculinity, to which women crucially cannot make a claim. The general election of 2016 will be used to illustrate how this perception of presidential suitability works to the disadvantage of women, for whom there exist no established models of presidentiality.

Models of masculinity

The office of President of the United States has been called a "bastion of masculinity", as masculinity is embedded in the traditions that constitute the presidency (Anderson 107). The masculine character of the presidency has developed over the centuries and has in 230 years become well-established. The gender of the presidency, as any other facets of the institution, are influenced by its creators and incumbents, with every man taking office simultaneously refining and solidifying the masculine character of the institution (Duerst-Lahiti and Oakley 29; Hoffman 272). George Washington first established and defined the image of the presidency. The first President of the United States was highly aware of the importance of his public image, as the embodiment of the Founding Fathers' vision for the newly established nation, and for

that reason took care to project the virtues that he deemed desirable in executive and symbolic leadership, such as “morality, integrity, steadfastness, sense of purpose, vision, intelligence, initiative, sensitivity to the nation’s zeitgeist, love of country, and so on” (McDonald 137). George Washington moreover influenced the type of masculinity associated with the presidency by “[embodying] the manly ideals of a physically imposing war hero” (Heldman et al., *Sex and Gender* 36).

Warrior-hero is a particular definition of ‘ideal’ manhood that is still prevalent in the cultural understanding of the presidency today. Strategic military prowess is an important argument in favour of being considered for the position of commander-in-chief (Smith 7). Aside from George Washington, Ulysses S. Grant and Dwight Eisenhower were both successful wartime generals before they were elected to the presidency. Partly due to the President of the United States commanding the United States Army and Navy, and partly due to this precedent of having war heroes as president, military experience has become a relevant exhibition of competence to any candidate running for president. Smith cites John F. Kennedy and Jimmy Carter as presidential candidates who capitalized on their military service. Women are disadvantaged in this regard, as “military credentials remain largely the domain of male candidates” (Carroll and Fox 5). John Nagl from *The Washington Post,* however, argues that “the connection between service in war and election to the highest office in the land has been severed”, citing as evidence that since 1992 every presidential election has been won by the candidate with less military experience (“Military Service”). The 2012 and 2016 elections, moreover, were won by candidates with no military experience. This development is significant, as women will not be disadvantaged by their lack of military experience.

Over the decades, the presidency has come to be associated with diverging ideals of masculinity. Apart from the “warrior hero”, the “beneficent patriarch” and the “self-made man” are familiar models that that are invoked by presidential candidates as well presidents (Smith

7). Kimmel defines the ideal of the beneficent or genteel patriarch as "a dignified aristocratic manhood", which specifically corresponds to "property ownership and a benevolent patriarchal authority at home", with the further characteristics of "love, kindness, duty, and compassion, exhibited through philanthropic work, church activities and deep involvement with his family" (*Manhood* 16). Kimmel again cites George Washington, but likewise John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison as genteel patriarchs (*Manhood* 16). Under the influence of the Industrial Revolution the values and traditions of the genteel patriarch became outdated, and were replaced by the ideals of the self-made man. The model of the genteel patriarch, however, has influenced more contemporary models of masculinity. Today being a family man is similarly considered to be a worthy credential in a campaign. This image is fostered by publicly appearing with children and grandchildren, and "arguing for their policies from the position of lived experience as fathers and husbands" (Smith 8). Smith cites George H.W. Bush and 2012 presidential candidate Mitt Romney as prime examples of this type of modern masculinity (8). What is crucial to note is that this ideal of masculinity is not available to women. For female politicians with children, there is the "perception of conflict… a domestic responsibility [she] would be shirking in her rise" (Traister, "Mom vs. Dad"). Parenthood is considered to be a priority for women in the way that it is not for men. For men, fatherhood in a political campaign is a "bonus", for women it is a "structural impediment" ("Mom vs. Dad").

The self-made man, then, is "a model of manhood that derives identity entirely from a man's activities in the public sphere, measured by accumulated wealth and status, by geographic and social mobility" (Kimmel, *Manhood* 17). In this, the model combines characteristics of the marketplace man who accumulated wealth, power and status in the capitalist marketplace (Kimmel, "Homophobia" 60; Ryle 349) and the frontiersman who is the model of rugged, self-reliant individualism and masculine ethos, with traits of autonomy, strength, invulnerability, independence, silence and aloofness (Kimmel and Aronson 499).

Over the years, the model of the self-made man has come to dominate America's definition of manhood, which is likewise translated to the presidency. This model is most closely related to the predominant view of America itself, as it is considered a land of immigrants, frontiersmen, and democratic ideals. In Kimmel's words, "the self-made man seemed to be born at the same time as his country" (*Manhood* 17). The self-made man is the embodiment of the American Dream, the idea that from humble beginnings one can rise to prominence by means of intelligence, strength and hard work (Smith 7). Smith cites Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama as presidential incarnations of this manly ideal (7).

Alternate to the above discussed models of hegemonic masculinity, R.W. Connell argues that two types of masculinity vie for hegemony today: dominance and expertise masculinity "coexist as gendered practices, sometimes in opposition and sometimes meshing" (194). Dominance masculinity centres on direct domination, while expertise masculinity is founded on technical knowledge (Connell 165). Duerst-Lahiti and Oakley argue that the presidential election is one of the sites where these two masculinities struggle for hegemony. They cite the 2000 election, during which incumbent Vice President Al Gore ran against George W. Bush. Gore was a typical expertise candidate due to his knowledge of and record in computer science and information technology. Bush' intelligence, on the other hand, was "regularly questioned" (Duerst-Lahiti and Oakley 36). He ran from a position of dominance masculinity, capitalizing on his sports career to emphasize toughness, resolve, determination and athleticism (Duerst-Lahiti and Oakley 36; Moore and Dewberry 5). In the 2004 presidential election, Bush once again projected dominance masculinity, citing the war on terrorism as his main credential in that regard (Duerst-Lahiti and Oakley 36). His direct opponent during that election cycle was John Kerry, who possessed enough knowledge on various subjects to be qualified as an expertise candidate. He, however, chose to put the emphasis on his military career and his status as a war hero, thereby projecting dominance masculinity as well. Duerst-

Lahiti and Oakley suggest that that "his campaign recognized the potential liability of expertise masculinity" (36).

In other words, expertise masculinity is generally valued less than dominance masculinity. This may be due to the events of 9/11. The atmosphere of war that followed the attacks changed voters' perception of a candidate's suitability (Lawless 479). As has been stated before, men are generally perceived as rational and agentive, and more competent in dealing with the military and national security than women. This, according to Jennifer Lawless, is "particularly relevant in a political context dominated by fighting terrorism, deploying troops, protecting national security, and brokering peace agreements" (479). Lawless furthermore draws attention to the interplay between gender and the language and rhetoric of war. She argues that "the language of war is tough, aggressive, and uncompromising", and that war rhetoric requires decisive speech (487). The projection of dominance masculinity, in short, is well-suited to the atmosphere of war that has dominated the United States since 9/11. This means that women are doubly disadvantaged, as expertise masculinity is the only type of hegemonic masculinity that women can lay claim to without losing credibility: leadership roles are available to women who possess expertise, while women who are deemed to dominating are often deemed too masculine and thus unfeminine as according to the gender binary (Duerst-Lahiti and Oakley 36, 41). The 2016 election poignantly illustrates how expertise matters less than dominance. Hillary Clinton, who was considered almost overqualified for the job, naturally ran as the expertise candidate, while the politically inexperienced Donald Trump projected dominance masculinity. Dominance words in newspaper coverage outnumbered expertise words with a ratio of five to one, and Trump even received more expertise coverage than Clinton did (Duerst-Lahiti and Oakley 40). The dominance versus expertise debate is one of the interesting components of the 2016 election. The election, however, was noted for its focus on gender in general, which will be discussed in the remainder of this chapter.

The case of 2016

Gender was a salient feature in the 2016 presidential election. This was partly due to Donald Trump, who projected a particular type of masculinity that had to that point not been associated with the presidency. Jill Filipovic describes him as a "new kind of old-school American man" and a "paradigm of feckless male entitlement, embracing male power while abnegating the traditional masculine requirements of chivalry, courtesy and responsibility" ("What Donald Trump Thinks"). Most importantly, he is "a throwback to days when authority and power were exclusively white and male by definition, when displays of masculine entitlement were overt and unapologetic" ("What Donald Trump Thinks"). The focus on gender in the 2016 election, however, was mostly due to Hillary Clinton's historic feat of being the first woman to be nominated for President of the United States by a major party. The novel presence of women in this particular sphere highlighted how the institution of the presidency has been gendered as masculine and how this masculinity had up until then been perceived as the status quo (Duerst-Lahiti and Oakley 29). While support for a Clinton presidency was far-reaching, she faced unprecedented obstacles during her campaign, which were for a large part the result of her being a woman in a domain that had been dominated and therefore shaped by men for over 200 years. The 2016 election was significant in this respect, as it was the first time the hypothesis about gender-incongruency in the presidency, as well as hypotheses about the influence of gender on the electability of women for the American presidency could be tested against empirical evidence.

Dittmar discusses a number of gender-related challenges that Clinton faced during her campaign, one of which is the discrepancy between toughness and likability. Clinton asserted her toughness, which is for the presidency mostly associated with the president's role of commander-in-chief of the U.S. military, by highlighting her experience with national security

and defence. This assertion of toughness, however, worked to the disadvantage of her likability (Dittmar 65). Clinton's attempts to communicate toughness and strength resulted in her being characterized as a bitch, as evidenced by slogans raised by Trump supporters, such as "Trump That Bitch". Clinton herself explained her predicament as follows: "I know that I can be perceived as aloof or cold or unemotional. But I had to learn as a young woman to control my emotions" (Clinton). This illustrates the double bind placed on women, as it reiterates the idea that women must suppress their emotions or come to be seen as emotionally unstable, yet that a woman controlling her emotions and thus asserting a certain toughness is simultaneously seen as unfeminine. In the control over her 'feminine' emotions Clinton thus proved that she was stable enough to be trusted with the nuclear codes, but she simultaneously negated the perception of her character as compassionate and likable (Dittmar 65).

Another gender-related challenge with which Clinton was confronted during her presidential campaign was the focus on her honesty and integrity. As stated before, honesty and ethics are executive leadership qualities that are considered to be feminine rather than masculine, and can therefore work to the advantage of female candidates in an election for an executive office. Because honesty and integrity are considered to be a woman's prerogative, however, the punishment for ethical infraction is greater for women than it is for men, both in voter evaluation and media scrutiny (Dittmar 74). Campaigns against female candidates, therefore, may very well capitalize on that. The 2016 election is a salient example of this. Clinton's opponents launched an extensive attack on Clinton's honesty and integrity, in particular capitalizing on Clinton's use of her private email servers for official communication when she was Secretary of State. Clinton was eventually acquitted for wrongdoing after a thorough investigation by the FBI, but the nickname that Trump gave her—"Crooked Hillary"—stuck, and her trustworthiness and integrity had been successfully tainted. Duerst-Lahiti and Oakley examined the media coverage of the candidates' scandals, and found that

Clinton's scandals generated almost half as many headlines as Trump's controversies did, which illustrates the greater focus on a woman's dishonesty (42). Clinton's controversies did not necessarily result in the loss of voter support, but voters did indicate that they did not trust her. According to a *New York Times* article, voters cited multiple reasons for their distrust: some pointed to specific scandals, but there were also voters who cited "a vague gut feeling that she has never been completely truthful" (Chozick, "Trust Deficit"). A *Washington Post* reiterates this idea, stating that "both [Clinton and Trump] are deeply unpopular with voters, but Clinton elicits a more visceral mistrust" (Gearan, "Trust Problem"). This can be traced back to the idea of honesty and ethics as a woman's playing field: it was essentially Hillary Clinton who was deviating from the norm, not Donald Trump.

A third gender-related challenge that Hillary Clinton faced during her campaign for the presidency was the focus on the disruption of traditional gender roles within a presidential couple that her presidency would generate. Just as the presidency is gendered towards masculinity, the role and duties of the presidential spouse are exclusively feminine. The role of the First Lady has never been officially defined, but it does not include official government duties. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* the role of the First Lady now involves "involvement in political campaigns, management of the White House, championship of social causes, and representation of the president at official and ceremonial occasions" (Caroli, "First Lady"). Clinton's nomination initiated a discussion about the role her husband Bill Clinton would fulfil in the White House. The idea that he would pick out china patterns, assemble weekly menus, and host tea parties was met with scepticism, due to him being a man as well as him being a former president with a successful career (Lee, "First Dude"). The question was raised whether he would and should be forced to give up his work with the Clinton Foundation in order to support his wife the president in a traditional manner—First Ladies traditionally set aside their own careers upon entering the White House—or if he would reshape the role of the

first spouse (Lee, “First Dude”). As Dittmar argues, there is an “independence assumed of men in the presidential partnership” (71), which is one of the main reasons why imagining a man to assume the duties of the traditionally subservient First Lady is difficult. While it is possible to view a husband independently of his wife, it is apparently more difficult to do so the other way around. Hillary Clinton was frequently asked about her capacity to act independently of her husband (Dittmar 71). Moreover, she did not benefit from ‘spousal reflection’, or “the process by which an appropriately feminine spouse reflects the masculinity of her candidate husband” (Dittmar 71). Melania Trump’s femininity affirmed Donald Trump’s masculinity in various ways, as Dittmar argues:

> [She] was highly feminized by media, voters, and her husband in the attention to her appearance, her role as primary caregiver to the couple’s 10-year-old son, and her near silence over the seventeen months of her husband’s presidential campaign. When she did speak publicly, it was to affirm Trump’s strength, defend his lewd comments and communicate his respect for women and devotion to his family. (71)

Hillary Clinton, on the other hand, suffered the idea that power resides in the male partner, in a marriage but particularly in a presidential partnership. Her husband’s perceived masculinity rather proved to be one more way in which Clinton’s femininity and legitimacy as a suitable presidential candidate was undermined.

In conclusion, the cultural understanding and public expectations of the American presidency did not favour Hillary Clinton during her presidency. Her attempt to break the mould proved that the gender-incongruency hypothesis still applies to the presidency: it brought to light that the presidential election and the institution of the presidency have been gendered masculine. This is due to historic precedent—as up until this moment all 45 Presidents of the

United States have been men—but likewise to gender stereotyping, because of which masculine qualities are valued above feminine attributes in leadership roles. For these reasons, there exist multiple models of presidentiality for male presidents, but no similar models of presidentiality based on femininity to which female candidates can lay claim. The masculine identity of the American presidency is maintained through gender bias and discrimination in voters as well as the media, which too was visible in the 2016 general election, as predicted by the gender-incongruency hypothesis. One of Clinton's most important achievements during her presidential campaign, however, however, was to initiate a debate on the sustainability of this masculine identity, as well as the desirability to maintain it. In this way, the acknowledgement of the fact that the institution of the presidency and therefore presidential elections are gendered is the first step towards dismantling the masculine identification of the institution and thereby eradicating the disadvantage that women face due to gender bias when it comes to running for office.

Chapter Two: Premediation and Representation

The logic of premediation

11 September 2001 was a turning point in American history, society and culture, and as Richard Grusin argues, American media practice. Before that day, the United States believed itself to be safe from the conflicts in the Middle East (Nadel 129). These conflicts were "mediated by time and space" as well as by the United States' belief in its own invincibility and indestructability (134). The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre, however, made war for Americans a lived experience (134). For these reasons, the tragic events of that day were followed by a sense of national disorientation, and a great sense of "psychological, cultural, and social loss" (127). There were no words to adequately describe the impact of the attacks. Nadel argues that in witness accounts of 9/11 "reality is understood to be more like a film than actuality" (129). Many first responders, for example, compared what they were confronted with to a movie scene (McQueen, "B-Movie"). Nadel furthermore cites New York novelist John Updike who described the destruction of the World Trade Centre as having "the false intimacy of television" in that "there persisted the notion that, as on television, this was not quite real; it could be fixed" ("Tuesday"). This quotation illustrates the manner in which the reality of the situation was negotiated; it could only be understood by means of pre-existing narrative structures. As Muntean states, the comparison to film "served to disarm the terrifyingly uncertain nature of the attacks by making them knowable though a mode of familiar, safely mediated spectacle that so often reaches a definite conclusion" (51).

Reference to "established narrative formulas" thus became a way to make sense of the attacks (Nadel 129). This, however, became a point of contention as what had previously been entertainment had, in a sense, become reality. More significantly, there was a widespread belief that entertainment had generated reality. After 9/11, there was

> … a (brief) sense of collective guilt, an overwhelming feeling that the incessant, soulless depiction of spectacular widescreen devastation in the likes of *Armageddon, Deep Impact* and *Independence Day* had somehow spawned the crashed planes, fuel explosions and grand demolitions of that fateful day… Hollywood blockbusters, it seemed, has prefigured, even created 11 September. (Maher, "Bang")

What is significant, however, is that Hollywood's prefiguration did not lessen the trauma of the events. Popular culture had previously had the sole function of entertainment, which is crucially disengaged from reality (Nadel 130). Thus, when fictional entertainment became reality, there was a strong sense of disorientation rather than understanding. In light of this, Richard Grusin argues that the impact of 9/11 had less to do with the "structural or imaginative possibility of such an attack" than with "the way in which it altered the ratio of our senses in our everyday media environment" (14). That is to say, one of the major consequences of 9/11 was the way in which it forced the public to re-evaluate and negotiate the interplay between the media, which includes popular culture, and their understanding of the world and the systems in which they live.

To this end, Richard Grusin argues that the practice of premediation has increased since the 9/11 attacks. He defines premediation as the process of imagining and anticipating a "multiplicity of possible futures" in order to prevent the public from having to experience again the "shock or cultural trauma experienced on 9/11" (47, 34). Premediation thus works to prepare the public for any possible future before it comes to pass (12). Crucially, premediation does not seek to predict the future, and neither does it "predetermine the form of the real" (46). In his explanation of the concept, Grusin among other things relates the practice of premediation to the Internet,

> which functions neither as a space of complete freedom, nor as a controlled, predetermined or pre-censored space, but as a space of virtuality where links and networks are already laid out to enable users to navigate only according to possible paths (and where patterns of linking and networking make it much more likely that users will navigate according to some possible paths rather than others)… [O]ne can only work within those potentialities that the Internet allows or had been made to allow, within what has already been networked or premediated—technically, algorithmically, socially, and culturally. (47)

In other words, premediation is the practice of setting up potentialities in the present; it works "to guide action (or shape public sentiment) in the present" and in that way "contributes to the production of a collective affective orientation both towards particular futures and towards the future or futurity in general" (47, 48). Premediation thus works to establish a continuity between the present and the future, in order to prevent the future from disrupting the present in the manner that it did on 9/11 (48). In conclusion, premediation does not seek to predict or predetermine the future, but to manage the links between the present and the future and thereby steering the future into a direction that has been anticipated; "[it] imagines multiple futures which are alive in the present, which always exist as not quite fully formed potentialities or possibilities" (8).

With regard to the specific means by which the media achieves premediation, Grusin discusses the difference between cinematic and televisual depictions of catastrophe, with 'televisual depictions' referring to news coverage. According to Grusin, television news is a good medium for premediation—better than cinematic representations of catastrophe—because it has a close connection to everyday reality and in that way works to prevent the "recurrence of media trauma" such as 9/11 (15). According to Doane, "television's greatest technological

prowess is its ability to be there—both on the scene and in your living room" (238). For that reason, "television is felt as an immediate collision with the real in all its intractability" (Doane 238). This differs from cinematic depictions of catastrophe and mass destruction, and popular culture in general, because this medium maintains a certain distance between the events and the audience: it creates a "[visual]… presence" while simultaneously keeping "physical, spatial, temporal, and psychological distance" (Nadel 132). This distance must not exist for true premediation, which is only achieved when the future event is prefigured "in the very medium within which the event itself is experienced", which is often television news (Grusin 17). That is not to say that imaginative experiences cannot be valuable, or cannot have a prefigurative function. I would argue that cultural production, which includes literature and popular culture, contributes significantly to anticipating and prefiguring the future. Popular culture is an important site for the production and distribution of meaning, and therefore contributes significantly to our understanding of the world and its structures.

Premediation in popular culture

It is difficult to produce a contemporary definition of the term 'popular culture' that incorporates all aspects of the concept. It is generally understood as a "mass-produced commercial culture", even though this definition does not always apply (Storey 5). With regard to function, popular culture is considered to be synonymous with entertainment media. In this respect, many different forms of cultural production can be labelled as popular culture, the most important being television, film, music and video games. The function of mass-mediated popular culture, however, extends beyond entertainment. It has become embedded in our daily lives to such an extent that mass media is now our primary source of information, as well as the most important framework to inform and influence our perception and understanding of society (Grossberg 94). In light of this, popular culture has been criticized for being "manipulative and

stupefying" (Dolby 415). The critical theorist Theodor Adorno, for example, argued that it "impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves" (19). Dolby, however, argues that this is an oversimplification of the interplay between popular culture and society, as "popular culture is not uniformly imposed on people from above" (416). Rather, popular culture is a "site of power in society" where meaning is constantly negotiated (Dolby 416). In light of this, it is a "site of hegemonic power", but it is simultaneously a site of "political resistance" (Sandlin 75). Resistance in this sense can be defined as "acts of opposition to dominant culture that contain within them a critique of domination and a struggle for self and social emancipation" (Sandlin 75). Popular culture, in short, is an influential site for public pedagogy, especially for young people (Giroux 7). Popular culture, in his words, "[shapes] habits of thinking by providing audiences with framing mechanisms and affective structures through which individuals fashion their identities and mediate their relationship to public life, social responsibility, and the demands of critical citizenship" (7).

As discussed in Chapter One, gender is a social construct; masculinity and femininity are defined as society's normative conceptions about appropriate behaviour for men and women. What was likewise discussed was Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, which includes the idea that gender performance is inevitable, and that gender ideology is strengthened by every performance. Popular culture is an important site for the enactment of society's normative conceptions about gender. What is communicated in popular culture, however, are not just stereotypes. Popular culture can work as a site of resistance by challenging the status quo and subverting gender stereotypes, and thereby influencing the dominant perceptions of gender. Representation is important in this regard, as it undermines the "controlling ways" of stereotypes, which "[label] some groups and their respective as socially normative and others as deviant, troubled, and problematic" (Erigha 86). Erigha argues,

however, that "through participation in the film industry, members of underrepresented groups can impact media images and cultural products by contesting and counteracting stereotypes, while dismantling the white male hegemony of American civil myth and culture" (87). She cites a study by Smith and Choueiti which found that "employment of women and racial/ethnic minorities behind-the-scenes positively impacted their quality of on-screen images, while an absence of women and racial/ethnic minorities corresponded with fewer and less empowered characters" (86). Numerical representation in this sense brings about qualitative representation.

The TV series *Commander in Chief, State of Affairs* and *House of Cards* fit this framework of resistance regarding gender representation. The subversion of stereotypes that characterize these shows is an end in itself. However, it is moreover the means to another end, which is premediation. The depictions of female presidents serve as entertainment, but in their seriousness they likewise serve to set up potentialities in the present, to "contribute to the production of a collective affective orientation … towards particular futures" (Grusin 48), this future being a female President of the United States. The series work to undermine gender stereotypes about women in general, but in particular gender stereotypes about women running for office, as well as the gender stereotypes that are attached to the office of President of the United States. The creator and erstwhile showrunner of *Commander in Chief,* Rod Lurie, commented on the purpose of the show by saying that "[t]hose of us who were intimately involved in the show did have the agenda of trying to get a woman in the White House, not necessarily Hillary Clinton, but any woman" (Kuhn, "Poor Signal"). He further stated on the matter that "what we liked was that the audience kept hearing the term 'Madam President'" ("Poor Signal").

Significantly, *Commander in Chief* was endorsed by the White House Project, a bipartisan initiative designed "to change the political climate so that qualified women from all walks of life could launch successful campaigns for the US presidency and other key positions"

(as qtd. in Watson and Gordon 43). The president of the organization, Marie Wilson, explained how *Commander in Chief* worked to advance this agenda: Americans have to be able to envision a woman effectively running the country before they will elect a woman president, and pop-culture images can do what thousands of hours of speeches, educational campaigns and campaign ads can't. They capture imaginations" (Carman, "Women Hope"). *State of Affairs* should be interpreted in this regard as well. *House of Cards* is in tone very different from *Commander in Chief* and *State of Affairs*, and only the last of its six season focus on Claire Underwood as president. The show, however, is interesting in its entirely with regard to premediation. It is based on the eponymous 1990 BBC series, but is often interpreted as being inspired by the Clintons. Stern argues that *House of Cards* "has always represented the far-right's distorted view of Bill and Hillary Clinton: two politicians who embody establishment corruption and will do *anything* to cling to power—even commit murder" ("Forget Trump", emphasis in original). Interestingly, however, many of the issues depicted in the show were realized not by Bill or Hillary, but by Donald Trump. Netflix content chief Ted Sarandos said of this that "[i]t's almost crystal ball-ish. Some of the storylines are obviously developing well before they're happening in the headlines and it just tells you how fluid the market is. And the world is not expecting anything but absurd, yet it's totally grounded" (Porreca, "Trump's America"). One of the few aspects of *House of Cards* that does not have a counterpart in the real world is Claire's presidency. The storyline was set up before the 2016 general election was decided, and since Claire appears to be inspired by Hillary Clinton, it might be argued that the show anticipated a Clinton presidency, and that its premediation for that reason has failed. However, *House of Cards* generally premediates a female presidency, and it is interesting to see how Claire is represented in that regard. The following chapter will analyse three fictional female presidents in order to determine how *Commander in Chief, State of Affairs* and *House*

of Cards reflect or challenge gender stereotypes surrounding women seeking or being in positions of power, and those positions themselves.

Chapter Three: The Fictional Representation of Female Presidents

The history of fictional female presidents

Some 40 TV series and films of all genres have featured a female President of the United States. Early depictions of a woman as president were the science fiction films *The Last Man on Earth* (1924) and *Project Moonbase* (1953). In an article for *The Huffington Post* on the history of fictional female presidents, Molly Fitzpatrick writes that "as a genre, sci-fi is a stronghold for female presidents" ("Depressing History"). She is sceptical towards this particular fact, "because what could better represent a distant, disorienting future than flying cars, massive alien invasions, and – a lady in the Oval Office?!" ("Depressing History"). Kimberly Yost reiterates the idea that "the presentation of a future world is sufficiently accomplished through the embodiment of the presidency as female" (99). However, she nuances the idea that this is the only reason that science fiction as a genre makes use of female presidents. According to Yost, science fiction has an important social function: feedback oscillation is the process through which the "imagined world of the author allows the audience to reflect upon their own reality and then meet the narrative again to see it with a fresh perspective" (99). In other words, science fiction allows us to "contemplate contemporary social issues and challenge our understandings" (Yost 99). The presence of female presidents in science fiction thus helps the audience to reflect on the absence of such a leader in our own reality. Imagining the future, however implausible, is moreover a way in which science fiction participates in premediation. Science fiction films do not necessarily predict the future, but they do anticipate it, and in that way prepare the audience to some extent for this future. The depiction of female presidents should be interpreted in this regard as well.

American female presidents, when they are represented on-screen, are thus often to be found in science fiction. Examples aside from *The Last Man on Earth* and *Project Moonbase* include *Whoops Apocalypse* (1986), *Les Patterson Saves the World* (1987), *Mars Attacks!*

(1996), *Perfect Lover* (2001), *Iron Sky* (2012), and *Independence Day: Resurgence* (2016). It is, however, not just science fiction that features women as President of the United States. A notable other depiction is the 1964 comedy *Kisses for My President.* This film is cited by many as the first realistic imagination of a woman in the Oval Office. However, the film does not focus on the challenges and opportunities that the first democratically-elected female president faces during her time in office; Leslie McCloud's presidency is a subplot. The film instead centres on her husband's struggle to adjust to the role of First Gentleman. Many critics consider the President's eventual decision to resign the presidency to focus on her family after she finds out she is pregnant to negate the important representation of a woman as POTUS. Sheeler and Anderson argue that the film essentially "is designed to emphasize how farcical the notion of a woman US president really is" (57). Leslie McCloud is portrayed as a qualified, competent and confident leader, but essentially the film does not satirize or challenge traditional gender roles. The film's ending does not serve to highlight the "inequities woven into the fabric of twentieth-century political culture", but rather to "[restore] sanity and order to the world of the erstwhile patriarch, Mr. McCloud" (Sheeler and Anderson 59). For this reason, Sheeler and Anderson argue that rather just being classified as a comedy, the film is a farce, which is a genre that "delights in taboo violation, but which avoids implied moral comment or social criticism… the more successfully moral implications are avoided, the funnier the farce will be" (Milner Davis 86).

What is significant about the *Kisses for My President*'s depiction of Leslie McCloud, however, is that she was elected into office. In the history of representation of fictional female presidents in popular culture this is an exception. Mostly a woman is represented as taking office through succession rather than election. This is important, as it reflects the understanding that even in a fictional universe it is improbable and unrealistic to elect a woman into office. Goren moreover argues that succession reflects the masculine nature of the presidency, as it

casts the "relationship of president and vice president (successor) in the context of a traditional marriage, with the woman as subordinate, in the vice presidency, and thus her path to power and her use of power as coming only with the death of the male (husband/president)" (110). In the HBO series *Veep* Vice President Selina Meyer ascends to the presidency when her predecessor resigns, as do Claire Haas in the ABC series *Quantico* and Claire Underwood in Netflix' *House of Cards.* In *Commander in Chief* and *Prison Break* the respective Vice Presidents Mackenzie Allen and Caroline Reynolds take the oath of office after their presidents have died. However, in more recent years there have been more TV series that featured a female president who was elected into office: season six of Showtime's *Homeland* features president-elect Elizabeth Keane, while in the sixth season of the ABC series *Scandal* former First Lady Mellie Grant was elected as President of the United States. Both series were filmed before Election Day 2016, and interesting to note is *Homeland* showrunner Alex Gansa's implication that they anticipated that Hillary Clinton would win the election. His first reaction to the actual result was concern that the show was now "counterfactual to the point of being irrelevant" (O'Connell, "Adjustments"). This comment implies that the showrunners were anticipating a female presidency in real life, which they not just wanted to mirror in the show, but which they hoped to premediate. In any case the election of a woman as President in the United States in popular fiction has become less of an aberration.

In the following part of this chapter, three fictional representations of female presidents will be analysed. The respective analyses aim to answer the main question of this thesis: How do these fictional depictions of female presidents reflect and challenge the cultural understanding of the actual office of the President of the United State as a masculine institution? An important question that is related to this is how these fictional depictions reflect or challenge the gender stereotypes that are attached to women running for office, as has been discussed in Chapter One. I will analyse the series in chronological order, starting with *Commander in*

Chief's President Mackenzie Allen, which will be followed by *State of Affairs*' President Constance Payton, and *House of Cards*' President Claire Hale Underwood. As stated in the introduction, the analysis of these women will focus on the plot details of the respective series, in particular the president's rise to power, her marriage and motherhood, her femininity, and her issue competency and crisis management. This analysis will, where relevant, be supplemented by an investigation into how the series' cinematography and mise-en-scène contributes to the portrayal of the female commanders-in-chief, and in that way influences the manner in which these women are perceived.

Commander in Chief

Rise to power

In the opening scene of ABC's *Commander in Chief* (2005), Vice President Mackenzie "Mac" Allen is informed that the President of the United States, Theodore "Teddy" Bridges, has suffered a cerebral aneurysm ("Pilot"). Simultaneously, she is told that it is the President's wish that Mac resign so House Speaker Nathan Templeton can assume office. The main reason for this is that President Bridges, as a Republican, and Mac, as an Independent, represent different ideologies, whereas Bridges and Templeton share the same vision for America. Mac was only chosen to be Bridges' running mate in order to appeal to women voters. Templeton for this reason refers to her vice presidency as a stunt, as pure theatre, and "a whole lot of nothing" (00:19:06). Mac's gender is another reason why an Allen presidency is contested. When the President's Chief of Staff, Jim Gardner, first asks Mac to resign, he gives the reason that "things are too unstable, we don't need the world—" (00:02:26). Mac interrupts him to sarcastically suggest that the world does not need "to see a soft, indecisive woman command the troops" (00:02:28). Templeton too wants Mac to resign as, in his opinion, "this is not the time for social advances made for the sake of social advances" (00:18:09), since Mac would become the first

female President of the United States. Templeton is moreover sceptical about the willingness of Islamic states to "follow the edicts of a woman" (00:18:26). Mac once again uses sarcasm to respond to this: "Well, not only that, Nathan, but we have that whole, once a month 'will she or won't she press the button' thing" (00:18:25).

Mac eventually sets aside her doubts about defying President Bridges' wishes that she resign, and assumes the presidency. This decision, and her later decision to run for re-election, are both represented as being informed by morality and ethics, in a direct response to Templeton's ruthless ambition and hunger for power. The particulars of this antagonism can be understood in gendered terms. Ambition, agency and assertiveness are considered to be positive qualities in men, whereas modesty, humility and sacrifice are valued in women, as are morality, honesty and ethics. In *Commander in Chief,* therefore, Mac and Templeton reaffirm gender stereotypes. What must be noted, however, is that lack of ambition is likewise considered to be a presidential trait, which is based on the idea that reluctant leaders are least likely to be corrupted by power. Mac is from the onset portrayed as a woman without political ambition: she left Congress after one term because she was not willing to sacrifice her morality and integrity by playing "the game of survival by deception" (00:13:37). Her vice presidential nomination was moreover not based on her capabilities or her credentials, but on the merits of her symbolic presence on Bridges' ticket. Lastly, Mac refutes Templeton's claim that like him, she seeks the presidency for the power that it gives her. Rather, *Commander in Chief* implies that Mac assumes the presidency out of necessity. It is, as Rod says earlier in the episode, merely "the right thing" to do in the face of a Templeton presidency (00:15:59). This is visualized in the last scene of the episode, in which Mac address a joint session of Congress. Templeton, as Speaker of the House, is positioned behind her on her right, and when the camera is on her, Templeton is in the shot as well, out of focus but looming over her shoulder nevertheless.

Templeton likewise motivates Mac's decision to run for re-election. Re-election is initially a point of contention for Mac for multiple reasons. First, Mac does not want to spend the remainder of her term campaigning, preferring to focus on governing the country: "Why have the job if the only point is keeping the job, not doing the job?" ("The Mom Who Came to Dinner", 00:29:09). This idea, however, is refuted by her consultants, who argue that she will be a "lame duck", which means that she will lose power, influence, and the ability to effect change ("The Mom Who Came to Dinner", 00:04:53). Secondly, Mac does not want to run for re-election because of her eldest daughter's protestations. Rebecca struggles with the publicity that comes with being a First Daughter, and Mac wants to take her hesitancy seriously because she and Rod are "parents first" ("Sub Enchanted Evening", 00:40:11). Mac, however, is reminded of the threat Nathan Templeton poses to the integrity of the presidency when he assumes power after Mac is temporarily incapacitated due to an appendicitis attack. While Mac is in the hospital, Templeton forces an end to an airline strike, undoing Mac's negotiations to get a long-lasting deal for both sides. Upon her return to the Oval Office, Mac berates Templeton for his actions by saying that he used his time as president "for [his] campaign, for [his] cronies, for [his] massive ego" ("The Elephant in the Room", 00:40:37). She then announces that she is running for re-election to keep him from abusing his power, stating the following: "If I ever needed another reason to prevent you from holding this office, I have it now. And I'm going to do everything in my power, and I have the power, to see that that never happens" (00:40:54). She underscores the message by rising out of her chair, despite the discomfort of her surgical wounds, to use her height to look Templeton in the eyes while stating that he has "crossed a line with [her], and there is no going back" (00:41:17).

The continued focus on Mac's lack of political ambition is interesting, as it essentially characterizes her as being dissociated from the presidency. This is, for example, illustrated by her willingness to break traditions that are associated with the office. In the episode "State of

the Unions", for instance, Mac decides to give the State of the Union Address from the Oval Office as a televised speech, rather than addressing Congress in the chamber of the House of Representatives. She chooses to do so because she prefers to speak "not before the people's representatives, but directly to the people..." (00:40:34). In the speech itself, she clarifies her reasons, saying that with the "elected officials of Washington… tactics of ugliness and deception have prevailed" which was "politics as usual" (00:41:01). Mac's disapproval of the political system which she expresses in the speech position her as a leader outside this system. In this way *Commander in Chief* imagines the presidency in a new way, but does so by simultaneously reiterating stereotypes about women in positions in power. The only manner in which the series can imagine a female president is by dissociating her from the office that she holds. In this way, the masculine identity of the office remains unchallenged. This is true for *Commander in Chief*'s general depiction of Mac's rise to power. She only obtains the presidency after the death of her predecessor, a decision which is moreover represented as strictly moral and ethical rather than the result of personal ambition.

Marriage and motherhood

Commander in Chief has a dual narrative structure. The series centres on the workings of the Allen administration, but simultaneously dramatizes Mac's struggle to balance her professional and her private life. Mackenzie is married to Rod Calloway, and they have three children: 16-year old twins Rebecca and Horace, and 6-year old Amy. The children are first introduced when Mac asks their opinion on her potentially becoming the President of the United States. This scene reveals two important aspects of Mac's relationship with her children. First, she appears to be invested in her children's opinions, more so than those of her advisors. When talking to Amy, she leans over the table and listens attentively to the girl's questions about whether Mac will be on printed money if she becomes president. Secondly, the scene portrays Mac as an

attentive and nurturing mother, as the conversation takes place during breakfast. These themes recur throughout the season. When talking about her daily schedule in the second episode “First Choice”, Mac asks that time is allocated for a family dinner every day. Throughout the series, she is repeatedly shown to interact with her family during mealtimes. In the episode “First Strike”, for example, the family is having breakfast together. Mac appears as an engaged mother throughout this scene. She refuses to give Rebecca permission to stay over at the house of a friend because it is a school day, and furthermore exchanges Amy’s plate of chocolate chip pancakes for a plate of fruit.

In the same episode, Horace and Rebecca return to school for the first time since Mac became president. When they arrive there, they are swarmed by reporters and photographers. When Mac is shown footage of this, she goes to the briefing room to tell the available press to leave her children alone. The manner in which she does this is significant. She purposefully strides into the briefing room and angrily tells the available press that reporting on the children of the president is not news. A reporter responds by asking: “Ma’am, don’t you think the press should determine what is or isn’t news?” (00:20:26). Mac answers in the affirmative, but her subsequent demand that her children be left alone suggest that she finds the freedom of the press as established in the First Amendment to be less important than her duty to protect her children. She moreover states that “[t]his is not Mac-the-president talking. This is Mac-the-mother. *Don’t* mess with my kids.” (00:20:29, emphasis added). The last words are spoken while she unblinkingly glares at the press, and uses her hands to emphasize her point. This scene interestingly illustrates the double bind placed on women in positions of power. The presidency, as the highest office in the United States, demands its incumbent’s full attention. For a man, it is less of a problem to combine this work with familial responsibilities, as he is generally not forced to choose between the interests of his children and those of his country. Mac, as president, however, is expected to prioritize the nation, while as a woman she is expected to

prioritize her children. In this regard, *Commander in Chief* premediates the difficulties that a female president might encounter in office. As the scene illustrates, Mac ultimately makes the stereotypical and 'feminine' choice by prioritizing her children. In this manner *Commander in Chief* once again reaffirms gender stereotypes.

Commander in Chief focuses on President Allen's relationship with her children, but likewise addresses the impact that Mac's presidency has on her relationship with her husband Rod. Mac undercuts the assumption that a woman is dependent on her husband in a (presidential) partnership by minimizing Rod's part in her administration: "As the first female president, from an image point of view, I can't have it seem like my husband is running the country" ("Pilot", 00:30:06). Rod, for that reason, has no other position in the Allen administration than First Gentleman. He is ridiculed in the media for occupying this role. A talk show host jokes that "The President today had to delay her family vacation to Camp David when husband Rod, and this is sad, pricked his finger trimming the White House Rose Garden" ("First… Do No Harm", 00:06:27). Another joke is that "President Allen may give her husband Rod a new cabinet post; he will be Secretary of Making Her Breakfast" (00:06:49). Horace later bitterly tells his father that "no one's even noticed that mom is the first female president because they're too busy laughing at her wuss of a husband" (00:26:31).

Rod tries to refute this statement by claiming that "[he is] proud of what [he is] doing here" (00:26:24), but ultimately he is not willing to fully embrace the role. He passes on some of his ceremonial duties to the former First Lady, Grace Bridges, and moreover argues that Mac's mother should move into the White House because "[they] need an official hostess" and because "the kids need more attention" ("The Mom Who Came to Dinner", 00:31:59). This illustrates Rod's general sentiment that his responsibilities as first spouse are beneath him, as he "used to be so much more" ('First Dance", 00:14:16). Rod later in a conversation with Mac reiterates the idea that his talents are being wasted in his current role: "You have no focus. No

forward motion. No game plan. And guess what, the guy who could help you make one, who wants to help you make one, he's too busy picking out drapes for the Vermeil Room" ("Rubie Dubidoux and the Brown Bound Express", 00:02:21). He then issues Mac an ultimatum: "Make me a part of this administration, Mac. Officially. Or this isn't gonna work, professionally… or personally" (00:02:45). Mac agrees and relents her earlier position by saying that he is right: "I've always looked to you, counted on you, needed you, we are in this together and if other people can't handle that, to hell with them" (00:03:59). Through this compensational behavior, Mac is represented as a woman whose professional competence depends on her husband, and who does not believe in her own independent capability. Mac's behaviour towards her husband mirrors her behaviour towards her children as it restores the "'appropriate' gender hierarchy in their domestic relationship" (Adams 232). In line with this, Adams argues that *Commander in Chief*'s portrayal of Mac as a mother and a wife is stereotypical as it justifies "[her family]'s sense of entitlement to Mac's time, energy, and subordination", entitlement which "emanates from gender stereotypes embedded in the traditional institution of family" (236). Adams furthermore argues that Mac "being family-engaged does not enhance her persona as a strong, responsible leader, but in fact undercuts it by painting Mac with a gender stereotypical brush of dependency and subordination" (236).

Femininity

Sheckels et al. argue that a female president must "look masculine but, of course, not too masculine as to be unattractive" (171). For this reason they consider Geena Davis to have been a good choice to portray President Mackenzie Allen as "she blended stature and attractiveness—read masculinity and femininity—in a way few political women will" (171). Mac has shoulder-length brown hair, brown eyes, and a square jaw. All these qualities are considered to be attractive, but not overtly feminine, and they are moreover associated with

trustworthiness, competence and intelligence (Kleisner et al. 3; Beddow 18). She furthermore stands at six feet tall, for which reason she commands attention by either looking people in the eye, or looking down on them. Only her husband Rod is taller than her, which is interesting considering the discussion on Mac's subordination to Rod above. Nevertheless, Heldman argues that Mackenzie Allen is a "highly sexualized character" due to her "bright red lipstick and suggestive blouses", which "[diminishes] her status as a possessor of knowledge" (37). Her fashion style, however, is a balance between masculinity and femininity, as Mac generally wears skirt suits in muted colours, such as black, dark blue and grey. It is professional business attire for a woman, and similar to what most presidents wear in office in reality. Heels, lipstick and jewellery provide feminine touches to Mac's appearance, and furthermore signal that she is unapologetic about her femininity and attractiveness (Barry, "Happy First Day"). In other words, she portrayed as unwilling to sacrifice her looks and style to project a more masculine image, as would be better suited to the office that she occupies.

Interestingly, *Commander in Chief* suggests that Mac is most effective in diplomacy in more feminine settings. The episode "First Dance" focuses on the visit of the Russian president Kharkov and the state dinner that President Allen hosts in his honour. Interestingly, this episode suggests that Mac is most effective in diplomacy in more feminine settings (Sheeler and Anderson 52). The episode's crisis centres on Russia's human rights' violations which deeply divides President Allen and President Kharkov. Eventually, the Russian president excuses himself from attending the state dinner. Mac has a conversation with Mrs. Kharkova in which she appears considerate, supportive and nurturing, even offering chicken soup for the President's supposed illness. She speaks to her as a president, but moreover as a woman and a wife, for which reason she is able to encourage Mrs. Kharkova to persuade her husband to attend the dinner. She later says of this to Rod that "if their relationship is anything like ours, Mrs. Kharkova will have a great deal of influence" (00:31:51). President Kharkov later

confirms that this was the case. The episode furthermore highlights that the talks and negotiations between President Allen and President Kharkov are unsuccessful. It is only at the state dinner, which is more a social function than a political one, and in which Mac furthermore appears in a highly feminine fashion, that Mac is able to successfully negotiate with the Russian president.

Issue competency and crisis management

A last aspect of *Commander in Chief*'s depiction of Mackenzie Allen as President of the United States that needs to be discussed regarding the show's reflection and questioning of the cultural understanding of the actual presidency is the issue competency and crisis management. As discussed in Chapter One, there is a difference in the public perception of issue competency for men and women. Women are seen as more competent to handle so-called 'compassion' issues such as poverty, education, health care, the environment, and gender equality (Huddy and Terkildsen 120; Semmler et al. 251; Lawless 480). Men, on the other hand, are considered to be mere competent at handling issues such as the military, crime, terrorism and international crises, as well as the economy (Semmler et al. 251; Lawless 480). Semmler et al. furthermore address the fact that voters deem 'masculine' issues more important than feminine issues. They cite a 2008 CNN poll which reports that 57% of voters considered the economy to be the biggest priority of the new president. 13% of the voters deemed the war in Iraq to be the most important, while 10% voted for terrorism and 5% for illegal immigration. Of the 'compassion' issues, only health care was considered to be an important issue at 13% (252).

These trends are reflected in the fictional universe of *Commander in Chief.* Throughout the season, President Allen mostly addresses masculine issues, with a particular focus on national security and domestic terrorism, as well as crime (Semmler et al. 255). Mac does this with competence, and it is interesting to analyse this by taking into account the series' title.

Commander-in-chief is a title and position with purely masculine association. Women are, in line with the gender-incongruency hypothesis, perceived as unsuitable for this role. By having the eponymous commander-in-chief be a woman, and by presenting Mac as the opposite of a "soft, indecisive woman [commanding] the troops", *Commander in Chief* addresses the unfoundedness of these stereotypes, and subverts the audience's expectations with regard to the show as a whole, and Mac as a character specifically.

Mac's competence with regard to crisis management is first illustrated in the episode "First Strike", which focuses on an international crisis in the fictitious South American country San Pasquale, where nine American undercover agents have been executed, supposedly on the orders of the country's dictator. Mac proves to be highly competent in handling this issue. She weakens the dictator by destroying his source of power—the cocoa fields that form the basis of the country's drug production—in a coordinated strike, and furthermore calls upon the citizens of San Pasquale to overthrow the dictatorship. Jim Gardner approvingly calls her actions "bold [and] decisive" (00:31:58). Mac is furthermore successful in averting a nuclear war with North Korea, which even Templeton calls "a hell of a job for the country" ("No Nukes is Good Nukes", 00:39:31). Another masculine issue with which Mac is confronted is crime. The way this issue is introduced in the show is interesting. In the episode "Ties That Bind" Nathan Templeton introduces a bill which focuses on the reduction of domestic crime by means of harsher jail sentences. Mac's Press Secretary Kelly Ludlow summarizes the conflict as it is presented in the episode in the following terms: "The Speaker's bill focuses on punishment and prisons, where the president believes that the taxpayer money is better spent on policing and prevention" (00:03:45). The discussion on the bill takes place in the context of protests in Prince George's County in Maryland due to the increasingly numbers of unsolved murders in the predominantly black communities. Mac visits one of these communities and listens to their grievances. During the town hall, she emphasizes that she herself is a woman and a mother,

thereby accentuating her ability to relate to their outrage of having their children shot in the streets. She furthermore resolves some of the conflict in Prince George's County by means of direct federal intervention. This effectively kills Templeton's bill and garners a lot of attention for the situation. Mac's approach to crime proves to be successful, as the approval ratings for her decision to federalize it are high.

Commander in Chief thus portrays Mac as being highly effective in handling issues that are considered to be masculine. Feminine issues are much less prevalent in the show. However, it is significant that Mac's handling of masculine issues is often reactionary. It are often issues which she, as President, is forced to address. The vision for her administration, however, focuses more on feminine issues. Significantly, her first act as President of the United States is to extract an adulteress who was sentenced to death from Nigeria. Shots of this extraction are shown intermittingly with shots of Mac giving her first presidential address. These visuals, combined with the content of Mac's speech signal that human rights, and women's rights in particular, are going to be an important focus of the Allen administration:

> I am … humbled by the notion that I am the first woman to hold this office. I'm humbled by the responsibilities that rest with me. I promise to vigorously defend the constitution. I will recognize, as Harry Truman said, that the responsibility of a great state is to serve the world, not to dominate it. For while human rights is not just an American issue, we must consider it an American responsibility. ("Pilot", 00:41:09)

In line with this, Mac passes the Homeless Initiative Act in the episode "States of the Union", and puts the Equal Rights Amendment on the national agenda in the series finale "Unfinished Business". Generally, therefore, Mac is represented as a president who is competent in addressing both traditionally masculine and feminine issues, but whose vision for the future

appears to be somewhat stereotypical in its focus on feminine issues. This is another example of how *Commander in Chief* envisions and thereby premediates the particulars of a female presidency.

State of Affairs

Rise to power

Constance Payton was elected to the office of President of the United States approximately a year before the events of NBC's *State of Affairs* (2015). Little is known of her life before the presidency, except that she was an Air Force Pilot during the First Gulf War before she started a political career as senator from California. In flashbacks it is shown that Constance, her son Aaron, and his fiancée Charleston were on a diplomatic mission in Kabul when Aaron was killed in an attack on the congressional convoy. The visit to Afghanistan was part of Constance's presidential campaign. Her Chief of Staff David Patrick arranged it because "Constance Payton is a decorated war veteran and [he] wanted to remind the voting public that unlike four of the last five presidents she actually fought for this country" ("Ar Rissalah", 00:25:44). In this regard, Constance Payton emulates male presidential candidates who use military experience to underwrite their own competence as commander-in-chief, thereby assuming one of the models of masculinity that is available to presidential candidates and presidents, which is the 'warrior hero' model. David later underscores this by saying that "military strategy wasn't a prerequisite for me getting my job. It was for her" ("Cry Havoc", 00:35:25). This is one instance by means of which *State of Affairs* engages in premediation. Despite the decreasing emphasis on military experience in presidential campaigns, more women are in the military than ever before, which increases the likelihood that of a female commander-in-chief with military credentials. Constance Payton is a fictional representation of such a future, as she won the primary two weeks after the attack in Kabul. Upon insinuation that she

capitalized on the death of her son in her bid for the presidency, her Chief of Staff David Patrick calls Aaron's death "unintended political capital" ("Ar Rissalah", 00:26:16). The tragedy did gain her the advantage in the race, but this was not of her own accord. Constance later likewise states that "[she] will not allow [her] son's murder be used as political currency, by anyone" ("Bang, Bang", 00:24:35), and that "[t]here is no position, no amount of power, nothing in this world that [she] wouldn't give to hear him call [her] name again" ("The Faithful", 00:21:39).

Constance Payton's rise to power as represented in *State of Affairs* is interesting, as it is one of the few depictions in popular culture of a woman becoming President of the United States as a result of being elected to the office, rather than by means of succession. What is moreover significant about this situation is that Constance is an African-American woman. *State of Affairs* thus sets a fictional precedent in two regards, and premediates not only the election of a female president, but moreover the election of an African-American female president. It is remarkable that the series itself does not comment on this. Throughout the season, there are very few references to Constance's gender or race. One time her gender is explicitly commented upon is in the episode "Half the Sky", President Payton is visited by a Chinese delegation. Constance tells the Chinese premier that she "appreciates [him] speaking to [her] as an equal" (00:29:36). The Chinese premier's response to this that she is "the President of the United States" implies that it is obvious that he would do so as they are equal in their status as world leader (00:29:40). Constance retorts by saying that "[she is] a woman" (00:29:41), but the Chinese premier does not seem to be concerned by this. He merely agrees with Constance when she quotes Mao Zedong by saying that women hold up half the sky (00:29:49).

State of Affairs, in its depiction of Constance Payton as an elected female and African-American president, thus comments positively on the electability of women and women of colour. In not addressing the gendered struggles faced by women running for president or

women in the highest office of the nation, however, the series portrays the presidential election and the presidency itself as devoid of gender. For that reason, *State of Affairs'* depiction of Constance Payton does, in this regard, not challenge the masculine identification of the office.

Marriage and motherhood

Unlike *Commander in Chief, State of Affairs* does not focus solely on President Constance Payton as a character. The series centres on the team of CIA analysts responsible for briefing the president on global intelligence. For this reason, President Payton is almost always represented in professional capacity. The sporadic representation of her personal life exclusively focuses on the repercussions that the death of their son has on Constance's relationship with her husband. The First Gentleman, Marshall Payton, is first introduced in the second episode "Secrets & Lies" in a scene where he, Constance, and Charleston are remembering Aaron. Marshall expresses frustration at not knowing the circumstances surrounding his son's death. Whereas Constance wants justice for their son's murder, he just wants to know the truth in order to have closure. In the episode "Half the Sky" he, to that end, requests confidential papers on the convoy attack. Constance denies this request, stating that it would interfere with matters of national security. Marshall is frustrated with Constance for her unwillingness to aid him in his grieving process. There is a distance in their relationship which is mirrored in the scene's cinematography, as Constance and Marshall do not appear in the same frame throughout the scene. Furthermore, Constance is standing behind her desk in the Oval Office, while Marshall paces in front of it. This illustrates that there is no distinction between Constance-as-president and Constance-as-wife, even in their marriage, and that Constance's dominant position as president translates to her personal relationship with her husband. Her dominance is furthermore shown in the episode "Bang, Bang", in which Constance and Marshall are shown to have dinner. Crucially, it is Constance who sits at the head of the table.

The distance between Constance and Marshall grows as the series progresses. In the episode "Ghosts" Marshall comments on a political issue, which results in a disagreement between him and Constance. She eventually dismisses the argument by stating that she needs to get back to her work. Marshall does not appreciate this. He responds reminding her that he is still her husband, a statement to which he adds a sarcastic "Madam President". He continues as follows: "I don't mind us having a disagreement, Cece, but I do mind being dismissed" (00:23:09). This scene illustrates that Marshall objects to Constance's behaviour towards him, as she treats him as another political advisor who can be dismissed rather than her husband who has her best interests at heart. It is moreover significant that the conversation takes place in the Oval Office and is on a political topic as well, which illustrates that their marriage is being consumed by politics, and has very little basis outside the presidency. Even when Constance calls Marshall later in the episode to offer an apology and a declaration of love, she is in the Oval Office. Marshall accepts both, albeit in a lackluster manner, which is an indication that the love is disappearing from their marriage. This is interesting, as it reaffirms the assumption that a woman cannot balance her professional and private lives without one absorbing the other.

In the next episode "Cry Havoc", Marshall is shown trying to make an appointment with Constance's secretary in order to be able to speak with her privately. He then confronts her with a photo which may be taken as evidence that the CIA was responsible for the convoy attack in which Aaron was killed. Constance already knew this, which angers Marshall because he is being kept in the dark about his son's murder, and because he wrongfully defended her against the accusations that she would cover up a scandal. Constance's response implies that he does not truly does not understand her position, as "[he] is not the president" (00:24:37). By saying this, Constance confirms that her public image as president takes precedence over her marital responsibilities to aid her husband in his grieving process (00:24:37). In the following episode "The War at Home", Marshall confirms this by stating that Senator Green, who gave him the

photo, gave him the information "as a friend, information [Constance] wouldn't give him as [his] wife" (00:27:40). Eventually, Marshall leaves Constance and the White House in the series' last episode "Deadcheck", claiming to be "done with all this" (00:15:32). "All this" is not their marriage, but Constance's presidency, "and what it requires of [her] to keep from [him]" (00:15:41). In response Constance again accuses Marshall of underestimating the demands of the presidency, calling him "an armchair critic" (00:15:47). Marshall concedes by stating that the presidency "is too much for [him]" and that he "didn't know what [he] signed on for" (00:15:57). He says of Constance, on the other hand, that "a warrior… has emerged in [her] since [she] took this office" (00:16:26). He thus argues that Constance has changed as President of the United States; she is no longer the person he married, as Constance-the-president has suppressed Constance-the-wife. This scene is interesting with regard to the discussion on the discrepancy between toughness and likability to which women in positions of power are subjected. Marshall implies that Constance has sacrificed her relatability for toughness, which reiterates the idea that the two are mutually exclusive. The distance between Constance and Marshall is reflected in the cinematography of the scene. Again, they do not appear in a shot together. Instead, the camera cuts to whoever is speaking. The setting is moreover very formal, with Constance and Marshall sitting on chairs on opposite sides of the Oval Office.

The fact that Marshall does not understand "what the office truly asks of [Constance]" implies that Constance's presidency is not a partnership; Constance is in it by herself (00:15:51). She does not depend on her husband, and at this point she has sacrificed his support for her independency. This independency is illustrated by her alienating him by denying him her help in his quest for closure on Aaron's death. This causes Marshall to lose faith in her, as well as his ability to support her presidential decisions. This culminates in him taking his leave. Constance comments on this by saying that "if [he] can't stand by [her] side when [she needs

him] most, then maybe [he] should go" (00:16:11). This statement illustrates that Marshall is supposed to be Constance's support system, but it simultaneously indicates that she does not truly need him, thereby reaffirming her toughness.

As stated above, Constance and Marshall Payton have different grieving processes over the death of their son. Whereas Marshall wants to know the truth about what happened, Constance wants justice. This need for vengeance characterizes *State of Affairs*' depiction of her as a mother. She vocalizes her grief by repeatedly saying that she would do anything to have her son back, and that there is nothing that was worth losing him, but Constance's position as President of the United States does influence her grieving process. President Payton first appears in a scene where she listens to a news broadcast about the upcoming anniversary of her son's death. Charleston Tucker then comes in to conduct the President's Daily Briefing, and the first words Constance Payton speaks are a greeting and an inquiry into Charleston's well-being. Crucially, she does not speak as the President of the United States in this instance, but as a woman with a true concern for the well-being of her once prospective daughter-in-law upon the anniversary of her fiancé's death. When Charleston asks in return how she herself is doing, she replies with "I've been better", before initiating the briefing ("Pilot", 00:19:26). Constance is thus introduced as a mother who still grieves for her son, and who can be characterized as sympathetic and nurturing towards her son's fiancée. However, at the end of the episode she tells Charleston that "his death will make killers out of both of us" (00:38:01). As President of the United States Constance is in a unique position, as she can use the resources of the office to find and bring to justice the people who were responsible for the attack. The series in this sense contrasts Constance with Marshall, who does not have the same power and thus copes with his grief differently. The presidency, in this sense, dictates Constance's coping mechanism: her ability to avenge his death supersedes her interest in mourning him and moving on from his death.

By not distinguishing Constance-the-mother from Constance-the-president, *State of Affairs*' depiction of Constance as a mother is masculinized, since the presidency gives her the power to be proactive with regard to vengeance (Laflen et al. 62). At the same time, however, Constance's particular grieving process as represented in the series likewise underwrites the stereotypical assumption—and thereby premediates—that a woman's emotions dictate her professional capabilities. In that sense it is thus suggested that Constance's particular feelings towards the death of her son might jeopardize her capacity to prioritize the good of the country above everything else.

Femininity

As stated, *State of Affairs'* portrayal of President Constance Payton's rise to power and motherhood is masculinized. Her femininity, however, is clearly reflected in her appearance, and in particular in her clothing. When President Payton is first introduced in the series, she is wearing a white sheath dress and a pale pink-coloured jacket, which is paired with black flats. She is furthermore wearing minimal make-up and jewellery. This pastel pink look recurs multiple times throughout the series. Melina Root, who was the Costume Designer for the first episode of *State of Affairs,* commented on this stylistic choice by stating that she wanted to reflect Constance Payton's gentle power: "I specifically wanted warmer, pale tones for her costume so that she would appear glowing and god-like against the Oval Office windows. She's strong and elegant, but not aggressively or 'powerfully' dressed" ("State of Affairs"). Root furthermore commented on President Payton's look by stating that it reflects her sense of duty: "Her clothes reflect a cleanness that derives from being in a family that is used to wearing uniforms" ("State of Affairs"). President Payton's appearance is thus one of the few examples by which *State of Affairs* communicates traditional femininity. Throughout the series she makes certain gestures that can likewise be interpreted to that end. In the episode "Secret and Lies"

she pours out tea for Charleston during their intelligence briefing, and in the episode "Masquerade" she stands and straightens her clothing before receiving the Qatari president. What must be noted, however, is that Constance's feminine appearance is contrasted with her masculine behaviour. This is one of the ways in which the series reflects racial stereotypes, as black women are often simultaneously sexualized and perceived as masculine, in particular in comparison with white women (Cole and Zucker 2). Constance's feminine appearance and masculine demeanour can likewise be perceived as an attempt to project both toughness and likability, a balance that female politicians are expected to achieve, as discussed in Chapter One.

Significant with regard to *State of Affairs*' depiction of Constance Payton's femininity is the episode "Cry Havoc" when the terrorist group Ar Rissalah blows up a CIA safe house. Constance's first priority is to speak with the victim's families. David, however, contends this decision: "Madam President, I know that you are a compassionate woman, but right now, we don't need to hear from that side of you. Right now, we need the soldier" (00:35:06). What this means is that she must address the nation to not only comfort them, but moreover to inform them on her strategy on how to deal with the terrorists. Constance's first reaction to the terrorist attack can be characterized as feminine: she prioritizes speaking with the families of the victims in order to console them and mourn the victims properly, but she has to be reminded that addressing the nation, crucially in the persona of commander-in-chief, should be her first priority in that moment.

The portrayal of Constance Payton's femininity is limited to these examples. Other aspects of her characterization on *State of Affairs,* such as her rise to power, her relationship with her husband as well as her issue competency and crisis management are represented as either de-gendered or masculinized.

Issue competency and crisis management

As stated before, *State of Affairs* focuses on a team of CIA analysts and their attempts to avert daily threats to national security. The issues President Payton must confront on the show are therefore always within this realm, which has been characterized as masculine. In the second episode "Secrets & Lies", a CIA asset is stranded on board a Russian submarine that was hacking into a CIA fibre optics line. President Payton is faced with the decision to either save the officer on board, or protect valuable American intelligence from Russia. She chooses to sacrifice one American life in order to protect sensitive intelligence and prevent a war with Russia, which would happen if they try to rescue the asset. When Charleston states that "you want me to ask to our asset to sink the sub", she responds by saying "I don't want you to, I need you to" (00:29:04). Whereas Charleston is visibly affected by this decision, Constance's demeanour is calm and collected. This illustrates that President Payton is willing to sacrifice one person to protect the nation if it is the only way in which the conflict can be peacefully resolved without damage to American national security. It moreover demonstrates that she does not let personal emotions cloud her judgment and thereby interfere with her decision-making, as is stereotypically expected of a woman in power. Instead, she is rational and level-headed in her logic.

Constance Payton is throughout the series portrayed as a competent leader in the face of crisis. In the episode "Half the Sky" a bus full of girls is kidnapped by Boko Haram in Nigeria, and a ransom from the West is demanded. Nigeria accepts America's help "in advisory capacity only", for which reason President Payton cannot give an order for direct action (00:07:56). In light of this, she claims that "the hardest thing about having power is not being able to use it when every fiber of your being says you should" (00:13:04). This citation illustrates that Constance is moved by the situation with the Nigerian girls, for which reason she enables Charleston to resolve the conundrum without direct interference. Crucially, she does not want

to know what Charleston is planning, stating that "forgiveness after sometimes beats permission before" (00:22:21). Charleston's plan of action is to offer China, who have special interest in the region where Boko Haram is active, a private task force which would rescue the girls in order to prevent insurgence in the region. In this way, President Payton succeeds in rescuing the girls, engaging in diplomacy with China, and protecting American interests at the same time.

President Payton is faced with another crisis in the episode "Ar Rissalah", in which the known terrorist Omar Fatah has given an interview which the CIA believes to be a "call to arms" (00:13:21). When asked how much of the First Amendment she would ignore to keep the interview off the air, Constance responds by saying the following: "This isn't a constitutional question. If Fatah intends to rally terrorists using our media as a delivery system, then I intend to shut it down" (00:14:17). Constance is in this instance thus portrayed as a competent leader: she is willing to compromise a part of the constitution in order to protect the lives of innocent Americans. The next episode "Masquerade" likewise focuses on the threat Ar Rissalah poses to American national security. President Payton intends to broker a deal with the president of Qatar. Her Chief of Staff David Patrick is surprised by her plan, stating that [she's] though this through" (00:02:32). Constance, seemingly offended, responds by saying that "[she is] not just a pretty face" (00:02:34).

State of Affairs does not just portray Constance Payton as a competent commander-in-chief, but likewise as a competent politician. In the episode "Secrets & Lies" she names a member of the opposite party—her own party is never specified, which simultaneously promotes bipartisanship and eliminates partisan prejudice from the audience—as the new CIA director. In Charleston's words, "empowering her former enemies, making them allies, it's smart politics" ("Pilot", 00:24:46). In the episode "The War at Home" Constance intends to open up an investigation into the CIA, and she is persuaded to have the investigating committee

be a bipartisan one as even though “that would be like Caesar handing Brutus the blade” (00:10:13). The argument that convinces her is that “combining forces… isn’t just good for us, it’s good for the country” (00:10:52). This is one more example of Constance choosing the interests of the country over her own. However, the investigation into the CIA threatens to backfire, and Constance Payton is accused of “playing fast and loose with the great honor and responsibility our country’s given her” (“Here and Now”, 00:09:50). Constance then intends to have the senator responsible for leaking incriminating evidence to the press jailed, but David tells her this is an “irreputable political decision based on personal grudges” which she cannot come back from (“Deadcheck”, 00:06:54). *State of Affairs* thus portrays Constance as a woman whose ideas get reckless when her position is being challenged, but simultaneously she appears as someone who is willing to listen to her advisors.

With regard to issue competency and crisis management, *State of Affairs* thus portrays President Constance Payton as a competent leader, at least when it comes to ‘masculine’ matters of national security such as national intelligence and domestic terrorism. She is advised on these issues, but likewise takes matters into her own hands when necessary, which she can reasonably do due to her own personal experience and capabilities. She is portrayed as compassionate when the situation affords it, and calculating when it does not.

House of Cards

Rise to power

Netflix’ *House of Cards* (2013–2018) chronicles in six seasons how Francis Underwood (portrayed by Kevin Spacey) moves from being Chief Majority Whip to President of the United States by means of corruption, deception and murder. His wife Claire Underwood is introduced in the first episode as the CEO of a non-profit organization, and her husband’s main accomplice in his quest to climb the ranks in Washington. Throughout the series she fulfils the roles of

Second and First Lady of the United States, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Vice Presidential Nominee for the Democratic Party, Acting President of the United States and Vice President of the United States. In the season five finale she becomes President of the United States after Frank resigns his post. In this sense, *House of Cards* premediates not only a female President, but likewise a female Vice President and a female Acting President. Claire's rise to power is represented as extremely Machiavellian: she and Frank are willing to do whatever it takes to secure power, including blackmail, extortion, and even murder. Frank summarizes this by saying that "[t]he road to power is paved with hypocrisy and casualties" ("Chapter 22", 00:37:49). Claire's ascension to the presidency must be perceived in light of this. Unlike *Commander in Chief,* Claire's ascension to the presidency via the vice presidency should not be perceived as reflecting the show's negative assessment of the electability of women to the presidency. Rather, it should be interpreted within the context of the show and the characterization of the characters. Frank and Claire Underwood want to depend on as few people as possible in their quest to secure power, and certainly not on the voting American public. In the show, backchannels are represented as the most secure way to power, despite the efforts it takes to deflect suspicion off oneself. In this sense, *House of Cards* interestingly premediated the corruption, obstruction of justice and abuse of power of the Trump administration.

That being said, Claire's ascension to power is represented as more legitimate than Frank's is. Frank has to scheme his way into the vice presidency and in particular the presidency, whereas Claire receives the vice presidential nomination in an open party convention, and the presidency due to Frank's own decision to resign the office. While there is some scheming involved in shifting the vice presidential nomination from Catherine Durant to Claire Underwood, Frank's decision to resign the presidency did not impair anyone but himself. Claire is angered by his decision, as he had not previously informed her before announcing it,

thereby breaking their one rule: "I cannot be your ally if I don't know what you're thinking" ("Chapter 65", 00:03:20). The resignation must be interpreted in as a part of the Underwoods' grand scheme, but Claire was not in the know in this regard: "But going forward with my operating from the outside, in the private sector, and you working from here we can own this house together. Don't you see? I've designed this. I wanted you to be the president. I've made you the president" (00:04:56). This statement is significant. Up until this point, Claire and Frank were represented as working together to secure as much power as possible. Frank's statement, however, reveals that Claire's rise to the presidency was essentially brought about by him: she gained the presidency by his virtue. Frank furthermore implies that the real power does not lie in the presidency itself. Rather "the real power … is beyond here. It's above it, but still working in conjunction with it" (00:04:39). Frank intends himself to have that power, which would make Claire essentially a puppet. Claire's presidency was brought about on the condition that she would pardon Frank for his crimes. She, however, ultimately decides not to accommodate him, thereby regaining her agency and freedom from Frank's influence. In the opening scene of season six it is revealed that Frank has died—Kevin Spacey was fired from *House of Cards* after sexual assault allegations—and that Claire intended to divorce him before his death, which would have thwarted his plans even more. As will be discussed later, Claire divorces herself from Frank's criminal legacy, which further legitimizes her presidency, at least in the eyes of the public.

Marriage and motherhood

In the first seasons of *House of Cards,* Claire and Frank Underwood's relationship is depicted as a true partnership: everything they do, they do together. Significantly, their marriage is represented as an "us against the world" type of relationship. It is unconventional, and is therefore something of an enigma to the audience. Showrunner Beau Willimon, however,

considers this mystery "one of its strengths. I think it's a mixture of trust, mutual admiration, loyalty, respect, a deep understanding of each other, and shared desire to succeed at all costs" (Smith, "Sexual Politics"). Their marriage lies at the core of their success, as they enable each other to succeed. They are each other's support system, but likewise each other's harshest critic. They love each other, but theirs is not a loving relationship. Their most intimate scenes are those in which they smoke a cigarette together and debate their next move. In light of this it is significant that their marriage does not have a sexual component. As Frank quotes in "Chapter 9", "everything in life is about sex, except sex. Sex is about power" (00:45:52). Sex would thus undermine the equality within Frank and Claire's relationship. The most meaningful sexual relationships that Frank and Claire have in the show take place outside their marriage. Claire has two affairs throughout the show. The first, with Adam Galloway, is represented as an escape from Claire's life with Frank. He represents everything her life could have been if she had not married Frank. This affair might be interpreted with regard to Claire's assertion that she re-evaluates her marriage with Frank every seven years, as she appears to do in her time with Adam. In the end, however, she comes to the conclusion that she cannot sacrifice her life with Frank, as they have a history and a future, a future which is "bigger than a moment" ("Chapter 11", 00:26:47). Crucially, Frank knew of this affair, as he knows of her relationship with Tom Yates. He acknowledges that she wants and needs certain things that he cannot give her, and for that reason approves of her decision to do "what's right for [her]" ("Chapter 50", 00:43:58).

There are, however, tensions between Claire and Frank that threaten their partnership. Most of these tensions surface when Claire's ambitions are sidelined in favour of Frank's. In season one, for example, she sabotages his bill in order to get something done that Frank was not willing to help her with. She later says of this that "[she] diverted time and energy way from [her] goals for [them]" and that "[him] using [her] just like [he uses] everybody else … was never part of the bargain" ("Chapter 10", 00:07:21). This idea is reiterated in season three, when

Claire tells Frank that she no longer feels like "two equal parts" who "are on this path together" ("Chapter 39", 00:48:42). She eventually leaves him and his presidential campaign in order to start her own congressional campaign, with the following words: "We used to make each other stronger. Or at least I thought so. But that was a lie. We were making you stronger. And now I'm just weak and small, and I can't stand that feeling any longer" ("Chapter 39", 00:50:37). Francis' presidency essentially does not fulfil her own ambitions, as "it is [his] office, not [hers]" and he is the one who makes the decisions, while she can do no more than give her opinion. Claire and Frank eventually get back together after an assassination attempt and Claire becomes Vice President.

However, some of the tension remains, especially after Claire's brief tenure as Acting President, and it continues into Claire's presidency. Significantly, she relinquishes her married name Underwood for her maiden name Hale when she assumes office in order to distance herself from Frank. This is significant, as it announces that Claire's identity is not dependent on her husband. In the public eye, she is distancing herself from his criminal legacy, but privately she likewise does not wish to be reminded of Frank. As she says in her voice-over to the audience in "Chapter 66", "Francis, I'm done with you" (00:09:28). In "Chapter 70", moreover, she calls him her "biggest regret" (00:07:37). Professionally, she fires everyone who is associated with Frank, such as his Press Secretary Seth Grayson and his entire Cabinet. She moreover publicly denounces Frank while claiming herself to have been ignorant of his dealings.

As stated before, Claire and Frank's relationship does not involve a sexual component. This is, however, not the reason that the pair does not have any children until Claire becomes president. In the episode "Chapter 17" Claire reveals that she has had three abortions. She choose to terminate the third pregnancy in its sixteenth week, however, in order to be able to focus on Frank's political career. She moreover states that "Francis and [herself], as parents,

were not [viable]" ("Chapter 71", 00:04:14). In this sense, *House of Cards* envisions a future in which the President of the United States does not have children. In the season six episode "Chapter 71", however, Claire reveals that she is pregnant. It is not actually disclosed who the biological father of the child is. What is important is that Claire says it is Frank's child in order to be able to access his inheritance. She reveals to Doug, who had been set to inherit everything, that their prenup had a clause: "If we ever have descendants together and one of us is first to die, we agree to waive our rights to everything passed on. By which I mean, all of Francis's assets are entitled to his heir. If he should have one. Francis and I have been blessed" (00:52:55). Claire's pregnancy is thus revealed to be strategic: it is in her mind the only way to be able to keep Doug from Frank's inheritance. In the episode "Chapter 67", she is told by a doctor—the same doctor who worked in the fertility clinic Claire visited in season two—that "for this to happen at this point in your life, the prognosis is not good" (00:47:38), as Claire has shown signs of menopause earlier in the series. Claire answers that she knows this, but there is a 'but' implied in this answer. This thus implies that Claire made the conscious decision to become pregnant after Frank's death, and thereby "weaponizing motherhood"—as the showrunners have called it—and consciously laying claim to the stereotypes about mothers in positions of power (Strause, "Final Scene"). The pregnancy is one way in which *House of Cards* challenges the masculine perception of the presidency, as it presents Claire as the mother rather than the father of the nation.

Femininity

Throughout *House of Cards*, Claire Underwood has been represented as highly unfeminine in her demeanour. She is strong, authoritative, assertive, tough, and competent, and decidedly not honest, compassionate, inclusive, collaborative and conciliatory. On the other hand, however, Claire is portrayed as highly feminine regarding her appearance. She is almost always shown

to wear form-fitting costumes with timeless cuts and modest hemlines in grey, navy, cream or black. Claire's appearance subtly shifts when she becomes president, with her look being more "militaristic" and "utilitarian" (Weinberg, "Costume Designer"). Her presidential wardrobe features higher necklines, longer sleeves, hemlines below the knee, and belts. All her clothing is very form-fitting to highlight Claire's figure. Later in the season, when Claire has announced her pregnancy, her clothing remains tight to emphasize her growing stomach and thereby her sex. Other notable differences in Claire's wardrobe in season six were the lack of a bag, and cufflinks which both represent her new status. American presidents traditionally wear a flag pin on the label of their suit jacket, and personalized cufflinks. Claire does not wear the flag pin, but all her outfits do have French cuffs in order to show off her cufflinks (Barsamian, "Madam President"). This adds a masculine element to her outfits. Claire's military-inspired look is likewise reflected in her haircut. Her hair in season six is slightly longer than it was in previous seasons, but it has been straightened into a rigid bob as opposed to season five's feminine waves. It is a simplistic haircut that suggests strength and toughness. Claire's appearance, is thus a means of projecting both toughness and likability through masculine and feminine elements.

Throughout the series, Claire projects femininity in order to manipulate the public's perception of her. In public she is compassionate and graceful, but her likability is merely a façade. That Claire knows how to appeal to the public is made explicit in "Chapter 37" when she dyes her hair back to blonde because "blonde polls better with the voters" (00:39:24). She moreover demonstrates that she knows how to manipulate her public image in the episode "Chapter 17" when she publicly reveals to have had an abortion. She knows she cannot give the real reason for this as the public would vilify her, so instead she says that she got pregnant as the result of rape, which would engender sympathy. Her pregnancy in season six, is therefore, likewise a means to an end. Her statement that she is going to be "father, mother, leader and

friend" to the American people is received with loud cheering, as is the statement that "future has become very personal" ("Chapter 72", 00:04:47). The public greatly approves that she is both mother and general, as her approval ratings are revealed to be in the high 70s. The pregnancy feminizes Claire, who uses this to her best advantage to further construct the public image of her likability. She even publicly admits to feeling "woozy" and "cranky", which humanizes her further. Moreover significant is that Claire is expecting a girl, which further associates Claire with femininity.

Moreover interesting with regard to Claire's use of femininity to manipulate her public image, is her faked mental breakdown in "Chapter 70". No one doubts that she has actually lost control of her senses. She carefully plays into the assumption that women cannot handle such as demanding position as the presidency, and that their emotionality will make them unsuitable. Indeed, a plan is made to invoke the 25th Amendment and declare the President unfit to rule. Claire had been counting on this, and promptly fires her entire cabinet before appointing a new, all-female Cabinet, thereby simultaneously defying assumptions about her own capability and enabling more women to assume positions of power.

Issue competency and crisis management

In *House of Cards,* the Presidents Frank and Claire Underwood must address a myriad of issues. Their policies, however, are largely portrayed as reactionary. There is very little decision-making that can be characterized as visionary. When this is does occur, however, bills are proposed on 'feminine' issues. Frank proposes an elaborate program to create employment opportunities and uses this during his election campaign. Claire, furthermore, proposes legislation on sexual assault and gun reform. Crucially, however, she works on both of these bills during Frank's tenure in the Oval Office. The vision for her own presidency is only vaguely defined: Claire's aim is "to elevate America, fight for America, and if it ever came to it, die for

America" ("Chapter 72", 00:06:37). She moreover states that "[she want] to create a progressive and productive Hale legacy for the ages" (00:51:03). She never communicates concrete plans on how to bring about this legacy.

Throughout season six, however, there are a number of crises with which President Hale must concern herself. In episode two "Chapter 67" an oil refinery has exploded. Claire first manipulates the governor of Ohio into declaring a state of emergency which in her words is "a prudent precaution" that she wants to happen "on her watch" (00:00:37). She then visits the gymnasium to which the residents of the town have been evacuated. The officials of the town and the refinery find the state of emergency an exaggeration, but they dare not drink the water that Claire has tapped for them, thereby proving her point. Claire thus reacts to this particular crisis with competency and compassion, even if the latter is only superficial. In "Chapter 69" there is a threat of imminent conflict between Russian and American troops in Syria. Claire lets others take the lead in the discussion with the Russian President Petrov, "playing incompetent" in the background (00:25:42). Her Vice President speaks for her, and when Claire's opinion is asks, she merely states that "[she concurs] with the Vice President" (00:25:19). She does this to let her advisors think she is compliant to their wishes, when in reality she has brokered a private deal with President Petrov to resolve the crisis and further her own agenda. Throughout the series, she is portrayed as one of the few people to engage in successful diplomacy with the Russian president, and this is once again established in this episode. Moreover interesting with regard to Claire's crisis management is the episode "Chapter 73", in which Claire greatly exaggerates a terrorist threat, and, in order to look tough on terror, threatens nuclear action. This reduces President Petrov to effectively beg her to reconsider. He recognizes that Claire has orchestrated the situation in order to distract the American public from the publishing of Frank's diary, which implicates her in his crimes. This episode illustrates the lengths to which Claire

will go in order to protect her power, even sacrificing the carefully constructed public perception of her likability which is undermined by her willingness to start a nuclear war.

Conclusion

This thesis' analysis of *Commander in Chief*'s portrayal of President Mackenzie Allen, *State of Affairs*' depiction of President Constance Payton and *House of Cards'* characterization of President Claire Hale Underwood was guided by two questions. The first question was how the portrayals of these female presidents reflect and challenge the cultural understanding of the actual office of the President of the United States as a masculine institution. The second question was how the depictions of the female presidents reflect or challenge the public perception attached to women running for office. To this end, the presidents' rise to power, their marriages and modes of motherhood, their issue competency and crisis management, and their femininity were investigated.

Ultimately, it must be argued that *Commander in Chief, State of Affairs,* and *House of Cards* do not challenge the gendered cultural understanding of the office of President of the United States, for varying reasons. *Commander in Chief* represents President Mackenzie Allen as a competent, moralistic and popular leader. Despite this, the show reiterates stereotypes about women in positions of power, and reinforces notions of presidentiality as a masculine prerogative. First, the show reinforces the idea that women are unelectable by having Mac obtain the presidency through ascension via the vice presidency rather than through election. It is likewise significant that Mac did not earn the vice presidential nomination based on merit. Rather, she was chosen based on her ability to gather attention and support for a Bridges presidency. Secondly, the show represents the power of the presidency as something in which women are not interested. Mac's decision to assume office is represented as a direct response to Templeton's desire for "the power to control the universe" ("Pilot", 00:20:37). Mac does not have political ambition, nor does she aspire the power of the presidency. Her decision to assume office is thus framed as a selfless, responsible and moralistic act; she does it to keep power from falling in the wrong hands. Her popularity is, in light of this, likewise framed as a result of her

'outsider' status rather than her competence or her presidentiality. Thirdly, *Commander in Chief* presents Mac's private and professional lives as being irreconcilable to a large extent. Moreover, the show reiterates the idea that women are expected to do their job as if she had no children, and to care for her children as if she had no job. Mac's relationships with her husband and her children are put under strain by the pressures of the presidency. This is represented as a failure to adhere to traditional gender norms—in which the woman's main priority is the well-being of her family. Mac's attempt to restore the traditional family order, however, can also be understood as an indication of her supposed unsuitability for office, as at various moment throughout the series Mac prioritizes attending to the needs of her children over running the country. Her decision to give her husband an important position within her administration likewise undermines the independence that is assumed of a president, and reinforces the stereotype that a woman needs spousal affirmation and guidance in her professional life. On a related note, the traditional gendered structure of the First Family is not challenged in the series. Rod is unwilling to adhere to the gender norms that are attached to the role of the First Spouse, but rather than redefining what the position entails, he distances himself from its responsibilities, preferring to reassign these to other women.

Most importantly, however, *Commander in Chief's* portrayal of Mackenzie Allen as President of the United States fails to challenge the masculine identification of the office because it fails to imagine the presidency in a new way. While the content of the show may subvert the expectations that the audience might have had as a result of the show's title, the show's insertion of a female character into a masculine position appears to have few implications. Aside from a partially shifted focus to more feminine issues in the Allen administration, the show does not give any indication of the ways in which a female president changes the status quo. While the show does acknowledge and dramatize sexism as a large part of a woman's inability to succeed, it does not address how a female president would change the

social structures that prevent a woman from being elected to the office in the real world. For this reason it can be argued that *Commander in Chief* does not sufficiently premediate the innovation of a female presidency, and thereby insufficiently "[contributes] to the production of a collective affective orientation… towards [this] particular [future]" (Grusin 48).

Like Mackenzie Allen, President Constance Payton is represented in *State of Affairs* as a highly qualified and competent leader. She possesses all the qualities that are associated with executive leadership. She is portrayed as competent, authoritative, decisive, rational and level-headed in the face of a crisis. These qualities are considered to be masculine, for which reason *State of Affairs*' portrayal of Constance Payton challenges gender stereotypes. It must be noted that in the series, these masculine qualities take precedence over stereotypically feminine qualities. Constance's femininity is portrayed as a negative contribution to her presidency: her emotionality over her son's death appears to hinder her professionality to some extent, and her compassion is rejected in favour of combativeness. For this reason, Constance Payton is effectively masculinized. Constance Payton's stereotypically masculine behaviour is contrasted with her feminine appearance. As with Mackenzie Allen, this might suggest that a female president does not have to compromise on her feminine appearance in order to be taken seriously as President of the United States. However, since Constance Payton, unlike Mackenzie Allen, is a black woman, this takes on a different dimension, and might be interpreted as reflective of racial stereotypes.

While *State of Affairs* reflects positively on the electability of women, the show simultaneously suggests that Constance was elected by using a masculine model for the presidency, namely that of the 'warrior hero'. The masculine identification of the electoral process as well as the presidency thereby remains unchallenged. Constance's roles of mother and wife are likewise masculinized. Constance Payton is represented as an independent woman who does not need her husband's approval for anything. This appears to be feminist, but

crucially it is not. It merely reiterates the power dynamic that is culturally understood to exist within the presidential couple, namely that the President of the United States is dominant and therefore independent in the relationship, and that the First Spouse serves to enable their partner. Constance's independence alienates Marshall, and thereby undermines their partnership. The biggest argument in favour of the claim that *State of Affairs* does not challenge the masculine identity of the presidency, however, is that the show does not address gender in itself. Constance Payton is the first woman, and moreover the first African-American woman, to assume the office of President of the United States in any universe, fictional or real. *State of Affairs,* however, bypasses a discussion on the meaning and implications of this achievement. It does not address the gendered hardships inherent in the election process as outlined in Chapter One, and neither does it remark on the sexism and racism on the receiving end of which a woman president would undoubtedly be. Moreover, like *Commander in Chief* it does not address how a female president would reform the office and its practices itself. In this sense *State of Affairs* is likewise not satisfactory in its premediation of a female presidency.

House of Cards' President Claire Hale Underwood resembles President Mackenzie Allen and President Constance Payton in her competence, assertiveness, self-confidence, authoritativeness, and toughness. Ultimately, however, Claire is characterized as a completely different woman and president than Mac and Constance, since she lacks their honesty, compassion and consideration. She is unconventionally ambitious, and has forfeited integrity and morality in her pursuit of power. In this regard she is a highly masculine character. While Claire states that "the reign of the middle-aged white man is over", she subscribes to the same characteristics that this reign was based on which almost negates her gender ("Chapter 67", 00:37:59). In this sense, *House of Cards* reflects rather than challenges the cultural understanding of the presidency as a masculine institution. It can be argued that the show *does* challenge the masculine identification of the presidency in the sense that Claire's presidency is

represented to the outside world as a 'beacon of femininity': Claire attaches her maiden name to her administration, she appoints a cabinet consisting entirely of women, she is expecting a daughter, and she presents an extremely feminine exterior to the American public. She is not a feminine character, but uses femininity to manipulate people's image of her. Her faked mental breakdown, for example, negatively influences people's perception of her ability to deal with pressure, while her pregnancy significantly humanizes Claire in the eyes of the public. With regard to the latter, the show moreover challenges the cultural understanding of the First Family: Claire is a widow with a complicated relationship with her deceased husband and his legacy, and will be a single parent to a young child, which is a unique situation in the White House. Since *House of Cards*' audience is privy to Claire's actual behaviour and the fact that her public image is a deception, what the series premediates is not a wholly positive future.

In general, it can be argued that while *Commander in Chief, State of Affairs* and *House of Cards* do not challenge the masculine identity of the American presidency, they do contribute to the normalization of the image of a female commander-in-chief. They are engaged in premediation by envisioning a future that might come to pass. In doing so, they moreover respond to contemporary fears about a female president, and they do this mostly in a positive light, as Mackenzie Allen, Constance Payton and Claire Hale Underwood are strong, tough, assertive, competent and decisive leaders who are not defined by their gender. By consistently challenging gender stereotypes about women, TV series of this kind contribute to a positive image about 'Madam President' which may help ensure that such a future comes to pass. If nothing, they at least familiarize the audience with the title.

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