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The World According to Frank Underwood: Politics and Power in "House of Cards"

Lindsey E. Davidson
Claremont McKenna College

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CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE

The World According to Frank Underwood: Politics and Power in *House of Cards*

SUBMITTED TO

PROFESSOR JOHN J. PITNEY JR.

AND

DEAN NICHOLAS WARNER

BY

Lindsey E. Davidson

for

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter I: From London to Washington.....	1
Chapter II: Politics of Scandal.....	16
Chapter III: Politics of Political Spouses.....	38
Conclusion.....	49
Bibliography.....	54

Chapter 1: From London to Washington

In recent years, political dramas on television have offered exaggerated narrations of the American political process. Series such as *The West Wing*, *Political Animals*, and *Scandal* illustrate a blurred lined between fiction and reality. The political thriller *House of Cards* has received extraordinary attention for its portrayal of politicians ruthlessly striving for both personal and political power. According to one ABC.com report, Washington “is officially obsessed with Netflix drama *House of Cards* — and its deliciously cold-blooded protagonist, Frank Underwood.”¹ The series shows the audience a Machiavellian rendition of the legislative system.

Margret Thatcher’s reelection as the United Kingdom’s Prime Minister in 1987 inspired Michael Dobbs’s novel *House of Cards* about “the dark political arts.”² According to Chris Wimpres in *The Huffington Post*, Thatcher’s reelection was one of the “high water marks for the Conservative Party-where she won by a landslide in the British electorate.”³ Thatcher’s position provided Dobbs with the essential material to create a devious, Machiavellian narrative in which the protagonist’s soul ambition was to eradicate the Prime Minister.⁴

¹ Erin Dooley, “Washington, DC Is Officially OBSESSED With ‘House Of Cards,’” ABC, February 14, 2014. <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2014/02/washington-dc-is-officially-obsessed-with-house-of-cards/>.

² Michael Dobbs, “The Start-House of Cards,” Michael Dobbs, accessed September 20, 2014, <http://www.michaeldobbs.com/house-of-cards/>.

³ Chris Wimpres, “Thatcher's 1987 General Election Landslide-25 Years On,” HUFF POST POLITICS UNITED KINGDOM, November 6, 2012, accessed September 20, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2012/06/10/general-election-1987-25th-anniversary-thatcher-conservative-party_n_1584274.html.

⁴ Dobbs.

While many British political narratives are conspiracies with “identifiable collective actors undermining government for political gain,”⁵ Dobbs’s *House of Cards* does not contain a standard conspiracy narrative according to Liesbet Van Zoonen and Dominic Wring in their article, “Trends in Political Television Fiction in the UK.” Michael Dobbs’s creation tells the story of heartless Tory Chief Whip Francis Urquhart on his “Machiavellian route to the premiership.”⁶ This British political thriller is an exaggerated version of real life party politics. Dobbs, a former Conservative Chief of Staff, wrote right after Thatcher’s demise, embodying the notion of “life imitating art.”⁷

In 1990, the BBC adapted the novel as a television series. The trilogy comprised three four-episode seasons: *House of Cards*, *To Play the King*, and *The Final Cut*. In the series, Urquhart blackmails, threatens, and even kills those in his way. After Margaret Thatcher’s resignation, the Conservative Party needs a new leader and the party overlooks Urquhart. His ruthless, manipulative machinations make him a vindictive villain. Urquhart’s back-channeling manipulation results in Henry Collingridge’s rise to the position of Conservative Party leader. Once Urquhart learns that the man that he put into power passes him over for a more authoritative political role, Urquhart makes it his mission to ruin Collingridge and insert himself as Prime Minister.⁸ His plotting commences when Collingridge takes over the Conservative leadership, and inevitably the

⁵ Liesbet Van Zoonen and Dominic Wring, “Trends in Political Television Fiction in the UK: Themes, Characters and Narratives, 1965-2009,” *Media, Culture and Society (Sage Publications)-Loughborough University Institutional Repository* (2012): 10, accessed September 22, 2014, <https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/13448>.

⁶ Van Zoonen and Wring, 11-12.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸ June Thomas, “You Should Watch the Original ‘House of Cards’,” *Slate*, January 23, 2013, accessed September 22, 2014, http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2013/01/29/house_of_cards_original_uk_version_is_brilliant_available_on_netflix.html.

Prime Ministership. The series' portrayal of "skullduggery"⁹ leaves the audience enticed as they watch Urquhart carry out his methodical schemes, comments John O'Connor of *The New York Times*.¹⁰ The guileless members of Parliament allow Urquhart to behave in a calculated and conniving manner.¹¹

Urquhart's asides give the viewers a firsthand glimpse of his ruthlessness. He explains his actions to the viewer in a very precise and detailed manner, convincing the audience to trust him.¹² Urquhart seductively sucks the viewer into his schemes, just as he does with his political enemies. His political skill beautifully masks his ruthlessness. The harder he knocks his enemies down, the more they become reliant on him.¹³ His manipulative tactics lurk behind a façade of helpfulness, which allows Urquhart complete political leverage over his competitors, knowing their weaknesses.

Urquhart thrives on the mishaps of others because he turns their misfortunes into his own relative gains. The most ambitious yet naïve pawn¹⁴ is Mattie Storin. A journalist for *The Chronicle*, she believes forging a bond with Urquhart will lead her on a path to success. She comes to understand that getting in bed with the devil will break her. The relationship solidifies Urquhart's evil tendencies in the eyes of the audiences as he exploits Storin's "daddy issues"¹⁵ and manipulates the repercussions to his advantage.

⁹ John O'Connor, "House of Cards Dovetails Into Reality: Author Imagined Thatcher Had Finally Been Ousted as Pm," *The New York Times* (March 30, 1991): 1, accessed September 22, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/31/arts/tv-view-dirty-deal-it-s-all-in-the-cards.html>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Michael Noble, "Looking Back at the BBC's *House of Cards*," Den of Geek, January 31, 2013, accessed September 23, 2014, <http://www.denofgeek.com/tv/house-of-cards/24300/looking-back-at-the-bbcs-house-of-cards>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Urquhart's deceptive charm enables him to continue assembling his revenge narrative with the help of Tim Stamper and Urquhart's beloved wife Elizabeth.¹⁶ Stamper serves as the Assistant Whip for the Conservatives in the House of Commons, functioning as Urquhart's right-hand man. Almost as manipulative as his boss, Stamper finds "glee in getting his hands dirty"¹⁷ as he ascends to power alongside Urquhart, argues Edward Copeland in his article "Different Ways of Playing 'Cards.'" Elizabeth exists as her husband's genuine helpmate.¹⁸ She functions as a co-conspirator in his attempt to gain the Prime Minister position. Mrs. Urquhart advocates for the sexual relations that Urquhart pursues with Mattie and others, as the couple sees these relationships as steppingstones to their ultimate goal.¹⁹ With the help of both Stamper and Elizabeth, Urquhart flawlessly executes his Machiavellian plans.

As the thriller unfolds Urquhart slowly departs from his suave façade.²⁰ He becomes less manipulative and more forceful, revealing his disdain for his colleagues. Although his conquests cannot see beyond his composed demeanor, the audience witnesses his villainy throughout the series. Urquhart establishes a relationship with the audience, challenging them to understand the necessity of his actions as his popularity starts to wane. As he glares directly into the camera he points out that "he has always acted in the best interests of the country and that he was always the best man for the

¹⁶ Edward Copeland, "Different Ways of Playing 'Cards'," Edward Copeland's Tangents, June 26, 2013, accessed September 24, 2014, <http://eddieonfilm.blogspot.com/2011/05/different-ways-of-playing-cards.html>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Noble.

job.”²¹ Michael Dobbs’s narrative conveys both extreme pragmatism and real life politics.

According to Liesbet van Zoonen and Dominic Wring of Loughborough University, UK, “most series are firmly linked to real life politics, some story lines relate to historical or political events, other storylines exploit current societal threats and some characters are based on real political figures.”²² The main question surrounding the series remains whether *House of Cards*, both the BBC and American version, represents political reality. Politically charged television provides a basis of legislative knowledge for the viewer and it certainly affects their beliefs towards politics.²³ Liesbet Van Zoonen and Dominic Wring argue that *House of Cards*’ “perceived realism is one of the clearly identified mechanisms through which television”²⁴ affects the viewer. Fiction uses the political narrative to engage with the audience, depicting a dramatized reality. Film and television connect a narrative with an audience’s real experiences. When a fictional politician illustrates his “partisan and personal interests before those of his constituents and the nation,”²⁵ a viewer makes the realistic connection to his or her own government, argues Van Zoonen and Wring. A politician’s actions become more understandable amid a familiar narrative that is relatable to the viewer.²⁶

Beau Willimon’s *House of Cards* evokes a political narrative that highlights realistic tenets of the American legislative process through ruthless ambition and a desire for power. Adapted from Michael Dobbs’s novel, the Netflix-produced American

²¹ Ibid & The Final Cut Episode 4.

²² Van Zoonen and Wring, 15.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 267.

²⁶ Ibid., 274.

adaptation portrays a “pulpy blend of sex, lies and bureaucracy—a treatise on power and its perversion,”²⁷ comments Jordan Zakarin of the *Hollywood Reporter*. Like Dobbs, Willimon comes from a political background and draws on his experiences for inspiration. Willimon worked on Democrat Chuck Schumer’s senatorial campaign in 1998, Hillary Clinton’s run for Senate in 2000, Bill Bradley’s campaign for president in 2000, and finally Howard Dean’s 2004 presidential campaign.²⁸ Zakarian argues that these experiences gave Willimon the ammunition to create a “bloodsport”²⁹ Machiavellian political narrative. Working for Howard Dean functioned as a “protean moment that forever shaped Willimon’s political and dramatic outlook,”³⁰ claims Adam Sternbergh in his article “The Post-Hope Politics of Beau Willimon.” Willimon, would ask himself, “What is the nature of political power? What is the nature of personal power?”³¹ Willimon always admired candidates that took a “practical approach to getting the job done,”³² and therein lies the creation of Democratic Majority Whip Francis Underwood, and the birth of the newest *House of Cards*.

Transplanting a series from post-Thatcher Britain to twenty-first century America resulted in many differences between the BBC’s *House of Cards* and the American adaptation. One of the most fundamental disparities between the two political systems is the United States Constitution, asserts Rodger Darlington in his article “Contrasts

²⁷ Jordan Zakarin, “How *House of Cards* Writer Beau Willimon Got the Inside Dirt on D.C.,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 26, 2013, accessed September 30, 2014, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/house-cards-beau-willimons-journey-421559>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Adam Sternbergh, “The Post-Hope Politics of Beau Willimon,” *Literature Resource Center* (February 2, 2014): Accessed September 30, 2014, http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA357357012&v=2.1&u=claremont_main&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Zakarin.

between the American and British Systems.”³³ The Constitution represents the foundation of the United States Government while the British system does not abide by a “single document, but rather its constitutional provisions are scattered over various Acts of parliament,”³⁴ says Darlington. The American separation of powers between the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches differs from Britain, as members of Parliament can play roles in the various branches of government.³⁵ Another notable difference between the two systems is the leadership. The American people elect a president through the Electoral College while the British Prime Minister is elected by a majority of the House of Commons. The British people elect their representatives who in turn elect the Prime Minister. The US Congress does not elect the president.³⁶ An American president holds his position as the Commander in Chief for a set four-year term, while the Prime Minister can remain in office as long as “he or she commands a majority of votes in the House of Commons,”³⁷ affirms Darlington. However, there are protocols for instituting a new executive power in the American system. The Presidential Succession Act (the 25th Amendment) gives a vice president the ability to take over as president in the case of a sitting president’s death, resignation, or impeachment. In addition, due to the US system of checks and balances, a president must rely on Congress to pass legislation, whereas a British Prime Minister can generally pass legislation because his party has a majority in the House of Commons.³⁸ These varied distinctions

³³ Roger Darlington “Contrasts Between The American and British Political Systems,” Roger Darlington's World, August 11, 2013, accessed November 15, 2014, <http://www.rogerdarlington.me.uk/USvsUK.html>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

between the two systems inevitably affected the political dynamics of the two *House of Cards* narratives.

British protagonist Francis Urquhart became Democratic House Majority Whip Frank Underwood in the American version. While the most significant difference between the two series remains the political systems, the second is the protagonists' "socioeconomic and ideological backgrounds,"³⁹ asserts Noah Kristula-Green of *US News & World Report*. Unlike Urquhart, Frank Underwood does not come from a privileged background, but instead hails from a small, poor farm town in South Carolina. Underwood is a Democrat, while the Republican Party aligns closer politically with Urquhart's affiliation to the Conservative Party.⁴⁰ Despite their ideological differences, Underwood's political ambition rivals Francis Urquhart's merciless nature – Beau Willimon made sure that Frank Underwood possesses the Machiavellian qualities of his British counterpart. Both are ruthless in their tactics to achieve power. Although Underwood's desire for power is more overt, both are vindictive when dealing with challengers.⁴¹

Francis "Frank" Underwood, a Democratic Congressman from South Carolina, discovers within the first minutes of Episode One that the president and his Chief of Staff

³⁹ Noah Kristula-Green, "Netflix's House of Cards Ups the Ante on Its British Inspiration," *US News & World Report*, February 5, 2013, accessed November 15, 2014, <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/noah-kristula-green/2013/02/05/netflixs-house-of-cards-ups-the-ante-on-its-british-inspiration>.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Chris Hallam, "House of Cards Vs. House of Cards," *Chris Hallam's World View: Movies, politics, comedy and more...*, January 9, 2014, accessed November 15, 2014, <https://chrishallamworldview.wordpress.com/2014/01/09/house-of-cards-vs-house-of-cards/>.

have reneged on their promise to nominate him as Secretary of State.⁴² Subsequently, Underwood, like Urquhart, plots his political revenge, manipulating enemies and allies alike before “double-crossing and backstabbing them to get his way,” says Zakarian.⁴³ His amoral principles and Machiavellian tendencies place him on no end of the political spectrum, as he will conspire with either party in order to continue ascending the political ladder. His moderate ideals allow him to negotiate legislation through a bipartisan effort.⁴⁴ While he may be a political animal, Underwood, according to Willimon, “is his own kind of D.C. outsider, playing by his own rules to buck the party establishment.”⁴⁵ He schemes, lies, and manipulates his way to the top in order to achieve personal political power.

Frank Underwood has one rule and that is “hunt or be hunted,”⁴⁶ and viewers see this motto in practice in the first scene of the first episode. The audience watches as Underwood attends to an injured dog, and instead of helping the dog he strangles it.⁴⁷ Frank says to the audience, “There are two kinds of pain. The sort of pain that makes you strong, or useless pain. The sort of pain that’s only suffering. I have no patience for useless things.”⁴⁸ Within the first three minutes, the viewer experiences both Underwood’s ruthlessness nature and his Shakespearean breaking of the fourth wall. The

⁴² Rebecca Hill, “Online Programming Realities: A Case Study of *House of Cards* and the Perceived Advantages Over Traditional Television” (master's thesis, Stockholm University, Spring 2014), 19, accessed October 14, 2014, Google Scholar.

⁴³ Zakarin.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Gene Healy, “*House of Cards* May Not Be Realistic, but It's Enjoyable,” *Cato Institute* (February 10, 2014): 1-3, accessed September 30, 2014, <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/house-cards-may-not-be-realistic-its-enjoyable>.

⁴⁷ Hill, 34.

⁴⁸ “Quotes for Francis Underwood from 'House of Cards' (2013),” IMDB, accessed November 20, 2014, <http://www.imdb.com/character/ch0369160/quotes>.

use of an aside by both Urquhart and Underwood parallels Shakespeare's Richard III. Shakespeare's villainous characters speak directly to the viewer in an attempt to create a "more palatable-rapport"⁴⁹ and establish a connection with the audience, claims *The Huffington Post* in the article "9 Things 'House of Cards' Took From Shakespeare." Underwood's direct address to the camera engages the audience as he reveals his "operating Machiavellian philosophy,"⁵⁰ a technique also used by Francis Urquhart.⁵¹

Frank Underwood's sole ambition stems from the desire to accumulate power, ascending the political ladder one rung at a time. The second episode gives viewers insight into Underwood's perspective when, after speaking with a former employee, he says to the audience, "Money is the McMansion in Sarasota that starts falling apart after ten years. Power is the old stone building that stands for centuries."⁵² From the very first moment the audience meets Frank Underwood, his thirst for power becomes evident. Both Underwood and Machiavelli recognize the principle that "the end justifies the means,"⁵³ in that power and ruthless ploys can be both beneficial and acceptable in obtaining a desired result.

In order to achieve anything, Frank Underwood relies on his personal political power and the tactics he has learned throughout years in Washington. Underwood furnishes a "favor bank" and then draws from that pool at strategic moments. As soon as

⁴⁹ "9 Things 'House of Cards' Took From Shakespeare," *Huffington Post*, February 24, 2014, accessed November 15, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/21/house-of-cards-shakespeare-n_4823200.html.

⁵⁰ Dr. Michael Cunningham, "House of Cards: Making Machiavelli Modern," *Lewis University Faculty Forum*, February 18, 2014, accessed September 24, 2014, <http://www.lewisu.edu/experts/wordpress/index.php/house-of-cards-making-machiavelli-modern/>.

⁵¹ Hill, 36.

⁵² Cunningham.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

he cashes in on a favor from a colleague, he obliterates him or her.⁵⁴ Machiavelli and Underwood share the notion that political power struggles in a “world where politics is disconnected from morality.”⁵⁵ Underwood positions himself in a place of political power, manipulating others by masking his evil inclinations to advance his own personal legislative goals. Despite short-term legislative objectives, Frank Underwood’s ultimate end game remains personal power.⁵⁶

Much like Urquhart, Underwood would not be in a position of high political power without the help of his wife Claire and his Chief of Staff, Doug Stamper. Both Claire and Doug represent anti-heroes in their own right who act as co-conspirators. Similar to the BBC’s Urquhart, Underwood has his own network. However, unlike Elizabeth Urquhart, Claire Underwood does not walk in her husband’s shadows. Claire runs the Clean Water Initiative, a non-profit organization that brings clean water to impoverished third world countries. This marks another difference in both the narratives and political systems of the two series. In the United States, the role of interest groups and lobbyists is far more extensive than in Britain. Lobbying is more widely accepted in America than in the UK, as many people in the UK view lobbyist as a “dirty word,”⁵⁷ claims Conor McGrath in his paper on *Comparative Lobbying Practices*. In Britain, lobbying firms are known as government relation organizations. They still refer to the process of influencing policy, yet are not as aggressive as American lobbying corporations. A London-based political consulting group says, “They help clients draft

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Conor McGrath, “Comparative Lobbying Practices: Washington, London, Brussels” (thesis, University of Ulster), accessed November 15, 2014, <http://esi.praguesummerschools.org/files/esi/19esi.pdf>.

materials for when they speak to Government- identify who they should speak with and in some cases set up meetings.”⁵⁸ Lobbying in the US, however, is more ruthless and aggressive. Much like Frank Underwood, lobbying firms generally work on a favor bank system and help companies or individuals achieve their goals in exchange for a beneficial gain. Claire’s non-profit role requires her to work closely with lobbying firms as she receives financial assistance from them. Despite her altruistic position, Claire also manipulates friends and foes to achieve political as well as personal power. She does not sit on the sidelines; together, the Underwoods are a powerhouse political couple.

Unlike Claire, Doug does not show signs of political aspirations and seems content with his position as Underwood’s right-hand man. He proves himself indispensable, taking care of delicate situations as they arise without a shred of hesitation. However, Don Wolfensberger of the Brookings Institution argues that a main critique of modern day Congress is that “few members and staff have real expertise in the areas over which they hold major legislative and oversight responsibilities.”⁵⁹ Although Doug has an aptitude for handling political scandals, he has no expertise as a politician. On the real Capitol Hill, a politician’s staff must develop sufficient knowledge on the issues at hand. In comparison to a Member of Parliament’s small staff of three volunteers and one full time employee, United States Congressional offices are typically comprised of “the chief of staff, a legislative director, two legislative assistants, press secretary, three fellows, an

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Don Wolfensberger, “The New Congressional Staff: Politics at the Expense of Policy,” BROOKINGS, March 21, 2014, accessed November 15, 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/fixgov/posts/2014/03/21-congressional-staff-politics-over-policy-wolfensberger>.

office manager, accountant, secretary, and interns,”⁶⁰ asserts Joel Rivlin in his article “Reflections of a British Intern on Capitol Hill.” American politics in general – and Congress in particular – is far more dependent on unelected political staffers than the British model. Nevertheless, in the context of *House of Cards* Doug serves his purpose as Frank’s ruthless chief-of-staff. Despite differences in their tactics and goals, Claire and Doug are ruthlessly efficient in their own ways serving the greater cause of Frank’s political battle.

While the American adaption of *House of Cards* remains overtly cynical and highly dramatized, the show also evokes certain elements of political reality. Frank Underwood’s devious tactics and “ruthless pragmatism” convey a striking resemblance to the 36th president, Lyndon B. Johnson. Although Underwood’s character is, according to Tolly Moseley, “morally corrupt, underhanded, selfish, and unspeakably cruel,”⁶¹ he gets the job done efficiently and tactfully, just as LBJ did. Willimon expresses Underwood’s character makeup as, “Two scoops of LBJ with a dash of Richard III and a pinch of Hannibal Lecter.”⁶² Both Southern Democrats, LBJ and Underwood show an aptitude for manipulating their way into power – both spent time in Congress before quickly moving onto the Executive Branch. They too claimed the presidency after the downfall of their predecessors rather than as a result of a fairly won election.

Like *House of Cards*’ Underwood, LBJ had a system, yet his was “highly personalized and instinctive, it could be broken down into two interlocking components;

⁶⁰ Joel Rivlin, “Reflections of a British Intern On Capitol Hill,” The Dirksen Congressional Center, July, 1999, accessed November 15, 2014, http://www.congresslink.org/print_expert_reflections.htm.

⁶¹ Tolly Moseley, “How LBJ’s ghost haunts *House of Cards*,” Statesman, February 21, 2014, accessed September 25, 2014, http://www.statesman.com/weblogs/statesman-shots/2014/feb/21/how-lbjs-ghost-haunts-house-cards/?__federated=1.

⁶² Ibid.

The Johnson Network and the Johnson Procedure.”⁶³ Johnson’s network was the “source”⁶⁴ of his power, which put his procedure into gear. He was able to sway votes for rewards, the same technique that Underwood uses throughout *House of Cards*. LBJ crafted an indispensable network as the personal alliances “transcended partisan, ideological and geographic lines,”⁶⁵ comments Rowland Evans and Robert Novak in “The Johnson System” article. Like Frank, Lyndon B. Johnson was a “ruthless pragmatist, who was willing to break the rules in order to properly lead,”⁶⁶ says Lucia Graves of *National Journal*. Johnson’s aggressive personal network and presidential pressure led to the passage of landmark civil rights and social welfare legislation. As Senate Majority Leader, there was a certain aura that surrounded Johnson, answering reporter’s questions in a calculated manner.⁶⁷ Johnson always used the right words, to convey his overriding dominance.⁶⁸ Robert Caro says, “there was a look he gave, there was the way he held his head, even if you didn’t know who he was, you would know this was a guy to be reckoned with.”⁶⁹ Part of LBJ’s dominance stemmed from his size, standing over six feet tall. His ruthless and aggressive nature erected change within Congress and eventually in the Oval Office.

New York Times bestselling novel *The Man Who Killed Kennedy-the Case Against LBJ* argues that LBJ, like Underwood, used corruption and murder to achieve

⁶³ Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “The Johnson System,” in *The Legislative Process in the Us Senate*, ed. Lawrence K. Pettit and Edward Keynes (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company), 178.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 178-179.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁶⁶ Lucia Graves, “Frank Underwood and a Brief History of Ruthless Pragmatism,” *National Journal*, February 19, 2014, accessed November 15, 2014, <http://www.nationaljournal.com/politics/frank-underwood-and-a-brief-history-of-ruthless-pragmatism-20140219>.

⁶⁷ Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Master of The Senate*, 3rd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc., 2002), 13716-32685, Kindle edition.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

political power in Washington.⁷⁰ The book makes the wild accusation that LBJ played a significant role in John F. Kennedy's assassination. As Underwood proclaimed in Season 2, Chapter 15, he is "one heartbeat away from the presidency and not a vote cast in [my] name. Democracy is so overrated."⁷¹ Through their narcissistic nature and strategic machinations, Frank Underwood's character remains similar to LBJ. Like LBJ, Underwood utilizes his network, including the Secretary of State, lobbyists, Congressional leaders of both political parties, journalists, and even the president to achieve political dominance. The reality of the political sphere blurs the line between fact and fiction, yet Beau Willimon's *House of Cards* provides a slightly dramatized but overall accurate portrayal of the Machiavellian nature of the American legislative process.

Throughout this thesis, I will argue that *House of Cards* portrays an embellished reality of our government through a Machiavellian lens, particularly looking at the politics of scandal through the 25th Amendment and impeachment, as well as the role of political spouses. I will also address the underlying question of appointing someone as controversial as Frank Underwood to the vice presidential position knowing his manipulative nature, and will analyze his schemes from a realistic perspective.

⁷⁰ Roger Stone, "House of Cards: Is Frank Underwood LBJ?," The Stone Zone, February 25, 2014, accessed Oct 1, 2014, <http://stonezone.com/article.php?id=598>.

⁷¹ House of Cards-Season 2 Chapter 15.

Chapter 2: Politics of Scandal

Political scandals attract the public eye and dominate the media. According to Robert Williams, in some cases political improprieties can both “disrupt and take over political agendas, [so] that it becomes necessary for public officials to resign.”⁷² The public is hungry for scandals, which makes it difficult for political figures to sweep immoral behavior under the rug. Williams asserts that in the American political system, with “free press, intense political competition, decentralized political authority and multiple access points,”⁷³ there are countless opportunities and motives for scandals to develop.⁷⁴ These scandals range from officials using “public office for private benefit,”⁷⁵ or abusing power in “pursuit of policy goals.”⁷⁶ Politicians advance their own careers at the expense of others. Corruption also gives rise to scandals in which unethical activities become the central focus of media frenzies. Marion Just and Ann Crigler argue that “research on politician’s personal misdeeds has fueled the greater part of scandal coverage and given rise to highly critical analysis of media feeding frenzies; highly negative, personalized and sensational stories.”⁷⁷ The violation of rules, protocols, and

⁷² Robert Williams, *Political Scandals in the USA* (Edinburgh: Keele University Press, 1998), 1, accessed October 15, 2014,

<http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxIYmtfXzk1NzJfX0FO0?sid=6748281c-b231-47eb-8d5b-f9e034b577d5@sessionmgr4002&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1>.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-3.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Marion R. Just and Ann N. Crigler, “Media Coverage of Political Scandals: Addressing Concerns about Personalization,” (paper presented at the annual meeting for the American Political Science Association, Phoenix, Arizona, May 29-June 1, 2014), 2, accessed November 16, 2014, http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2454705.

laws resulting in the “improper exercise of public duties”⁷⁸ can foster impropriety, chiefly if a “degree of moral bindingness”⁷⁹ exists, argues John B. Thompson in his book “Political Scandal: Power and Visibility in the Media Age.” Engaging in political misconduct requires discretion.⁸⁰ Despite the different origins of scandals, many involve an illegitimate exercise of political power.⁸¹

House of Cards shows exaggerated repercussions of political scandals. Frank Underwood’s rise in power from House Majority Whip in Season One to the presidency at the culmination of Season Two directly correlates to his Machiavellian desires for power. Underwood’s ability to seize political influence gives him full control of managing political scandals in an underhanded manner. He uses shrewd tactics to place himself one step ahead of both the scandal and his opponents. According to Melissa James Gibson, Executive Story Editor for *House of Cards*, “modern politicians have become experts at navigating news cycles and preying upon their opponent’s mistakes and vulnerabilities-Frank Underwood is rather gifted in that regard.”⁸² Political scandals can damage a politician’s career, and having a team to manipulate and fill the news cycle with distracting, unrelated coverage is often a corrupt politician’s most viable option.⁸³ Underwood stages Congressman Peter Russo’s suicide and pushes his lover and reporter

⁷⁸ John B. Thompson, “Corruption, Bribery and Scandal,” in *Political Scandal: Power and Visibility in the Media Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 711-7210, Amazon Kindle.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Melissa James Gibson and John Mankiewicz, emailed to Lindsey Davidson, Los Angeles/New York, October 20, 2014.

⁸³ John Pitney, “A 1994 White House Memo: A Great Handbook of Scandal Spin,” *Bessette Pitney Text* (blog), October 12, 2014, accessed November 16, 2014, <http://www.bessettepitney.net/2014/10/a-1994-white-house-memo-great-handbook.html>.

confidante, Zoe Barnes, off a Metro platform, all to advance his plan of claiming the Oval Office.

Underwood executes his plans without a single regard for the people that he scorns.⁸⁴ In Season Two Chapter 22 he says, “Do you think I’m a hypocrite? Well you should. I wouldn’t disagree with you. The road to power is paved with hypocrisy. And casualties. Never Regret.”⁸⁵ Underwood sees everything that happens, good and bad, as an opportunity to advance his own agenda, says John Mankiewicz, Co-Executive Producer for *House of Cards*.⁸⁶ Underwood’s vindictive disposition allows him to push boundaries in order to gain personal power. He whips votes, conducts sexual relations, and kills in order to reach the presidency. According to Eric Deggans of NPR, “Underwood blends his velvety charm and mesmerizing menace”⁸⁷ to achieve political influence and success as the “modern Machiavelli.”⁸⁸

Frank Underwood’s “unapologetic and self-interested” makeup is an extreme portrayal of a Washington, D.C., politician according to the show’s creator Beau Willimon. Most political figures desire to serve their country, yet “they are people that want power above all else.”⁸⁹ Willimon contemplates the question, “If someone is actually getting something done, do the ends justify the means?” In Frank Underwood’s

⁸⁴ Demetria Irwin, “Why ‘Scandal’ Can’t Hold a Candle to ‘House of Cards,’” theGrio, February 19, 2014, accessed October 14, 2014, <http://thegrio.com/2014/02/19/why-scandal-cant-hold-a-candle-to-house-of-cards/>.

⁸⁵ House of Cards-Season 2 Chapter 22.

⁸⁶ Melissa James Gibson and John Mankiewicz, emailed to Lindsey Davidson, Los Angeles/New York, October 20, 2014.

⁸⁷ Emma Gobillot, “The New Boogeymen,” FRAMED, October 19, 2014, accessed October 21, 2014, <http://emmacgobillot.wordpress.com/tag/frank-underwood/>.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Jeffrey Brown, “Storytellers Find Fertile Material in Fictionalizing Washington Dysfunction,” PBS NEWSHOUR, August 27, 2013, accessed October 21, 2014, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics-july-dec13-governing_08-27/.

world, rules can be tweaked for personal gains, especially when parties are “paralyzed by gridlock.”⁹⁰ Willimon continues, “It’s a paradox that people who are making the rules sometimes have to break them in order to move us forward.”⁹¹ Constituents desire storybook leaders, yet progress means “sometimes playing outside the box.”⁹² Although *House of Cards* portrays a dramatized Washington, says Melissa James Gibson, the narrative “effectively highlights how obscure legislative rules can be appropriated and repurposed”⁹³ for personal and party benefits.

In Season Two Chapter 16, Underwood constructs an omnibus bill on entitlement reform through a bipartisan coalition to avoid a government shutdown. Then-Vice President Underwood, Republican Senate Majority Leader Hector Mendoza, and Curtis Haas, a “Ted Cruz-esque Tea Party politician,”⁹⁴ agree to an amendment for the omnibus bill raising the retirement age to 68. Fearing a filibuster, Underwood requires Mendoza to sign a formal agreement guaranteeing the passage of both the amendment and the new entitlement reform bill in the Senate. When the deal falls through, Underwood whips the votes he needs and accelerates the quorum call in order to prevent the Senate Republicans from voting against the amendment. Underwood’s written unanimous consent agreement with Mendoza enables the entitlement reform legislation to pass in the Senate without a Republican filibuster.⁹⁵ In his capacity as the President of the Senate, Underwood can

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Melissa James Gibson and John Mankiewicz, emailed to Lindsey Davidson, Los Angeles/New York, October 20, 2014.

⁹⁴ Tierney Sneed, “Explaining That Bonkers ‘House of Cards’ Senate Sequence,” US News & World Report, February 14, 2014, accessed October 24, 2014, <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2014/02/13/explaining-frank-underwoods-bonkers-house-of-cards-senate-maneuver>.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

legally enact these “medieval rules,”⁹⁶ claims Sahil Kapur of the TPM. The 1988 incident with Majority Leader Robert Byrd and Senator Robert Packwood inspired Underwood’s takeover of the Senate, but the episode exaggerated the process and made the event less realistic. In 1988, Senator Byrd forwarded a motion to end a Republican filibuster and had the Senate sergeant-at-arms find and bring in absent Republicans in order to vote. One of the senators, Robert Packwood, refused to leave his office so he was carried feet first into the chamber.⁹⁷ However, the specific chain of events surrounding Underwood’s accelerated quorum call is highly unlikely as Underwood acts unilaterally without deliberation with other Democratic senators. Although Underwood’s win further nurtures his partnership and trust with the president, his Senate takeover would not be favorably regarded in the real Washington. Nevertheless, Underwood’s ability to efficiently get things done allows the president to rely on him for important tasks. Underwood’s hunger for power continues as he says, “Unfortunately, he’s the President and just happens to be the most powerful man in the free world-*for now*.”⁹⁸ Underwood’s Machiavellian initiatives enable him to conquer anything in his path to power.

Although Underwood holds a coveted political position, he is determined to claim the presidency. Creator Beau Willimon could be working from Alexander Hamilton’s premise in Federalist #6 that “men are ambitious, vindictive and rapacious.”⁹⁹ Willimon

⁹⁶ Sahil Kapur, “Behind Frank Underwood's Medieval Senate Maneuver In 'House of Cards',” TPM, February 15, 2014, accessed November 16, 2014, <http://talkingpointsmemo.com/caffe/house-of-cards-senate-frank-underwood-medieval-maneuver>.

⁹⁷ Sneed.

⁹⁸ Emily Yahr, “*House of Cards* Recap Season 2, Episode 3: 'Whatever Faith I Have Is Quickly Evaporating',” The Washington Post, February 19, 2014, accessed October 22, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/style-blog/wp/2014/02/19/house-of-cards-recap-season-2-episode-3-whatever-faith-i-have-is-quickly-evaporating/>.

⁹⁹ Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, “#6,” in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter and Charles R Kessler (New York: Signet Classics, 2003), 48.

draws inspiration for Underwood from politicians' hunger for power and desire to succeed in Washington. While many politicians describe *House of Cards* as far-fetched and highly dramatized,¹⁰⁰ Willimon argues, "every politician who gets to the highest offices of power is a murderer-they have to be willing to be a murderer-whether it's killing someone in a garage or whether it's sending 100,000 troops off to war, you're making decisions that are life or death."¹⁰¹ Even President Barack Obama thinks that Underwood's murders are less "off base,"¹⁰² than his ability to get things done.¹⁰³ Jon Dolan argues that Frank Underwood may be "cunning and punishing"¹⁰⁴ toward those in his way, but his ability to move the country in a forward motion "offers its own murkily hopeful vision of post-partisan gridlock in Washington."¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, his unsympathetic and corrupt deal-making forces viewers to ask "whether Frank Underwood has any belief system at all, and if so how is it warped by power?"¹⁰⁶ As vice president, Underwood proves that he can destroy anything in his path, including the president.

Frank Underwood has his eyes on the Secretary of State in the onset of Season One until the president reneges his offer for the position, forcing Underwood to set his sights higher by eyeing the Oval Office. His yearning for the presidency becomes clear in

¹⁰⁰ Howard Berman, phone conversation with Lindsey Davidson, Los Angeles/Washington D.C., October 20, 2014.

¹⁰¹ Nikki Schwab, Tierney Sneed, and Allie Bidwell, "Blurring Reality," *EBSCO Host*: accessed October 17, 2014, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=7&sid=2f13d00a-1afa-430c-8a9d-9d7910488681%40sessionmgr110&hid=107&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZZY29wZT1zaXRl#db=aph&AN=95880932>.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Jon Dolan, "House of Cards Slithers Back," *EBSCO Host* (2.13.14): 1, accessed October 21, 2014, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=9&sid=2f13d00a-1afa-430c-8a9d-9d7910488681%40sessionmgr110&hid=107&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZZY29wZT1zaXRl#db=aph&AN=94136232>.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

Season Two when he pushes Zoe Barnes to her death. He achieves his goal through ruthless, vindictive strategy. Persuading the current vice president to run for Governor in Pennsylvania leaves Underwood in a key political position. President Walker secretly vets him for the vice presidency and Underwood remains one step ahead in his endeavors.

Frank becomes vice president by exploiting the 25th Amendment. His use of the amendment “transformed [the Amendment] from a pragmatic constitutional provision into a Machiavellian route to power,”¹⁰⁷ argues Raymond A. Smith in his “Progressive Policy Institute” article. His political influence helps him to obtain the majority confirmation vote in both the Senate and the House.¹⁰⁸ Before his Congressional confirmation, Underwood arranges for the sitting vice president to step down through “various types of murder and mayhem enacted along the way”¹⁰⁹ that guarantee Frank the vice presidency. But ascending from House Majority Whip to vice president leaves Underwood unsatisfied, as he remains a “heartbeat away from the Presidency.”¹¹⁰

The Constitution does not provide the vice president with extensive power. The powerlessness of the office defeated even LBJ. Leaving the Senate for the vice presidency, “Johnson was sure he would still be a figure of power in Washington, no matter how powerless a job the vice presidency had been in the past, he would break the

¹⁰⁷ Raymond A. Smith “How Season 2 of 'House of Cards' Murders the 25th Amendment,” Progressive Policy Institute, February 28, 2014, accessed October 19, 2014, <http://www.progressivepolicy.org/issues/politics-and-politicians/how-season-2-of-house-of-cards-murders-the-25th-amendment/>.

¹⁰⁸ John D. Feerick, “Appendix B-Constitutional Provisions on Succession,” in *The Twenty-fifth Amendment: Its Complete History and Applications* (n.p.: Fordham University Press, 1992), 246-47, Google Play.

¹⁰⁹ Smith.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

mold,” says Robert Caro in his book *Master of the Senate*.¹¹¹ However, after leaving the Senate, Johnson no longer acted as a political powerhouse. Sitting as vice president, everyone knew that “he had lost all his power, so completely that he had become almost a figure of ridicule in the capital,”¹¹² argues Caro. The Constitution states in Article 1, Section 3, Clause 4 that, “the Vice President shall be President of the Senate, but shall have no vote, unless they be equally divided.”¹¹³ Although the vice president serves as the president of the Senate, he does not have any political influence unless an issue requires an official vote to break the tie. In addition, according to the 25th Amendment, the vice president “has the ability to second to discharge the powers and duties of the President in case of his death, resignation, removal or inability.”¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, Underwood takes substantial political action as vice president. His calculated maneuvers allow him to manipulate President Walker into sanctioning unrestricted boundaries and giving him full access to the executive.

Generally the vice president only has the power that the president grants to him or her. President George W. Bush relied heavily on Vice President Dick Cheney’s advice throughout his first term and treated Cheney with more respect “than anyone else in the inner circle,”¹¹⁵ says Peter Baker of *The New York Times*. Cheney was an active vice president because Bush “empowered”¹¹⁶ him, yet according to General Richard Myers,

¹¹¹ Caro, 24142-32785.

¹¹² Ibid., 24249.

¹¹³ “Article 1, Section 3, Clauses 4 and 5,” The Founders’ Constitution, accessed November 20, 2014, http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/tocs/a1_3_4-5.html.

¹¹⁴ John D. Feerick, “Vice Presidential Vacancy,” in *The Twenty-fifth Amendment: Its Complete History and Applications* (n.p.: Fordham University Press, 1992), 31-32, Google Play.

¹¹⁵ Peter Baker, “The Final Insult in the Bush-Cheney Marriage,” *The New York Times*, October 10, 2013, accessed October 20, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/13/magazine/the-final-insult-in-the-bush-cheney-marriage.html?pagewanted=1&_r=0.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Cheney was not the “alpha male in the White House.”¹¹⁷ Baker wrote, “Cheney was unquestionably the most influential vice president in American history, but that influence was in large part a function of his deference, as much as any overt exertion of power.”¹¹⁸ Vice President Cheney never showed any desire to undermine President Bush’s career or to run for president himself and instead endeavored to enhance the Bush Administration. In exchange for Cheney’s devotion to the administration, Bush granted him “access to every meeting and decision.”¹¹⁹ Although Vice President Underwood and President Walker’s relationship seems to display similarities to the Bush Administration, Underwood constantly undermines Walker’s presidential authority. Underwood intentionally leads President Walker’s administration in a downward spiral because Frank has every intention of becoming the president. Underwood’s inherent desire to rule with limitless boundaries propels his vindictive nature to sabotage Walker’s presidency one calculated move at a time.

Frank Underwood’s significant manipulation and capitalizing on the 25th Amendment enables him to reach the Oval Office. The amendment established a protocol for what should happen if a president dies, is impeached, or resigns from office. The implementation of formal procedure was essential for the sustainability of the executive branch. The amendment ended thirty-seven years of vice presidential vacancies by requiring a directive for filling a vice presidential position.¹²⁰ The amendment provides direct rules for handling the president’s inability to run the country as well. According to members of the 89th Congress, the most “insoluble problem was that of presidential

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Feerick, 31-32.

inability.”¹²¹ Because of the ailments of Presidents Garfield and Wilson, questions remained regarding how a vice president should act when a sitting president can no longer lead. After John F. Kennedy’s assassination, the 89th Congress proposed the ratification of the 25th Amendment.¹²²

Prior to the amendment’s ratification, the rules of succession were “constitutionally vague,” according to Senators Bayh and Celler.¹²³ The Constitution did not specify the vice president’s role if the president died or various circumstances prevented him from fulfilling his presidential duties. Therefore, many presidents and their vice presidents drafted their own agreements for succession.¹²⁴ Between November 1963 and January 1965, the United States had no sitting vice president. The Speaker of the House at the time was John McCormack (D-MA), a man in his early seventies, and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate was 87-year-old Carl Hayden. With the US in the midst of the Cold War, the American people wanted to know that a competent person could take over if something were to happen to the president.¹²⁵ On January 6th, 1965 Senator Birch Bayh (D-IN) and Representative Emanuel Celler (D-NY) set in motion joint resolutions in both houses of Congress that aimed to clarify the rules of presidential succession and inability.¹²⁶ This proposal formed the groundwork for the 25th Amendment, which, according to the Establishment and First Uses of the 25th Amendment, “refined the process of declaring a President incapable of fulfilling the

¹²¹ “Twenty-Fifth Amendment-U.S. Constitution: Presidential Vacancy, Disability, and, Inability.” FindLaw, accessed October 22, 2014, <http://constitution.findlaw.com/amendment25.html>.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ “The Establishment and First Uses of the 25th Amendment,” Gerald R. Ford: Presidential Library & Museum, accessed October 23, 2014, <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/amendment25/25thamendment.html>.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Correspondence with Professor John Pitney.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

duties of office and filling a Vice Presidential vacancy.”¹²⁷ Congress endorsed the amendment in July 1965, it was ratified by the states in 1967, and President Johnson certified the amendment 13 days later.¹²⁸ Although the amendment has been invoked six times since ratification, and for brief periods when presidents have undergone surgery, the most “far-reaching use”¹²⁹ was in 1973.¹³⁰ Following Vice President Spiro Agnew’s forced resignation amid a no-contest plea to bribery charges in 1973, President Richard Nixon nominated Gerald Ford to succeed Agnew. When President Nixon resigned the following summer, Ford became president and nominated Nelson Rockefeller to the vice presidency.¹³¹ This implementation of the 25th Amendment was a crucial moment in American history. Ford’s political ascension from House Minority Leader to president shocked America, as his succession occurred rapidly and without constituency nomination.

House of Cards employs aspects of the Agnew-Nixon-Ford presidency to convey Frank Underwood’s exploitation of the 25th Amendment. Both Underwood and Ford were members of the House of Representatives, Ford as Minority Leader and Underwood as Majority Whip, and ascended to the Oval Office through the process of the 25th Amendment, but the similarities end there. Ford assumed executive responsibility more in “sadness than in triumph,”¹³² claims Raymond Smith, while Underwood ruthlessly jumps at the chance to slyly challenge President Walker’s authority. Under the presidential succession law, Ford and Underwood reached the same position of power

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Andrew Glass, “The 25th Amendment Was Ratified, Feb. 10, 1967,” Politico, February 10, 2012, accessed October 20, 2014, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0212/72700.html>.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Smith.

without voter approval. Underwood manipulates the amendment for his own gain, but Ford used the amendment to appoint his own vice president. Ford harbored no Machiavellian tendencies, while Underwood's vindictiveness consumes him.

As vice presidents, both Ford and Underwood could have declared their presidents unfit to lead according to section 4 of the 25th Amendment with Congressional and cabinet consent. The section grants the vice president the ability to proclaim a president unequipped to fulfill his duties with written consent from both a majority of Congress and the executive cabinet. Immediately following, the President Pro Tempore of the Senate and the Speaker of the House can grant the vice president all powers and responsibilities of the presidency.¹³³ Although Underwood does not employ this ruthless tactic, he does not shy away from arranging his enemies' downfalls, especially that of the man who sits in the Oval Office. Frank finds a way to incapacitate President Walker through the process most debilitating to a politician's career: impeachment.

At the end of the *House of Cards* Season Two finale, the most "ruthlessly ambitious man in Washington stood on the threshold of the Oval Office"¹³⁴ and claims the presidency. Frank Underwood achieves his goal. However, he has murdered two people, had an innocent man sent to prison in fear of his findings, and lost the trust of President Walker, the very man he needed most on his side, all in pursuit for the Oval Office. Underwood's deceptive back channeling, countless lies, and ruthless presidential crippling cause President Garret Walker's inevitable downfall and gains Underwood the

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Jennifer E. Chaney, "House of Cards Season 2 Finale Recap: The Wicked Wing of the West," VULTURE, March 7, 2014, accessed October 22, 2014, <http://www.vulture.com/2014/03/house-of-cards-recap-season-2-finale.html>.

presidency.¹³⁵ Towards the end of Season Two, President Walker realizes that Frank has been undermining his political position from the moment Walker overlooked him for Secretary of State. After months of Underwood's exploits and manipulation, Walker's adversarial presence poses a potential threat to Frank's Machiavellian route to power as Walker says, "from this moment forward, I don't want to hear your voice-see your face-and if I do, I will put you on your goddamn back."¹³⁶ Underwood's devious actions cause him to lose Walker's trust, leaving Underwood in a vulnerable position. Thoroughly aware of this predicament, Underwood accelerates his plan to take the presidency by imposing the first section of the 25th Amendment, removing the president from office by the process of resignation or impeachment.¹³⁷ In order to prove President Walker's knowledge of an illicit Chinese money-laundering scheme financing political campaigns, Underwood persuades Secretary of State Catherine Durant to grant asylum to Xander Feng, the Chinese businessman responsible for stacking Congress in favor of the Democratic Party. This maneuver demonstrates both Durant's loyalty to Frank and his ability to enlist allies in times of distress. Tying up all loose ends, Underwood persuades Raymond Tusk, President Walker's most trusted non-political advisor and Frank's greatest enemy, to implicate Walker rather than himself in the money-laundering scheme. Tusk implicates Walker and removes any suspicion regarding Underwood's involvement

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Jen Chaney, "House of Cards Season 2, Episode 12 Recap: Asylum and Light Treason," VULTURE, March 5, 2014, accessed October 22, 2014, <http://www.vulture.com/2014/03/house-of-cards-recap-season-2-xander-feng-asylum.html>.

¹³⁷ John D. Feerick, "An Analysis of Sections 1,2,3 and 4 of the Amendment," in *The Twenty-fifth Amendment: Its Complete History and Applications* (n.p.: Fordham University Press, 1992), 191, Google Play.

in the scheme. Frank also convinces a reporter from *The Wall Street Telegraph* that he remains loyal to the President, “even while others questioned his ethics.”¹³⁸

Underwood’s relentless push to release the presidential and vice presidential travel logs to Heather Dunbar aids the Republican decision to vote for Walker’s impeachment. Underwood’s intentional leak of President Walker’s marriage counseling visits to Dr. Larkin seals the fate of Walker’s presidency. Underwood’s disclosure of President Walker’s intimate meetings with Dr. Larkin not only discredits Walker’s ability to lead, but also jeopardizes the reputation of the entire administration. The White House is accused of engineering testimonies to conceal the reality of Walker’s struggling marriage and Xanax prescription. With Walker’s secrets exposed, both Republicans and Democrats view Walker as an obstacle for America rather than a solution.¹³⁹

In his final play to remove Walker from office, Underwood gets Congresswoman Jackie Sharp to whip the Democratic votes needed to impeach Walker in exchange for both his and Claire’s support in passing Sharp’s version of the military sexual assault legislation. Frank warns Jackie that “if the Party rescues him [Walker] we will lose fifty seats in the House in the midterms, you will lose your position in the leadership, and it will take us a decade to regain our trust in the electorate.”¹⁴⁰ Together the Underwoods are ruthlessly persuasive, manipulating Jackie to carry out their dirty bidding as they express, “what we offer is progress, with the promise of more to come.”¹⁴¹ Sharp begrudgingly agrees as Underwood reminds her that “just shy of treason, is politics.”¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Jen Chaney, “*House of Cards* Season 2, Episode 12 Recap: Asylum and Light Treason.”

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Season 2, Chapter 25-speech from Underwood to Jackie.

¹⁴¹ Jen Chaney, “*House of Cards* Season 2, Episode 12 Recap: Asylum and Light Treason.”

¹⁴² Ibid.

The Underwoods persuade Jackie to distance herself as well as the rest of the party from a toxic president in order for Frank to reach the presidency.

Jackie Sharp's ability to convince even the incorruptible Donald Blythe to vote in favor of impeachment demonstrates the scope of Underwood's power and influence. Blythe's vote to impeach President Walker supports an administration that will be fully controlled by Underwood, a man Blythe despises more than anyone on Capitol Hill. Frank's network is one of the key factors in his ascension to power. While Blythe is under the impression that Jackie "is not Frank Underwood, and will never become Frank Underwood,"¹⁴³ Frank positions Jackie to accumulate votes and impeach President Walker. Underwood's control and influence remain all encompassing.

Despite the process depicted in *House of Cards*, it is very difficult to remove a president through impeachment in reality. When President Nixon faced impeachment charges, the Republican Party did not generally support him being ousted as president until his tapes confirmed his undeniable involvement in the Watergate cover-up. President Clinton was also generally supported by his party during his impeachment ordeal. Not only did the Democrats not encourage Clinton's impeachment, but they successfully used it as a campaign issue against Republicans in 1998.¹⁴⁴ The use of impeachment in *House of Cards* is dramatized, including Walker's plummet to single-digit approval ratings, which is highly unlikely as the lowest recorded presidential approval rating in history was Harry Truman's 22% approval in February 1952.¹⁴⁵ In

¹⁴³ Season 2, Chapter 26

¹⁴⁴ Correspondence with Professor John Pitney.

¹⁴⁵ "Presidential Approval Ratings--Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends," Gallup, accessed November 16, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116677/presidential-approval-ratings-gallup-historical-statistics-trends.aspx>.

addition, a president with an “abysmal approval rating will harm his party whether they have forced him out or not,”¹⁴⁶ argues Daniel Larison of *The American Conservative*. The consequences of Walker leaving office is far more damaging to the Democratic Party then having him fight the accusations. After Walker’s impeachment Underwood is the “leader of a wrecked party,”¹⁴⁷ claims Larison. The party will be under intense scrutiny, especially now with Underwood as the new Commander in Chief.

Manipulative tactics in order to achieve political influence are used frequently in modern day Washington. According to former Congressman Howard Berman, “the notion of getting something you want by helping another person get something they want-it’s called politics, not always explicit, not always resorted to that often, but it happens.”¹⁴⁸ Underwood exploits his favor bank because he always has someone to conquer. His amorality turns political leveraging from amicable to scandalous. Underwood’s destructive quest for power leaves anyone in his path vulnerable to manipulation and corruption. In reality, the gray area that creates political scandal “exists when you are providing something that is questionable, illegal, in-of- itself,” says Berman.¹⁴⁹ Underwood legally uses the 25th Amendment, but illegally frames Walker. Frank bribes Senator Michael Kern with the position of Secretary of the Treasury in exchange for whipping Democratic votes.

With single-digit approval ratings and a pending impeachment, President Walker has to step down from the presidency. No American president has ever had single-digit

¹⁴⁶ Daniel Larison, “The Increasingly Ridiculous *House of Cards*,” *The American Conservative*, February 17, 2014, accessed November 16, 2014, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/larison/the-increasingly-ridiculous-house-of-cards/>.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Howard Berman, phone conversation with Lindsey Davidson, Los Angeles/Washington D.C., October 20, 2014.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

ratings, even in the midst of political scandals and impeachment proceedings. Nixon's went down to 24% in August 1974 and Clinton's hovered around 37% in June 1993.¹⁵⁰ While the reality of Walker's situation parallels President Nixon's in the wake of the Watergate scandal, it remains highly unlikely that a president's party and country would lose complete faith in him so rapidly. Richard Nixon's involvement in the Watergate cover-up and subsequent impeachment proceedings marked the "first time that the House of Representatives had commenced such a proceeding against a President since Andrew Johnson in 1868,"¹⁵¹ argues Benjamin Koch. The Judiciary Committee recognized that an impeachment required bipartisan support. The shocking events of Watergate were a "slow burn"¹⁵² kind of scandal in which the significance and magnitude gradually manifested. At first, most media outlets ignored the Watergate burglary. Watergate's full scope was not exposed until after Nixon won reelection by a large margin in 1972, when the *Washington Post* reported that operatives working for the Nixon administration were responsible for the break-in at the office of Democratic National Committee Chairman Larry O'Brien. While Nixon had no involvement in the burglary itself, his extensive participation in the cover-up inevitably led to his impeachment. Nixon employed the "powers of his office"¹⁵³ to conceal the identities of chief White House officials and "promised presidential pardons to the burglars and directed that campaign funds be used

¹⁵⁰"Presidential Approval Ratings--Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends," Gallup, accessed November 16, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116677/presidential-approval-ratings-gallup-historical-statistics-trends.aspx>.

¹⁵¹ Benjamin Jonah Koch, "Watchmen in the Night: The House Judiciary Committee's Impeachment Inquiry of Richard Nixon" (diss., Graduate School of the University of Texas at Austin, May 2011), xxi, accessed November 4, 2014, Google Scholar.

¹⁵² Williams, 123.

¹⁵³ Elizabeth Holtzman, "I Voted to Impeach Richard Nixon: Here's What Watergate Means Today," *The Nation*, August 7, 2014, accessed October 25, 2014, <http://www.thenation.com/article/180885/i-voted-impeach-richard-nixon-heres-what-watergate-means-today#>.

to buy their silence,”¹⁵⁴ according to former politician Elizabeth Holtzman. Nixon’s cover-up of the Watergate scandal led to an extensive FBI investigation of the administration, uncovering authorized “illegal wiretappings of four reporters and 13 government officials in a bid to unmask those leaking information to the press.”¹⁵⁵ President Nixon placed himself “above the law,”¹⁵⁶ much like Frank Underwood, in an attempt to rectify political situations. However, unlike Underwood, Nixon did not calculate his every move and recorded all his conversations, inevitably providing evidence to destroy him.

On February 6, 1974, the House of Representatives passed HR803 by a 410-4 majority authorizing the Judiciary Committee to review “impeachment proceedings”¹⁵⁷ against President Nixon.¹⁵⁸ Former presidential counsel John W. Dean III became the key witness in the prosecution’s case, testifying regarding Nixon’s scandalous actions. Dean’s cooperation with Senate investigators and federal prosecutors enabled them to gather concrete evidence of Nixon’s “deep”¹⁵⁹ involvement in the Watergate cover-up. Dean affirmed that President Nixon had “prior knowledge of payments used to buy the silence of the Watergate conspirators and of offers of executive clemency extended in his name.”¹⁶⁰ John Dean’s testimony regarding Nixon’s dishonorable conduct led to the House Judiciary Committee’s decision to proceed with Nixon’s impeachment, eventually

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ William Lee Adams, “Brief History: Wiretapping,” TIME, October 11, 2010, accessed October 24, 2014, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2022653,00.html>.

¹⁵⁶ Holtzman.

¹⁵⁷ “Impeachment,” Watergate.info, accessed October 23, 2014, <http://watergate.info/impeachment>.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, “Dean Alleges Nixon Knew of Cover-Up Plan,” The Washington Post, June 3, 1973, accessed October 22, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/watergate/articles/060373-1.htm>.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

finding him guilty on three different articles.¹⁶¹ All articles of impeachment in the Watergate scandal concluded that the president acted in a manner “contrary to his trust as President and subversive of constitutional government, to the greatest prejudice of the cause of law and justice and to the manifest injury of the people of the United States.”¹⁶² After the passing of the articles in the House Judiciary Committee, and the Supreme Court’s mandate to release the White House wiretappings, President Richard Nixon resigned on August 6, 1974. Nixon’s resignation occurred before the actual House vote on the articles. The turning point in the Nixon case was the release of the “smoking gun tape” which proved that Nixon had obstructed justice. The recording revealed Nixon instructing his staff to have the CIA interrupt the FBI’s investigation of the Watergate burglary.¹⁶³ President Nixon, like President Walker, accepted impeachment as “virtually a foregone conclusion.”¹⁶⁴ They both understood their fate and chose to resign rather than be formally impeached.

The impeachment process is constitutionally “final and unreviewable”¹⁶⁵ and grounds for impeachment are based on majority belief in a president’s guilt in the House of Representatives. Despite the finality of the process, the Constitution provides no definition of “High Crimes and Misdemeanors” besides treason and bribery.¹⁶⁶ When he

¹⁶¹ Bernstein and Woodward.

¹⁶² “Articles of Impeachment,” Watergate.info, accessed October 23, 2014, <http://watergate.info/impeachment/articles-of-impeachment>.

¹⁶³ Jonathan Bernstein, “Nixon's Smoking-Gun Tape and the Presidency,” The Washington Post, June 22, 2012, accessed November 16, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/post/nixons-smoking-gun-tape-and-the-presidency/2012/06/22/gJQA0gTlvV_blog.html.

¹⁶⁴ Koch, 397.

¹⁶⁵ Albert Broderick “The Politics of Impeachment,” *Blais Claremont Library* 60, no. 5 (May 1974): 554-56, accessed October 17, 2014, <http://ry6af4uu9w.scholar.serialssolutions.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/?sid=google&auinit=A&aualast=Broderick&atitle=Politics+of+Impeachment,+The&title=ABA+journal&volume=60&date=1974&spage=554&issn=0002-7596>.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

was House Minority Leader, Gerald Ford explained that “an impeachable offense is whatever a majority of the House of Representative consider it to be at a given moment in history; conviction results from whatever offense or offenses two thirds of the Senate considers to be sufficiently serious to require removal of the accused from office.”¹⁶⁷ According to Albert Broderick’s *Politics of Impeachment*, the impeachment process remains a “political rather than legal process in the American constitutional system, where politics in the true rather than the partisan meaning of the term play an important role in the Congressional decisions.”¹⁶⁸ He argues that citizens’ input is vital to prevent an appointed group of congressmen from determining a politician’s fate. Historically, the impeachment process includes the introduction of the resolution for impeachment in “reference” to the House Judiciary Committee, which decides whether to pass the decision to the entire House of Representatives. If the House passes the impeachment resolution, the Senate schedules an official impeachment hearing. A two-thirds majority vote is then required in the Senate to impeach a president.¹⁶⁹

In *House of Cards*, Frank Underwood takes advantage of ambiguities of the impeachment process by first framing Walker for an offense that he did not commit and then strengthening the impeachment case through Walker’s personal life. In the Season Two finale, President Walker’s impeachable offense was exacerbated by the notion that he was unfit to govern due to his marriage counseling sessions and prescription for muscle relaxers. Underwood’s precise knowledge of the 25th Amendment and the subsequent impeachment process again leaves him one step ahead of his adversaries.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ T.J. Halstead, “CRS Report for Congress: An Overview of the Impeachment Process,” Senate.Gov, April 20, 2005, accessed November 16, 2014, <https://www.senate.gov/reference/resources/pdf/98-806.pdf>.

For creator Beau Willimon, Frank Underwood’s “borderline evil tactics are nothing more than democracy in action.”¹⁷⁰ Willimon says, “When you think about what leaders do—they send people to war, they have blood on their hands, they have to be willing to do the things we ourselves are not willing to do—that is why we entrust them with that power—they need to be willing to put people in their grave.”¹⁷¹ Willimon does not believe that politicians should kill in order to achieve success, but instead means that they serve and represent their country no matter the costs. Voters elect leaders they feel will deliver the most change and in order to achieve power in a competitive workforce, political figures resort to various extremes. President Obama has expressed a desire for Underwood’s ruthless efficiency, and while Obama may not resort to sexual impropriety and a “litany of evils to grease the legislative process,”¹⁷² comments Ira Teinowitz, Congress may be more effective and productive if there were more Frank Underwoods. He devises and diffuses scandals for the purpose of “bettering the country” and it seems as though his Machiavellian ploys produce results.

When faced with the president’s waning trust, Frank Underwood wins Walker’s forgiveness by taking a significant risk. Frank writes a letter to Walker in which Underwood’s cynicism seems to dissipate and he manipulatively constructs a compassionate, heartfelt message. Underwood professes his deep respect for the president and says that he will do anything to protect Walker’s reputation and honor. Frank asserts, “I’ve only written one other letter with these keys, it did not fail me then and I hope it

¹⁷⁰ Dolan, 1.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ira Teinowitz, “President Obama on 'House of Cards': Frank Underwood is 'Getting a Lot of Things Done',” *The Wrap*, December 17, 2013, accessed October 23, 2014, <http://www.thewrap.com/president-obama-house-cards-frank-underwood-getting-lot-things-done/>.

will not fail me now-you said I wanted to diminish you, the truth is I don't."¹⁷³ While he acknowledges that he wants the presidency, his tone is not vindictive, but rather vulnerable. He expresses his yearning for the Oval Office, writing, "what politician hasn't dreamed of what it would be like to take the oath of the highest office in our land."¹⁷⁴ In order to mend his relationship with President Walker and succeed in his plan, Underwood crafts a false confession, taking the blame for the unlawful acts that Walker is indicted for. His last words to the president read, "I said I would take the fall for you and now I give you the means to make that happen. We all must make sacrifices to achieve our dreams but sometimes we must sacrifice ourselves for the greater good."¹⁷⁵ Underwood's compassion and lack of scruples brilliantly turns the tables on Walker. By making himself vulnerable and placing his fate in Walker's hands, Underwood is able to manipulate Walker into forgiveness.

Even in the face of a seemingly crumbling plan, Frank Underwood can employ his Machiavellian tactics in a new way viewers have not seen in order to rectify the situation. His ability to exploit both compassion and fear prove that Frank remains a dangerous opponent and an even stronger ally. Seducing the president is his final attempt at obtaining the presidency, and his maneuver is a success. Walker is receptive to Frank's intentionally powerless disposition which results in Walker stepping down from office.

¹⁷³ Season 2, Chapter 26 (typewriter scene).

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

Chapter 3: Politics of Political Spouses

Although *House of Cards* focuses on Frank Underwood's machinations, the political narrative includes the role of Claire Underwood. Claire's ruthless disposition not only advances her husband's political career, but also projects an image of power. She propels the show's vindictive narrative with a "coldly formidable yet also seemingly earnest exterior," comments Judy Berman of *Flavorwire*.¹⁷⁶ Claire understands that her husband will stop at nothing to gain political power and she aids his Machiavellian endeavors. While Frank masks his cruel intentions behind an "all-American politically correct"¹⁷⁷ façade, the opposite is true for Claire. Instead of hiding behind her "immaculately pressed pantsuits,"¹⁷⁸ she often combats her challengers with a blunt demeanor.

Claire Underwood's motives match her husband's both in power and ambition.¹⁷⁹ The notion that her organization, the Clean Water Initiative, aims to bring clean water to third world countries in Africa masks her vindictive nature. However, while most philanthropists' actions are driven by compassion, Claire's successes are stimulated by a desire to dominate. Her motives are calculated like her husband's. In order to make CWI a more competitive non-profit, Claire fires the majority of her staff without hesitation,

¹⁷⁶ Judy Berman, "House of Cards' Season 2: The Mystery of Claire Underwood," *Flavorwire*, February 21, 2014, accessed November 4, 2014, <http://flavorwire.com/439287/house-of-cards-season-2-the-mystery-of-claire-underwood>.

¹⁷⁷ Lauren Slavin, "Claire Underwood: The Ice Bitch of Netflix's 'House of Cards'," *feminspire*, April 11, 2013, accessed November 4, 2014, <http://feminspire.com/claire-underwood-the-ice-bitch-of-netflixs-house-of-cards/>.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ Leigh Kolb, "The Complex, Unlikable Women of 'house of Cards'," *Bitch Flicks*, February 14, 2013, accessed November 4, 2014, <http://www.bitchflicks.com/2013/02/the-complex-unlikable-women-of-house-of-cards.html#.VF78JEuINZg>.

including her aging office manager.¹⁸⁰ In the pursuit of power, Claire hires a reputable “grassroots organizer”¹⁸¹ named Gillian Cole. Underwood believes Cole’s work at the Clean Water Initiative will attract potential donors for the organization’s revamped image. Claire’s actions distinctly use the Machiavellian motto of the “ends justifies the means.” Claire will take necessary measures to achieve her objectives. In order to acquire a new water-well building project and to see her husband’s political career thrive, she fires eighteen employees. This action gives both her and Frank personal political flexibility.¹⁸² Claire lays off the employees in order to prevent indebting Frank to political favors from notorious lobbying firms. SanCorp, a ruthless interest group, offers to finance Claire’s new project in exchange for Frank’s political support on the Hill. Claire makes a calculated decision to stray from going into business with the firm, which results in restructuring her organization. Claire’s willingness to do whatever it takes to execute her goals classifies her as, “cold, calculating and completely intractable,”¹⁸³ says Amanda Rodriguez in her article “Claire Underwood: Queen Bee in House of Cards.”

The Clean Water Initiative mimics modern-day Washington-based philanthropies. Self-interest and ambition drive a lot of non-profit organizations and they play a large role in the city’s power structure. Ellen Miller, executive director of the Sunlight Foundation, says, “the money that nonprofits receive from their corporate sponsors sticks not only in their bank accounts but in their minds- called deep lobbying-there is an expectation that when push comes to shove, these groups will come out in favor of their

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Amanda Rodriguez “Claire Underwood: The Queen Bee in 'house of Cards',” Bitch Flicks, April 17, 2013, accessed November 4, 2014, <http://www.bitchflicks.com/2013/04/claire-underwood-the-queen-bee-in-house-of-cards.html#.VGRA-UuINZh>.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

benefactors.”¹⁸⁴ Philanthropy can serve as a form of “political influence” claims John J. Pitney. When an organization receives money from a corporate sponsor, it will generally align itself with the benefactor, which can help the benefactor gain good publicity.¹⁸⁵ Corporations and philanthropies enter a mutually beneficial agreement in which it is understood that they have each other’s interests at heart. Philanthropies and non-profits serve as an example of political structures that have the ability to manipulate the political system because they are connected to a wide range of political players. Tom Hamburger and Alexander Beck write in *The Washington Post*, “Wealthy interests outside government are looking for new avenues to reach policymakers on the inside.”¹⁸⁶ Claire’s non-profit organization gives her a leg up as she has something to offer to corporate firms and has access to privileged information on the inner-workings of Washington.

As a political wife, Claire takes on the responsibility of advancing both her and Frank’s personal ambitions. She sees her husband for who he is, “a man willing to commit any crime short of genocide to get what he wants, and should he falter, she will prod him back onto the twisted track to power,”¹⁸⁷ comments Mary McNamara in *The Los Angeles Times*. Although Claire will do anything to protect her husband’s political standing, she will not let Frank take advantage of her. Their relationship exists as a partnership and if they are not working together as a unit then she will handle situations

¹⁸⁴ Eliza Krigman, “AT&T gave cash to merger backers,” Politico, June 10, 2011, accessed November 16, 2014, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0611/56660.html>.

¹⁸⁵ John Pitney, “Buying Brookings?,” *Bessette Pitney Text* (blog), November 4, 2014, accessed November 16, 2014, <http://www.bessettepitney.net/2014/11/buying-brookings.html>.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Mary McNamara, “Cards’ Stacks the Deck with Brutal Resolve; In Season 2, Kevin Spacey and Robin Wright Continue the Climb to Power,” *The Los Angeles Times* (February 14th, 2014): 1, accessed November 5th, 2014, <http://articles.latimes.com/2014/feb/14/entertainment/la-et-st-house-of-cards-review-20140214>.

as she sees fit.¹⁸⁸ Claire's restructuring of the Clean Water Initiative serves Frank's viability. She sacrifices her own career for her husband's ascension to power. But Claire expects her husband's political influence to assist in rebuilding her organization and when she does not receive the assistance she expects, she takes matters into her own hands. Claire's intentional sabotage of Frank's education bill results in her own gains. She garners the necessary influence with the Sudanese government to build her water well in exchange for undermining her husband's legislation.¹⁸⁹ She advises undecided representatives to "vote their conscience,"¹⁹⁰ and not worry about disappointing her husband on his bill, which results in its failure. *House of Cards* provides a fresh outlook on the intricacy of a political relationship in which the spouses are equals.

The Underwoods' marriage remains complicated throughout Seasons One and Two, and their shared "love for power is rivaled only by their affections for one another,"¹⁹¹ comments Jessica Sager of *Your Tango*. While Claire and Frank seem to love each other, their relationship also serves as a marriage of convenience.¹⁹² They both conduct extra-marital affairs, but are seemingly open and honest with each other. Claire and Frank tolerate each other's infidelities and view their marriage as a "non-aggression pact, an alliance in pursuit of power,"¹⁹³ claims Edward Cline of *The New Romanticist*. They both conduct extra-marital relationships for their own personal gain. Claire and

¹⁸⁸ Rodriguez.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Season 1, Chapter 9.

¹⁹¹ Jessica Sager, "House of Cards' Frank and Claire Underwood Are The Perfect Couple," *Your Tango*, accessed November 5, 2014, <http://www.yourtango.com/2014226616/house-cards-frank-claire-underwoods-perfect-love#.VGRDykuINZi>.

¹⁹² Slavin.

¹⁹³ Edward Cline, "House of Cards: No Heroes, Only Various Shade of Villany and Corruption," *The New Romanticist*, March 9, 2014, accessed November 5, 2014, <http://newromanticist.com/2014/house-of-cards-no-heroes-only-various-shades-of-villany-and-corruption/>.

Frank are “morally bereft as they maneuver their way around the politics and power games of Washington,”¹⁹⁴ writes Sager, and they are each other’s primary supporters. Their marriage may not be traditional, but it is built on mutual interest.¹⁹⁵ Frank and Claire support and aid in one another’s agendas in obtaining power and influence. Claire even represses the desire to have children to accommodate both Frank’s desires and her own political ambitions.¹⁹⁶

While Claire remains the more conflicted of the two, it is Claire that pushes Frank to “keep going at his most embattled moments,”¹⁹⁷ says Judy Berman of *Flavorwire*. The consequences of Claire’s actions catch up with her towards the end of Season Two. Although she remains merciless and conniving, her conscience seeps through when she realizes she has destroyed an innocent man for power. Nevertheless, Claire’s ruthless disposition sets her apart from traditional political spouses. She is not a “happy housewife heroine... who wears a pillbox hat and redecorates her home,”¹⁹⁸ claims Gil Troy. Claire Underwood exploits weaknesses for personal profit. In an attempt to manipulate Gillian Cole, who sues Claire for wrongful termination due to pregnancy discrimination, Claire seeks medical treatment from a fertility specialist.¹⁹⁹ Deceiving both the audience and the doctor, Claire’s true motives involve learning about a drug prescribed to Gillian so she can threaten to withhold Gillian’s insurance, therefore forcing Gillian to comply with Claire’s terms. She furthers her point by swearing to Gillian, “I’m willing to let your

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Conor Friedersdorf, “Feminism, Depravity, and Power in *House of Cards*,” *The Atlantic*, February 20, 2014, accessed November 5, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/02/feminism-depravity-and-power-in-em-house-of-cards-em/283960/>.

¹⁹⁷ Judy Berman, “House of Cards’ Season 2: The Mystery of Claire Underwood.”

¹⁹⁸ Gil Troy, “The Kennedys,” in *Mr. and Mrs. President: from the Trumans to the Clintons*, 2nd ed. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 110.

¹⁹⁹ Rodriguez.

child wither and die inside you...am I really the sort of enemy you want to make?"²⁰⁰

Claire's confidence stems from her capability to control situations and the influence she exercises over others. Claire's ambition pushes Frank to regain President Walker's trust, inevitably obtaining the presidency. The Lady Macbeth to Underwood's Macbeth,²⁰¹ Claire firmly declares to Frank that she has taken care of her end of the partnership after befriendng the First Lady and suggesting that she and President Walker seek marriage counseling. She says, "I've done what I had to do. Now you do what you have to do. Seduce him. Give him your heart. Cut it out and put it in his fucking hands."²⁰² Claire embodies a tenacious political spouse that will stop at nothing to achieve power.

Season One introduces Claire as Frank Underwood's "ambitious and unforgiving partner-in crime,"²⁰³ comments Liana Bishop of *At Daily*. Claire demonstrates a transparent desire to establish dominance through her ruthless actions throughout the season. With Frank in the vice president's seat, Season Two provides Claire with the ability to step out from the shadows of her husband and "drive the plot forward herself,"²⁰⁴ claims Bishop. With Frank in the executive branch, Claire has more flexibility as a political spouse. Claire admits in an exclusive interview with CNN that she had an abortion after being raped in college. Leaving herself vulnerable to the media gains Claire the respect of many political figures and victims of sexual assault and the intentional reveal of her rapist's identity allows for the construction of a sexual assault

²⁰⁰ Season 2 Chapter 15.

²⁰¹ Cline.

²⁰² Season 2 Chapter 12.

²⁰³ Liana Bishop, "Claire Underwoods Controversial Role in House of Cards," AT DAILY, March 3, 2014, accessed November 5, 2014, <http://www.atdaily.com/claire-underwood-controversial/>.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

bill.²⁰⁵ Judy Berman of *Flavorwire* argues, “[Claire] massaged the story of her own rape and abortions to expose a predator.”²⁰⁶ In the interview, Claire names her rapist as General Dalton McGuinness, a decorated military officer. Claire’s accusation against a respected figure exemplifies the ends justifying the means for the Underwoods.²⁰⁷ Claire’s behavior is motivated by power. While many viewers argue that Claire Underwood is “feminist warrior,”²⁰⁸ *Jezebel’s* Tracie Morrissey argues that Claire is a “feminist warrior antihero.”²⁰⁹ Her behavior suggests that power motivates her actions. She capitalizes on Frank’s advancement into powerful political roles because she “empowers herself by extension of his position,”²¹⁰ argues Conor Friedersdorf in *The Atlantic*. Claire will do anything to achieve what she wants, including exploiting timid women to profit off their weaknesses. Claire pressures another one of General McGuinness’s victims to testify to rape in order to help pass her anti-sexual assault legislation. After insisting the “political payoff would be worth the personal sacrifice,”²¹¹ notes Friedersdorf, Claire drops her support of the legislation over concerns of negative political effects. Claire neglects to acknowledge the consequences of her actions, as her main focus remains to advance the Underwood name.

²⁰⁵ Judy Berman, “House of Cards’ Season 2: The Mystery of Claire Underwood.”

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Friedersdorf.

²⁰⁸ Berman.

²⁰⁹ Tracie Morrissey “House of Cards’ Claire Underwood Is a Feminist Warrior Antihero,” *Jezebel*, February 17, 2014, accessed November 5, 2014, <http://jezebel.com/house-of-cards-claire-underwood-is-a-feminist-warrior-1524425272>.

²¹⁰ Friedersdorf.

²¹¹ Ibid.

Claire and Frank Underwood operate as a “single lethal unit”²¹² according to Hanna Rosin of *Slate*, yet their individual pursuits make them an unbreakable team. Both Claire and Frank have mastered the art of exploiting flaws for personal gain, yet Claire seemingly dominates political wives in a sense of having both political and personal power. Her duty as a political spouse is distinctly different from those responsibilities held by Jackie Kennedy and Lady Bird Johnson. While all three women’s personalities “defy easy categorization,”²¹³ comments MaryAnne Borrelli, neither Kennedy nor Johnson made assertive political strides like Claire does. Jackie Kennedy and Lady Bird Johnson were not political spouses defined by their “descriptive representation,”²¹⁴ claims Borrelli. They both were willing to “pay the cost of controversy”²¹⁵ in effectively controlling the media’s representation of their gender, comments Borrelli. Jackie Kennedy’s “symbolic representation”²¹⁶ was illustrated as powerful and political. She garnered attention and refocused it on her husband. Jackie monitored all media relations in the public sphere and kept her family life private. Publicly, Jackie supported her husband, but privately she was unable to “tame her playboy,”²¹⁷ claims Gil Troy. Jackie’s presence as the First Lady “boosted and undermined the President’s quest for respectability,”²¹⁸ asserts Troy. She effectively communicated and connected with the

²¹² Hanna Rosin, “More Than Sharks Love Blood’: Do Frank and Claire Underwood have the ideal marriage?,” *Slate*, March 18, 2013, accessed November 5, 2014, http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2013/03/house_of_cards_do_frank_and_claire_underwood_have_an_ideal_marriage.single.html.

²¹³ MaryAnne Borrelli, *The Politics of the President's Wife* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2011), 1, accessed November 5, 2014, <http://site.ebrary.com/ccl.idm.oclc.org/lib/claremont/detail.action?docID=10492844>.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

²¹⁷ Troy, 97.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

public and her civil diplomacy made her an asset to her husband's administration. She drew from her own intellect to strengthen the administration's relationships with its constituents.²¹⁹ MaryAnn Borrelli and Gil Troy argue that Jackie Kennedy "moved, rejected, and redrew long-established gender boundaries"²²⁰ where she refused to be confined to the "straightjacket imposed on her predecessors."²²¹ While Jackie supported her husband's political ambitions, she refused to allow his career to define her. She did not accept the idea of gender hierarchies and expressed her own opinions within confined limitations.

Both Jackie Kennedy and Lady Bird Johnson were influential political spouses, yet Johnson, unlike Kennedy, linked her political desires to the needs of her husband. The first political spouse with her own press secretary and staff, Lady Bird revolutionized the "the representation of the First Lady,"²²² asserts Borrelli. While she advocated gender equity, fostering her husband's presidential career took precedence. She portrayed herself as a loyal wife, "downplaying her politics,"²²³ states Borrelli. Although Bird had her own personal aims and policy goals, she devoted her life to supporting her husband's career. Lady Bird once said, "The aspect of the role one doesn't forget is that it all hinges upon the man you've married, my needs are groomed into helping him."²²⁴ Lady Bird Johnson developed an aggressive media strategy designed to garner support for the administration's policies. She worked tirelessly in the public realm to promote the

²¹⁹ Ibid., 109.

²²⁰ Ibid., 108.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid., 111.

administration's agenda.²²⁵ Lady Bird's ambition stemmed from her desire to advance her husband's career; she was an "implementer and translator of her husband and his purpose, she was first and foremost, a wife,"²²⁶ argues Borrelli. Johnson masked her power as a political spouse by working against the marginalized stereotyping of women as homemakers. Maryanne Borelli argues that Lady Bird's choice to focus her attention on her husband's career instead of pursuing her own political agenda left her "lacking credibility and associated with ethical ambiguities of political compromise."²²⁷ While both Lady Bird Johnson and Jackie Kennedy remain prominent historical political spouses, their political agendas cannot hold a candle to Claire Underwood's. Her ruthlessness enables her to simultaneously propel her own political agenda and advance her husband's ascension to power. Claire represents a new breed of political spouses. She is a departure from tradition, no longer putting her political agenda aside for her husband's career. Claire's ability to advance both her own politics and aid in Frank's Machiavellian route to power proves that women can defy the marginalized stereotype they are confined to. Although Claire is ruthless in her endeavors, she serves as a reminder that political spouses can be ambitious in addition to promoting their partners politics.

Hillary Clinton redefined the role of the modern political spouse and soon became one of the most influential women in America. An Ivy League educated lawyer, Hillary Clinton "built a thriving career in the public and private sector, which she balanced with

²²⁵ Ibid., 111-112.

²²⁶ Ibid., 112.

²²⁷ Ibid., 116.

family life,”²²⁸ argues History Channel Online Staff.²²⁹ Like Claire, Clinton pursued her own political agenda while supporting her husband’s administration. When the Clintons faced marital issues in the public sphere, Hillary tolerated her husband’s infidelity and continued to play an active role in his political career.²³⁰ Hillary led task forces that initiated legislation pertaining to healthcare and the protection of children. Once the Clintons left the White House, she led an extensive and influential career as a politician. Hillary won a Senate seat in 2000, ran against Barack Obama for the Democratic nomination in 2008, and served as Secretary of State from 2009 until 2013. While she has not announced her intention to run, many believe that Clinton is the frontrunner for the Democratic nomination in 2016. Hillary Clinton has set an example for modern political spouses. Like Claire, she is an aggressive, passionate, and ambitious woman who pursued her own political goals while also supporting her husband’s career.

As a duo, Claire and Frank prey on the weak to ascend the power ladder. Erin Whitney of the *Huffington Post* comments that their marriage serves as a “bond of power, held together by an insatiable passion for ultimate domination.”²³¹ Claire supports her husband both personally and professionally. Her ruthless scheme to destroy President Walker’s marriage aids Frank in claiming the presidency. Claire’s role as a political spouse goes far beyond advocating her husband’s political policy, as she serves as the backbone to Frank’s vindictive ploys. With a shared hunger for power, Claire makes certain that she and Frank land in the Oval Office.

²²⁸ “Hillary Rodham Clinton,” History.com, accessed November 16, 2014, <http://www.history.com/topics/first-ladies/hillary-rodham-clinton>.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Correspondence with Professor Pitney.

²³¹ Erin Whitney, “How Claire Underwood and 'House of Cards' Changed the TV Antihero Forever,” *Huffington Post*, March 5, 2014, accessed November 6, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/05/house-of-cards-tv-antihero-archetype_n_4899440.html.

Conclusion

Beau Willimon's *House of Cards* portrays a dramatized version of the American legislative process emphasizing ruthless ambition. Although critics say that the narrative exaggerates politicians' behavior, political scientist Wendy Schiller argues that the show is a "sophisticated look at the way ambitious politicians think ahead- they don't just think about what their actions will do for them now,"²³² but rather for the future. Motivated politicians calculate decisions based on potential for career advancement. Every television show contains unrealistic aspects, but generally *House of Cards* accurately depicts the overall picture that self-interest drives politics and that moral compromise is prevalent among politicians, interest groups, reporters, and nearly everyone else in Washington. While Frank Underwood remains more vindictive than many modern day politicians, his Machiavellian pursuits imitate the actions of actual politicians. Lyndon B. Johnson used manipulation and pressure to force productivity. Both Underwood's and Johnson's techniques allow them ruthless efficiency in their objectives. *House of Cards* authentically portrays a realm in which "money and partisanship matter less in politics, than the thirst for power,"²³³ argues Ari Melber of *The Atlantic*. The show portrays Washington as a place where powerful people congregate in an attempt to control one another.²³⁴

²³² Thomas Navia, "House of Cards with Wendy Schiller," BlogDailyHerald, April 23, 2014, accessed November 12, 2014, <http://blogdailyherald.com/2014/04/23/sat-american-politics-professor-wendy-schiller-discuss-house-cards/>.

²³³ Ari Melber, "The Terrible, True Insight of 'House of Cards': Bad People Run D.c.," The Atlantic, February 12, 2013, accessed November 12, 2014, http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/02/the-terrible-true-insight-of-house-of-cards-bad-people-run-dc/273063/?single_page=true.

²³⁴ Ibid.

Underwood drives the narrative in a ruthless direction, manipulating politicians on both sides of the aisle. In his rise from House Majority Whip, Frank's "hidden hand in the media and close relationship with the President"²³⁵ enable him to pursue his vindictive ploys, comments Melber. Although neither majority whips nor vice presidents typically propel politics, Underwood defies political norms. He plays a major role in drafting President Walker's education bill and spearheads Peter Russo's gubernatorial campaign. Actual House Whip Steny Hoyer only ventured to the White House five times during Barack Obama's first term, but "*House of Cards* is aiming for truth, not accuracy,"²³⁶ argues Melber.²³⁷ Underwood may represent a dramatization of Washington, but his desires and ambition resemble political reality. The show effectively illustrates Underwood's mastery of political games and conveys the image of "ephemeral self-interested"²³⁸ politicians, claims Melber. Frank Underwood is not Washington's hero, but he establishes change.

Underwood out-maneuvers his colleagues with his Machiavellian tactics and ruthless pursuit of power, but he could not accomplish his goals without the support of his equally ruthless wife. The bond between Frank and Claire strengthens their marriage and their endeavors are a team effort in that if one fails, they both fail. Frank enthusiastically asserts, "I love that woman. I love her more than sharks love blood."²³⁹ Although both Claire and Frank pursue extramarital affairs, they strive to advance each

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ "House of Cards Quotes (2013)," IMBD, accessed November 18, 2014, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1856010/quotes>.

other's careers.²⁴⁰ The political marriage between the Underwoods may seem to be one of convenience, but they protect each other. John Mankiewicz, co-executive producer for *House of Cards*, argues that while the “inside baseball of how Washington works and doesn't work, is crucial to the believability of the episodes, the marriage of Frank and Claire serves as the heart of the show.”²⁴¹

The Underwoods' political success resembles that of real life power couple Bill and Hillary Clinton. Bill and Hillary independently seek political positions and agendas, but they manage to promote each other's careers at the same time. While Claire and Frank's ruthless climb to the Oval Office may not resemble the Clintons' behavior, both the Underwoods and Clintons prove that a strong marriage between two powerful individuals can go a long way in politics. Frank's ascension to power would not be possible without Claire's assistance. Just like her husband, she operates on a Machiavellian level propelling both her and Frank's political agendas. The Underwoods' motto of “the ends justifying the means”²⁴² is a realistic quality that attracts viewers, argues creator Beau Willimon. Frank's agenda, whether personal or political, results in progress. While his Machiavellian nature may be exaggerated and cynical, his quest for power is a true representation of motivated politicians.

Although Frank Underwood remains seemingly unscathed after his various crimes, the broader question is whether a man of his stature could really get away with so

²⁴⁰ Benjamin Solomon “Why I want a 'House of Cards' Marriage,” *Swimmingly*, March 24, 2014, accessed November 12, 2014, <http://www.swimmingly.com/relationships/marriage/why-i-want-a-house-of-cards-marriage/>.

²⁴¹ Melissa James Gibson and John Mankiewicz, emailed to Lindsey Davidson, Los Angeles/New York, October 20, 2014.

²⁴² Kimp, “House of Cards' Stars Talk Clinton, Political Marriages, and Rowing Machines,” *YAHOO! TV*, August 29, 2013, accessed November 12, 2014, <https://tv.yahoo.com/blogs/emmys/-house-of-cards--stars-talk-clintons--political-marriages--and-rowing-machines-233104139.html>.

many improprieties. Although this thesis depicts *House of Cards* as a Machiavellian political opera, the show leaves room for viewers to question the legitimacy of Frank's actions. With around-the-clock media surveillance and social media, it would be difficult for a politician to get away with the crimes Frank commits. Opposition researchers would dig up everything they could find on Frank in order to discredit his political standing. Although there is not much of this shown throughout the seasons, the aim of *House of Cards* is not to illustrate the details that transpire in politician's offices, but rather the overarching theme of ambition and dominance. While Underwood's quest for power represents a realistic component of Washington, Frank could not get away with all of his vindictive pursuits on the real Capitol Hill. Many politicians have a reputation of self-interest and power hunger, but "they place a high value on living up to commitment and being straight shooters in their dealings with one another,"²⁴³ claims Professor John Pitney of Claremont McKenna College. Mike Mansfield, former Democratic Senator of Montana, served in both the House of Representatives and the Senate for a combined 34 years, 16 of them as Senate Majority Leader.²⁴⁴ David Rosenbaum of *The New York Times* comments, "In Congress, where bombast and pomposity are common, Mr. Mansfield was unusually modest and self-effacing."²⁴⁵ Former Republican Senator Hugh D. Scott Jr. asserts, "He's the most decent man I've ever met in public life."²⁴⁶ While many politicians resemble Frank Underwood, there are a select few who stray from the pack. Frank Underwood's story forces the question of whether treachery triumphs over

²⁴³ Email correspondence with Professor Pitney

²⁴⁴ David E. Rosenbaum, "Mike Mansfield, Longtime Leader of Senate Democrats, Dies at 98," *The New York Times*, October 6, 2001, accessed November 19, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/06/us/mike-mansfield-longtime-leader-of-senate-democrats-dies-at-98.html>.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

all. While there are aspects of the narrative that remain embellished, *House of Cards* does accurately depict facets of the American governmental system, particularly the ambitious desire for power in Washington.

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