

“Eighteen Million Cracks in the Flat Screen?:
An Analysis of *Commander in Chief* and *Political Animals*”

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Abstract

Popular television has been widely identified as having the potential to diminish cultural barriers that exist for women in presidential politics. The White House project's endorsement of the television dramas *Commander in Chief* and *Political Animals* necessitates a critique of these texts, and provides an opportunity to examine the impact of gender on presidential politics. A close analysis of both texts, using the concept of the double bind as a frame work, illustrates masculinism's continued place at the center of presidentiality, and exposes the limits to these texts emancipatory potential.

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Introduction

The 2008 election cycle was a momentous one in terms of race and gender in presidential politics. In her concession speech for the Democratic primary, Hilary Clinton said that “from now on, [...] it will be unremarkable to think that a woman can be the president of the United States.”¹ She pointed to the “eighteen million cracks” in the glass ceiling, but also to the long history of struggle for equality in American democracy, and argued that electing a female president was an important step in fulfilling America’s democratic ideals. Many have suggested that Hilary Clinton and Sarah Palin’s presence in the 2008 election signaled a sea change in regard to the public’s views on gender and the presidency.² Others have argued that the media coverage of both women illustrated that gender bias in presidential politics remains alive and well.³

The 2008 election cycle was also historic in terms of its intersection with popular culture.⁴ Karl Rove, on the night of President Obama’s 2008 election, articulated a widespread notion that television representations have the power to prepare American voters to accept forms

¹ Hillary Clinton, “Text of Hillary Clinton’s Concession Speech,” *The Guardian* June 7, 2013, accessed online July 10, 2013, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/jun/07/hillaryclinton.uselections20081>> All further references to Clinton’s remarks are garnered from this speech.

² Liette Gidlow, “Introduction” in *Obama, Clinton, Palin: Making History in Election 2008*, ed. Liette Gidlow (Chicago: University of Illinois Press 2012) 1; Castañeda Rossmann, “Tears, Unity, Moose Burgers, and Fashion: A Tale of Two Candidates,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 54.3 (2010): 239-64.

³ Janis Edwards, “Reading Hillary and Sarah: Contradictions of Feminism and Representation in 2008 Campaign Political Cartoons,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 54.3 (2010): 313-29; Joseph Uscinski and Lilly Goren, “What’s in a Name? Coverage of Senator Hillary Clinton during the 2008 Democratic Primary,” *Political Research Quarterly* 64.4 (2011): 884-96; Philo Wasburn and Mara Wasburn, “Media Coverage of Women in Politics: The Curious Case of Sarah Palin,” *Media, Culture & Society* 33.7 (2011): 1027-41; Diana B. Carlin, and Kelly L. Winfrey, “Have You Come a Long Way, Baby? Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, and Sexism in 2008 Campaign,” *Communication Studies* 60.4 (2009): 326.

⁴ Justin S Vaughn and Lilly J. Goren, “Introduction,” *Women and the White House: Gender, Popular Culture, and Presidential Politics*, ed. Justin S Vaughn and Lilly J. Goren (University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 3; Douglas Kellner, “Barack Obama and Celebrity Spectacle,” *International Journal of Communication* 3 (2009): 715-741; Nichola D. Gutgold, *Almost Madam President: Why Hillary Clinton "Won" in 2008*. (Lexington Books, 2009), xxi.

of difference (different kinds of people) in the White House. Rove pointed to the power of fictional television representations (particularly *The Cosby Show*) in “preparing” the American public for the possibility of not only an African-American president, but an African-American first family in the White House.⁵ During his comment Rove made what could be called a Freudian slip. Obviously misspeaking he said “we all work with people that forty years *from now* would have been unusual, in some parts of the country, to find yourself on the other side of the table from” [my emphasis]. Rove’s comments, intentional or not, in conjunction with Clinton’s remarks suggest that, while undoubtedly the landscape of presidential politics has changed, narratives of inevitability remain dangerous. The comments of these two political figures raise questions as to what role popular television plays in upholding or breaking down those cultural barriers and biases that persist for women in presidential politics.

Television texts act to reflect and affect the American nation as a whole and citizens individually. As Mimi White establishes, television has the capacity to reiterate the assumptions of dominant ideology *while* putting them on display, providing a means to examine, dissect, and intervene in the process of its creation.⁶ By engaging in a close analysis of the entirety of the television series *Commander in Chief* (2005) and *Political Animals* (2012) I hope to ‘mine’ television media for a greater understanding of the intersections between cultural notions of gender and the presidency, as well as how these programs are implicated in perpetuating potentially both positive and damaging messages about women in political office.

Many scholars and pundits specifically suggest that fictional television representations of

⁵ Karl Rove, “*Fox News*,” Nov. 3rd 2008, video clip accessed Jul. 10 2013, YouTube, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GViRp6PXz2g>>.

⁶ Mimi White, “Ideological Analysis and Television,” in *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Robert Clyde Allen (The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 121-144.

women in national leadership have operated to move America closer to a goal of a female president by eroding cultural barriers that exist for female candidates.⁷ In addition, both *Commander in Chief* and *Political Animals* have been publicly endorsed and promoted by The White House Project. The White House Project, originated in 1998 as an initiative of The Ms. Foundation, is the largest (relatively) bipartisan organization dedicated to the advancement of women in leadership positions in American politics, and the only one with a specific goal of electing a female president.⁸ Its mandate; “to change the political climate so that qualified women from all walks of life could launch successful campaigns for the US presidency and other key positions.”⁹

Although it has been argued that popular television plays a key role in paving the way for potential female candidates, it is important to remember that these texts insert themselves into what amounts to a long conversation about the role of women in American democracy that has remained neither static nor set on a steady incline toward gender equality.¹⁰ The office of the presidency has been identified as symbolically important to the women’s movement for 130 years.¹¹ Over time significant progress has been made in the way candidates are represented in

⁷ A few examples. Eleanor Clift and Tom Brazaitis, *Madam President: Shattering the Last Glass Ceiling*, (New York: Scribner, 2000), 275; Nichola D. Gutgold, *Almost Madam President: Why Hillary Clinton "Won" in 2008*; Erika Falk and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, “Changing the Climate of Expectations,” in *Anticipating Madam President*, eds. Robert P. Watson and Ann Gordon (Boulder, Colo.: Lynn Rienner, 2003); Cathryn Bailey, “When Girls Just Wanna Have Fun: Third-wave Cultural Engagement as Political Activism.” in *Feminist Politics: Identity, Difference, and Agency*, ed. Deborah Orr (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 81-98.

⁸ I say relatively because other PAC’s and women’s organizations that exist on the national level are overwhelmingly partisan, either explicitly supporting one party or supporting candidates based on their position on abortion, (either way). These include EMILY’S list, WISH, SBA and NOW. The White House Project has endorsed and supported more (D) candidates, but more women run as (D). Melissa Haussman “Can Women Enter the ‘Big Tents’?,” in *Anticipating Madam President*, eds. Robert P. Watson and Ann Gordon (Boulder, Colo.: Lynn Rienner, 2003), 75.

⁹ As quoted in Falk and Jamieson, “Changing the Climate of Expectations,” 43.

¹⁰ Falk, “Unnatural, Incapable, and Unviable.”

¹¹ This is considering Victoria Woodhull’s 1872 run for the office as a starting point. Susan B. Anthony was arrested for attempting to vote in the same Presidential election.

the media.¹² In recent decades, women have been nominated for vice president, been seen as viable presidential candidates, and even major party front runners. However, despite the seeming growth in public acceptance of the idea of a female president, including the increasing availability of images of women running for office, barriers for female candidates remain relatively fixed.¹³

Commander in Chief and *Political Animals* have been heralded as representing positive, and much needed, images women in presidential politics. Nevertheless, they portray what amount to negative or limiting stereotypes about women and fail to successfully challenge the understanding of the presidency as a masculinist institution. This illustrates the limits to these texts' emancipatory potential, but also suggests the limits that have been presented, and perhaps accepted, in American democracy. While the White House Project's endorsement of *Commander in Chief* and *Political Animals* plays a significant role in my reading of these two texts, it is also vital to note the particular relationship that television has had with the office of the presidency itself as this exposes the important role television plays in presidential politics and suggests the usefulness of these kinds of texts to scholars attempting to examine the place of cultural expectations of gender in presidential politics.

Television, The Presidency, and Gender

The medium of television plays a significant role in both presidential campaigning and governing.¹⁴ The intimacy and visuality of the television medium has had an impact on the

¹² It is rarely publicly argued that women are wholly inappropriate and unqualified because of their sex, as was the pervasive pattern for over 100 years. Erika Falk, "Unnatural, Incapable, and Unviable," in *Women for President: Media Bias in Eight Campaigns*, (University of Illinois Press, 2008) 31-52.

¹³ Falk, "Unnatural, Incapable, and Unviable," 31-52.

¹⁴ For excellent discussions of this see, Stephen J. Farnsworth and S. Robert Lichter, *The Mediated Presidency: Television News and Presidential Governance* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); William C. Spragens, *The Presidency and the Mass Media in the Age of Television* (Washington, D.C: University Press of America, 1978).

influence of gender on the office itself. Television is the principal medium through which the American public encounters the image of the President, and the same is true of the first family whose images have become increasingly prevalent since the 1950s.¹⁵ Television has contributed to a much more visible presidency and an increase in candidate centered campaigns, both of which have perpetuated and heightened the masculinization of the office.¹⁶

The interpersonal ‘dramas’ of politics have become increasingly popular on commercial television over the last ten years. Jennifer R. Mercieca argues that since the Constitutional Convention, political fiction has consistently served an important role in providing new ways of imagining the character of both citizens and government in the United States.¹⁷ Jeff Smith makes a similar argument regarding fiction about the presidency specifically.¹⁸ Entertainment television programming centered on the political system can be informative for both scholars and viewers, particularly concerning issues such as race and gender in American politics which are seldom discussed in the mainstream press.¹⁹ Political scientists and political communications scholars have studied the content of fictional television about politics to gain an understanding of the real

¹⁵ The presidency is further gendered by the cultural importance and popular representations of the first family. Washington’s family portrait could be found in homes, needlework, and lithographs in varying renditions designed to emphasize Washington as father of the country. The Cold War heightened this dynamic when the need to assert the superiority of the American nuclear family as the basic social unit asserted the politics of family on the world stage. Kennedy’s election marked an increasing cultural prevalence of the first family which coincided with the growing use of television in American homes. Melissa Michaux, “The First Family: Transforming an American Ideal,” in *Women and the White House: Gender, Popular Culture, and Presidential Politics*, eds. Justin S. Vaughn and Lilly J. Goren (University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 249-269; Jones, *Entertaining Politics*, 63

¹⁶ Jones, *Entertaining Politics*, 87; Georgia Duerst-Lahti, “Masculinity on the Campaign Trail,” in *Rethinking Madam President: Are We Ready for a Woman in the White House*, ed. Lori Cox Han and Caroline Heldman (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2007), 87-112.

¹⁷ Jennifer R. Mercieca, *Founding Fictions* (University Alabama Press, 2010), 6.

¹⁸ Jeff Smith, *Presidents We Imagine: Two Centuries of White House Fictions on the Page, on the Stage, Onscreen, and Online* (United States: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 3.

¹⁹ Donnalyn Pompper, “The West Wing: White House Narratives That Journalism Cannot Tell,” in *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*, eds. Peter C. Rollins, and John E. O’Connor (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 17-32

political environment, often including the impact of gender ideology on the character of American democracy.²⁰

Theoretical Approach

Popular television can be seen as performing John Fiske's "bardic function" for American culture, "clawing back" what may appear on the periphery into the realm of socio-centrality, particularly in national discourses such as the presidency.²¹ These programs help to draw female politicians into a discourse about presidential politics. Many of the arguments made by the White House Project and others for the potential benefits of these texts take this idea as their premise. However, once television has drawn these figures into a position of socio-centrality, into discourses about the presidency, they present complex messages about their place there, and often simplify significant aspects of the subject while emphasizing others.²²

In *Media Matters: Race and Gender in the U.S. Politics* Fiske argues that different figures performing the same social identity is part of the way in which "the internal politics of entertainment can flow into the external politics of voting."²³ Female politicians form a particular social identity, determined by cultural understandings of both gender and politics.

Representations of women *as* political representatives become instrumental in the formation of 'female politician' as a recognizable identity, and in defining the meanings with which that

²⁰ For some excellent examples of this see Caroline Heldman "Cultural Barriers to a Female President in the United States"; Michele Adams, "Is Family a Moral Capital Resource for Female Politicians? the Case of ABC's *Commander in Chief*." *Media, Culture & Society* 33.2 (2011): 223-41; Deborah Eicher-Catt and Jane Sutton. "A Communicology of the Oval Office as Figural Rhetoric: Women, the Presidency, and a Politics of the Body," in *Communicology: The New Science of Embodied Discourse*, eds. Isaac E. Catt and Deborah Eicher-Catt, (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010) 183-223; Patricia F. Phalen, Jennie Kim and Julia Osellame. "Imagined Presidencies: The Representation of Political Power in Television Fiction." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 45.3 (2012): 532-50; Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn J. Parry-Giles, *The Prime-time Presidency: The West Wing and U.S. Nationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), particularly the chapter "Gendered Nationalism".

²¹ John Fiske, *Television Culture* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 65.

²² John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 65.

²³ John Fiske, *Media Matters: Race and Gender in US Politics* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1996), 11.

identity is imbued.²⁴ My analysis here considers Fiske's arguments, primarily in relation to *Commander in Chief* and *Political Animals* portrayal of their female protagonists. This analysis also takes as its assumption Mimi White's assertion, noted earlier, that television works to reify dominant, or hegemonic, ideology, but also provides a space for its interrogation.²⁵ This paper considered these concepts in relation to prevailing notions about both gender and the presidency.

In the realm of American electoral politics the distinction between sex (biological) and gender (cultural) is seldom made.²⁶ Gender is a complex and hotly-debated concept. However, for the purposes of this analysis, gender will be defined as involving processes and discourses that work to socially construct the identities of 'men' and 'women,' and as being comprised "of boundaries, rules (prescriptions, proscriptions, built in penalties and rewards) barriers and channeled intersections."²⁷ "Gender in political communication is, in part, a matter of where the politics are occurring and the gender rules of that social-cultural milieu."²⁸ My interest here is not in pursuing the questions of gender in any great detail, but rather in the circulation of

²⁴ Karen Celis, "Gendering Representation" in *Politics, Gender, and Concepts: Theory and Methodology*, eds. Gary Goertzend and Amy Mazur (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 83-103.

²⁵ Hegemony and ideology are debated concepts with multiple definitions. This paper considers these concepts in relation to notions of gender and the presidency, and understands "[h]egemony [as] describ[ing] the general predominance of particular class, political and ideological interests within a given society. Although society is composed of varied and conflicting class interests, the ruling class exercises hegemony insofar as its interests are recognized and accepted as the prevailing ones. Social and cultural conflict is expressed as a struggle for hegemony, a struggle over which ideas are recognized as the prevailing, commonsense view for the majority of social participants. Hegemony appears to be spontaneous, even natural, but it is a historical result of the prestige enjoyed by the ruling class by virtue of their position and function in the world of production." White, *Ideological Analysis*, 125.

²⁶ Janette Kenner Muir and Anita Taylor, "Navigating Gender Complexities: Hillary and Bill Clinton as a Political Team" in *Gender and Political Communication in America: Rhetoric, Representation, and Display*, ed. Janis L Edwards (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2009), 4. Georgia Duerst-Lahti, " 'Seeing What Has Always Been': Opening Study of the Presidency," *Political Science and Politics* 41.4 (2008): 733-7.

²⁷ Muir and Taylor, "Navigating Gender Complexities," 4.

²⁸ Muir and Taylor, "Navigating Gender Complexities," 4.

discourses about gender specifically the ways in which those “barriers and channeled intersections” appear and operate in television representations of women in presidential politics.

Popular television and electoral politics are both central to American culture, and as such are carriers and propagators of similarly normative definitions of sex and gender.²⁹ Both politics and television fiction operate in the realm of performance and perception. In both, the performance of gender is often consciously deployed with the purpose of eliciting particular results, often as simple as an impression of familiarity.³⁰ This makes fictional television a rich and appropriate source for examining gender in relation to the institution of the presidency and its symbolic meanings in American culture.

Fiction about presidential politics enters into a discourse comprised of “the mythic and historical associations that attach to the office and to its past and present occupants.”³¹ While subject to those associations, these texts also create a space for them to be interrogated. Both *Commander in Chief* and *Political Animals* include explicit discussions of feminism and the place of women within American democracy. They raise issues of gender in American politics which are often over looked. However, as my analysis will show, they also operate to compound existing cultural perceptions which have worked to exclude women from presidential politics and created artificial limits on the most symbolically important elected office in the American republic.

²⁹ Muir and Taylor, “Navigating Gender Complexities,” 2; Lynne Joyrich, *Re-viewing Reception: Television, Gender, and Postmodern Culture* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996), 77.

³⁰ Kim Reiser, “Crafting a Feminine Presidency: Elizabeth Dole’s 1999 Presidential Campaign,” in *Gender and Political Communication in America: Rhetoric, Representation, and Display*, ed. Janis L Edwards (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2009), 41; Adams, “Is Family a Moral Capital Resource for Female Politicians?,” 224.

³¹ Anne Norton, *Republic of Signs: Liberal Theory and American Popular Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), 64.

Methodology

Cultural barriers for female candidates relate to dominant cultural assumptions about gender and the office of the presidency itself. There is a pervasive common sense understanding of the inarticulate characteristics that constitute what a president should be.³² A candidate's ability to look or seem "presidential" is an integral part of the informal litmus test candidates receive from the media and from voters themselves.³³ This commonly held yet seldom interrogated set of ideals relates to presidential scholars Shawn and Trevor Parry-Giles concept of "presidentiality."

Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles describe "presidentiality" as "a discourse that demarcates the cultural and ideological meaning of the presidency for the general public."³⁴ Their concept of presidentiality encompasses an amalgam of texts, practices and voices, which address the office and those individuals who have held it or hope to hold it. Presidentiality is formed by the layering of historical, political, public and media discourses over time. Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles argue that the concept of presidentiality "invites the continued scrutiny of the ideologies and boundaries that circumscribe the presidency and presidents in American political discourse."³⁵ The recent availability of pop culture representations of women in presidential politics presents an opportunity to examine the ways in which presidentiality remains determined by masculinism.

³² Individuals and media professionals commonly use the word 'presidential' outside of the context of constitutional action and consider themselves understood.

³³ Forrest McDonald, *The American Presidency: An Intellectual History* (University Press of Kansas, 1994), 425. Thomas Man, "Is This Any Way to Pick a President? Lessons from 2008" in *Reforming the Presidential Nomination Process*, eds. Steven S. Smith, and Melanie J. Springer (New York: Brookings Institution Press, 2009), 173-197.

³⁴ Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles, *The Prime-Time Presidency*, 2.

³⁵ Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles. *Constructing Clinton: Hyperreality & Presidential Image-Making in Postmodern Politics* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2002), 3.

The institution of the presidency has been masculinized from its scholarly study to its fictional representation.³⁶ The marriage of masculinity and the presidency is such a normalized part of American politics and culture that it is virtually invisible.³⁷ This common sense understanding pervades entertainment and news media and acts to confirm an irrational conception of leadership as exclusively male, and in effect rationalize that notion. This can be understood in relation to presidential scholar Georgia Duerst-Lahti's concept of masculinism. According to Duerst-Lahti, the "masculine impulses" that pervade American political institutions and practices are the function of an ideology that assumes the appropriateness of men wielding power. Duerst-Lahti demonstrates the ways masculinism defines not only the institution of the presidency, but also the electoral process through which candidates challenge one another for office.³⁸ As the institutional and electoral elements of the office have been determined by expectations of gender, so have the cultural perceptions of the presidency and those who hold it. Masculinism has formed commonly held understandings of presidentiality.

As Suzanne Daughton³⁹ puts it, "[f]irst and foremost, the president is the national patriarch: the paradigmatic American man." Writers and producers who attempt to imagine a female president inherently challenge the assumptions of masculinism. However, these attempts often reiterate the gendered nature of the office. Beyond a simple affirmation of the maleness of the office, they present representations of women which have the potential to reify the cultural

³⁶ Duerst-Lahti, " 'Seeing What Has Always Been' ," 733-7; Justin S. Vaughn and Stacy Michaelson "Its a Man's World: Masculinity in Pop Culture Portrayals of the President" in *Women and the White House: Gender, Popular Culture, and Presidential Politics*, eds. Justin S. Vaughn and Lilly J. Goren (University Press of Kentucky, 2012).

³⁷ Heldman, "Cultural Barriers," 20.

³⁸ Duerst-Lahti, " 'Seeing What Has Always Been' ."

³⁹ Suzanne Daughton, "Women's Issues, Women's Place: Gender Related Problems in Presidential Campaigns," in *Presidential Campaign Discourse*, ed. Kathleen E. Kendall (New York: Suny Press, 1995), 221-241.

prejudices and double standards which operate as barriers to female candidates.

Women who have run for president have each had to attempt to portray themselves within a notion of presidentiality determined by masculinism. Simultaneously, female candidates are expected to fulfill norms of femininity and ideals of womanhood in order to appear appealing.⁴⁰ This presents a double bind for women in presidential politics. Kathleen Hall Jamison describes the double bind as:

“a rhetorical construct that posits two and only two alternatives, one or both penalizing the person offered them. In the history of humans, such choices have been constructed to deny women access to power and, where individuals manage to slip past their constraints, to undermine their exercise of what ever power they achieve. The strategy defines something ‘fundamental’ to women as incompatible with something a woman seeks to be.”⁴¹

The concept of the double bind has been continually linked by scholars and political pundits to the challenges faced by female candidates for the presidency.

The entertainment industry is built on the bottom line, which necessitates the production of products which carefully gauge public perception and comfort levels. So in a broad sense television writers and producers are confronted with a similar task as political strategists and politicians themselves; insofar as it is a necessity to create a character that is both likeable and believable. In the case of female politicians (fictional or not) this traditionally entails qualities of likeability, associated with femininity, and believability, associated with presidentiality. Yet, in

⁴⁰ Some also argue to remain non-threatening. Adams, “Is Family a Moral Capital Resource for Female Politicians?”; Reiser, “Crafting a Feminine Presidency: Elizabeth Dole's 1999 Presidential Campaign” 41; Daughton, “Women’s Issues, Women’s Place”: Muir and Taylor, “Navigating Gender Complexities”; Falk, *Women for President*, 17-45;

⁴¹ Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 14.

American political and popular culture, there remains a frame of incompatibility between the cultural expectations of women and the cultural expectations of presidents.

Television representations of women in presidential politics create male and female characters (and their performance of masculinity and femininity) under the same sociopolitical conditions as real female candidates and under similar normative constraints. The series creators, in effect, attempt to make arguments for their characters' validity through a careful crafting in response to the public's expectations of both women and the presidency. Television creators who undertake representing a female president, or presidential candidate, must grapple with double binds. This makes television a rich source for raising questions about gender and the presidency and the construct of the double bind an appropriate tool of analysis for examining the types of messages these programs are sending about women in presidential politics. Other scholars examining these types of programs have ignored the ways in which both gender and presidentiality are crafted through multiple characters and interactions. The ways in which different characters' performance of gender, and the different ways they are positioned within presidentiality, reflect on one another. These programs' portrayal of women in politics is in many ways shaped by their representation of men and close attention must be paid to this dual construction.

My focus for this analysis is on each series as a whole; each of which I consider a complete text. While a number of episodes are specifically examined, they are considered within each program's linear narrative. While I include some of what John Fiske calls secondary texts, and consider the types of political/historical discourses these programs are in dialogue with, it is predominantly for the purposes of highlighting the pervasiveness, or the solidity, of a particular

set of messages found within the texts. Todd Gitlin's discussion of formula, slant, solution, and character type, as elements of television programming consistently engaged with the maintenance of hegemonic ideologies, usefully frames my discussion of these two texts, and suggests that, while these programs are heralded as harbingers of change, they exist in a medium and system which is in many ways predisposed to holding the status quo.⁴² This approach may not be appropriate for all television texts or all ideological constraints. However, the subject matter, content, and promotion of these two series suggests that they have a particular potential to expose how television fiction acts to both affect *and* reflect the relationship between gender and the presidency.

Three categories, or types of double binds, are continually discussed in the scholarship on the cultural barriers faced by female presidential candidates, and consistently present themselves in fictional representations of women in presidential politics. These categories do not operate discretely, encompassing personal characteristics, role expectations, and images. They do provide a useful framework for examining how American politics is reflected in these representations, and how they might reflect onto it.

1) Ambition/morality- Electoral politics necessitates ambition, and candidates must maintain the appearance of morality. In addition to ambition being commonly recognized as a masculine trait, for hundreds of years women who have appeared ambitious have been framed as immoral. 2) Public/Private roles- the gendered (based on sex) division of roles-The president is expected to fulfill certain masculinized roles, and candidates are judged on their capacity to do so. However, Female candidates are also expected to fulfill domestic roles, the performance of

⁴² Todd Gitlin, "Prime Time Ideology: The Hegemonic Process in Television Entertainment," *Social Problems* 26 (1978): 251-266.

which can undercut the perception of their presidentiality. 3) femininity/competency- In the same way fulfilling feminized private sphere roles undermines the perception of them fulfilling the complementary male roles, the femininity/competency double bind entails appearance and behaviors associated with femininity and ideals of womanhood which have historically acted to undermine the perception of a candidates competence.

Ambition/morality, binary gender(ed) roles, and the femininity/competency double bind are each issues of perception on the part of voters and viewers, and projection and construction on the part of politicians and creators. These elements take on a particular character, and particular importance, in the context of US presidential politics. The ways in which these texts cope with the double binds presented reveals the hold masculinism maintains on presidential politics. The tool of the double bind also establishes that although these texts may question that hold, they by no means defy it, and may operate to strengthen its normative position.

The White House Project, *Commander in Chief*, and *Political Animals*

Caroline Heldman argues that writers and producers are faced with an “impossible job of portraying a realistic female president, given the ingrained beliefs about the presidency.”⁴³ However, television often works to reflect, reinscribe, and normalize these “ingrained beliefs” and in effect strengthen them. This is a particular danger when these products are accompanied by the explicit suggestion that they are challenging these beliefs. Viewers are encouraged to view these representations as having a more substantial claim on realism, as they have been promoted as presenting positive (and needed) images of women in politics. As a result, the limiting stereotypes about women, and the continued masculinization of the office of the presidency, that

⁴³ Heldman, “Cultural Barriers,” 35.

they do present may be more likely perceived as true, natural, and appropriate.

Since its inception, The White House Project has endorsed and promoted two television series; *Commander in Chief* (2005) and *Political Animals* (2012). President of the organization, Marie Wilson stated that “[t]he most important part of our work at The White House Project is the perception piece.”⁴⁴ Wilson argued that cultural barriers are the most persistent and most important to overcome in the pursuit of gender equality in presidential politics.⁴⁵ In 2005, Wilson explained that

“[w]e are much closer than we've ever been, and *Commander-in-Chief* can only accelerate the pace. Americans have to be able to envision a woman effectively running the country before they will elect a woman president, and pop-culture images can do what thousands of hours of speeches, educational campaigns and campaign ads can't. They capture imaginations.”

The White House Project made similar statements about *Political Animals*, and both programs enjoyed a highly-publicized debut, with cooperation and coordination between the White House Project and the two networks.⁴⁶

The White House Project is not alone in suggesting that these types of programs increase voters acceptance of female candidates.⁴⁷ However, they are certainly the most vocal and

⁴⁴ The White House Project since its inception had been “lobbying hollywood” for a TV show about a female president . Tom Shales, “*Geena Davis Sweeps up the Oval Office*,” *Washington Post*, August 27, 2005, accessed July 15, 2013, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/26/AR2005092601810.html>>.

⁴⁵ Diane Carmen, “Women Hope to say Hail to the ‘Chief’,” *The Denver Post*, September 18, 2005, accessed July 15, 2013, <http://www.denverpost.com/carman/ci_3036745>.

⁴⁶ Vice President of The White House Project Kristine Henning, in an interview about *Political Animals*, stated “You can’t be what you can’t see. And that’s fundamentally what we’re trying to do here: Open peoples’ minds to new possibilities.” She continued saying “In allowing viewers to “see” this way, television has become a steady force for social change.” David Zurawik, “USA's 'Political Animals' and The Way TV Helps Us See What We Can Be,” *The Baltimore Sun*, June 13, 2012, accessed July 10, 2013, <http://www.denverpost.com/carman/ci_3036745>.

⁴⁷ See note 11.

influential advocate of that view. This makes it vital to examine what kind of messages these two texts are sending about gender and the meaning of the presidency. This type of unequivocal endorsement obscures what is problematic about these representations of women in presidential politics. What does appear problematic in these programs suggests the persistent hold masculinism has on presidentiality.

Analysis of Commander in Chief and Political Animals

Commander in Chief premiered on ABC in September 2005 and was cancelled in the spring of 2006 before the entirety of the first season had aired. The program's protagonist is America's first female President, Mackenzie "Mac" Allen (Geena Davis). Mackenzie Allen is a former one term member of Congress and unaffiliated with a party. She is the chancellor of the University of Richmond when she is nominated to run for vice president by the, eventually victorious, Republican candidate, Teddy Bridges. The series begins just as President Bridges becomes incapacitated due to sudden illness. Halfway through the pilot episode, Bridges dies, and Allen is sworn in as President. The program centers on her first months in office.

Political Animals aired on USA Network in the summer of 2012.⁴⁸ Six episodes comprised a complete first season.⁴⁹ However, after receiving weak ratings, the show was not renewed by the network. The text follows and completes one story arc, while establishing the potential for a second season by leaving the series on a cliffhanger in the final episode. *Political Animals* is a roman à clef, based loosely on the life of Hillary Clinton. Elaine Barrish (Sigourney

⁴⁸ An executive for *USA* stated that the series was invested in portraying the dramas of politics more than family and stated "[w]e want to fill the political void that exists right now" suggested both the anticipation over the deluge of coverage of the upcoming election and the absence of summer entertainment programs focused on politics. Alexandra Cheney, "USA Network's 'Political Animals' Offers Miniseries Fix for Junkies," *Wall Street Journal Online* June 6, 2013, accessed July 10, 2013, < <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304022004577515081419323936.html>>

⁴⁹ Cheney, "USA Network's 'Political Animals' Offers Miniseries Fix for Junkies."

Weaver) is a former First Lady, former Governor of Illinois, and current Secretary of State.

Barrish ran for the Democratic party nomination and lost to the current President, Paul Garcetti.

The program centers on her deciding whether or not to challenge the incumbent for their party's

nomination. Creator Greg Berlanti stated that the character of Barrish is an amalgamation of

Hillary Clinton and Madeleine Albright (although her biography is clearly modeled on

Clinton's). Berlanti also stated that the character of Barrish's ex-husband, former President Bud

Hammond, is based only on Lyndon Johnson, while the characterization of his presidency in no

identifiable way diverges from Bill Clinton's.

Ambition/Morality

Ambition, for these purposes, can be seen as acting on a desire to accomplish or possess something.⁵⁰ By morality I mean appearing to be 'good.' Good is a complex and subjective concept; as the history of theology and philosophy attest. However, in most political and television narratives it appears remarkably straightforward; there are almost always good guys and bad guys, protagonists and antagonists. Even in the subtlest of political advertisements or fictional narratives there is often an argument being made for the audience's identification with one character over another. Popular culture narratives of women in presidential politics have overwhelmingly portrayed ambition and morality as mutually exclusive characteristics.

⁵⁰ In politics, ambition can mean specific goals and offices, but also the raw material of power and popularity. In a sense this steps behind Jamison's definition and identifies the very act of desiring or "seek[ing] to be" as incompatible with "something fundamental" to women.

To elected president a person must be ambitious.⁵¹ Scholars identify an “ambition gap” between men and women, particularly in electoral politics.⁵² Lawless and Fox found that a fear of appearing too ambitious was a significant impediment to women even imagining themselves holding public office.⁵³ An irrational coupling of the absence of morality with the presence of ambition is persistent even amongst politically elite women in American society.⁵⁴ Ambition is commonly considered a male/masculine attribute and is correspondingly considered unnatural in women.⁵⁵ Where men’s ambition is commonly understood as competitive, women’s is framed as manipulative and often tied to their sexuality.⁵⁶ Women portrayed as ambitious are often cast as evil, and not simply unfeminine. The stereotype of the immoral power hungry woman is found everywhere in popular culture from fairy tales to contemporary cinema.⁵⁷

The ambition/morality bind is so pervasive that it is embedded in the structure of almost all of the few representations of female presidents that exist in American popular culture. The vast majority of the follow a simple pattern: unlikely circumstances lead to the downfall of (at least) the US president (and often the entire chain of succession), leading a woman to be thrust

⁵¹ It is worth while to note that in early American presidential elections expressing presidential ambition or even campaigning for one self was considered distasteful at best, and at worst antithetical to the Founders design for the American system of government. This has shifted over time with progressively candidate and media centered campaigns and being able to effectively promote one self as ‘the best person (more often man) for the job’ has become central to presidential campaigns. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency: A History and Criticism of Presidential Campaign Advertising*, (New York: Oxford University Press. 1996), 4.

⁵² Edmond Costantini, “Political Women and Political Ambition: Closing the Gender Gap,” *American Journal of Political Science* 34.3 (1990): 741-70; Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard Logan Fox, *It Still Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Jennifer L. Lawless, *Becoming a Candidate: Political Ambition and the Decision to Run for Office* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁵³ Lawless and Fox, *It Still Takes a Candidate*, 136.

⁵⁴ Carroll, “Political Elites and Sex Differences in Political Ambition: A Reconsideration.”

⁵⁵ Susan J. Carroll, “Political Elites and Sex Differences in Political Ambition: A Reconsideration” in *Gendering American Politics: Perspectives from the Literature*, eds. Karen O'Connor, Sarah E. Brewer, and Michael Philip Fisher (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2006), 75-90.

⁵⁶ Cynthia Griffin Wolff, “A Mirror for Men: Stereotypes of Women in Literature,” *The Massachusetts Review* 13.1/2 (1972): 205-218.

⁵⁷ Wolff, “A Mirror for Men: Stereotypes of Women in Literature,” 205.

out of necessity into the role of commander-in-chief.⁵⁸ Joseph E. Uscinski writes “[f]emale movie characters fly to the moon, journey to the center of the earth, and communicate with aliens; however, they never win a presidential election.”⁵⁹ And in fact, they do not even run.

Commander in Chief continues a long tradition of portraying the absence morality and the presence of ambition as interrelated, while *Political Animals* asks the American viewing audience to emotionally invest in Elaine Barrish’s ambition as the narrative centers on her plan to run for president a second time. On *Commander in Chief*, President Allen is so far removed from ambition that she becomes removed from politics and presidentiality. In *Political Animals* and *Commander in Chief*, a notion of presidentiality, and the lack of presidential qualities in the male characters, are key aspects in the framing of ambition. In both texts, the portrayal of the lead characters suggests that a woman’s entrance into presidential politics is appropriate only out of necessity.

Commander in Chief

On *Commander in Chief*, morality and ambition are presented as mutually exclusive characteristics and Mackenzie “Mac” Allen is decisively moral. She is shown as a competent executive, but one who is disinterested in politics and acts only out of necessity. The narrative assures us that Allen also assumes the presidency out of necessity. In the pilot episode, from his

⁵⁸ This pattern pervades in the genre that has most presented female presidents, science fiction. The television show *Battlestar Galactica* (2004), the comic series *Y: The Last Man* (2003), novels like *The Prodigal Daughter* (1982) and TV movies like *Alas Babylon* (1960) and *Whoops Apocalypse* (1986), all have women ascending- rather than winning the Presidency. As does the sitcom *Hail to the Chief* (1985). *Commander in Chief* creator Rod Lurie’s film *The Contender* (2000) portrays the attempt to confirm the first female vice president after the sudden death of the sitting VP. The second season of the TV series *Scandal* (2012) featured a succession plot line by a female VP.

⁵⁹ An exception to this pattern is the 1964 film *Kisses for my President*, in which an overwhelming majority of women voters surprisingly launch a woman, Leslie McCloud, into the White House, only to resign due to a pregnancy at the end of the film. The film presents women as an a-political alternative to what is seen as an overly partisan system. Interestingly, Karen S. Hoffman did a comparison of *Commander in Chief* and *Kisses for my President* and found that, despite the 40 year gulf between them, little had changed in the imagining of a female president. President Leslie Mc Cloud, however, runs and is elected, unlike Allen. The seventh season of the television series *24* also featured the election of a female president.

hospital bed, President Bridges asks Allen to resign in order for Speaker of the House Nathan Templeton to assume the office; a man who Bridges himself tells Allen is “an SOB, a liar, and a cheat.” Although his request borders on sexist, is constitutionally inappropriate, and fails to argue for Templeton’s superior capability or credentials, she accepts it. Although her staffers urge her to assume office because “Templeton makes Genghis Khan look like Mahatma Gandhi,” she writes a resignation letter and plans to resign. The text frames Templeton as extremely undesirable, but assures viewers that Allen is the kind of woman who would altruistically respect the President’s wishes by accepting the office only when a Templeton presidency appears untenable.

When President Bridges has a sudden fatal aneurism in the pilot episode Allen is forced to confront Templeton in person in a scene between the two. Templeton gives her an offensive lecture about her inability to hold the office, implying his own, and ends with a sexist pronouncement of the uselessness of the life of an imprisoned Nigerian woman whom Allen hopes to save. It is with these final comments that we see Allen make her decision to take office with the determined folding back up of her resignation letter. It is only when it becomes a literal life or death matter that Allen chooses to assume the presidency. This connection is reiterated in the last scene of the pilot, which features shots of the woman and her crying infant being helicoptered out of the prison yard by US army personnel, intercut with Allen giving her first public address to Congress. As Speaker of the House, Templeton is positioned directly over Allen’s shoulder and remains in the frame throughout her speech, hawkishly leaning forward in his chair. Allen’s Presidency is reduced to an effort to keep Templeton from office.

This dynamic between President Allen and Speaker Templeton is established in the pilot episode and remains throughout the series. Alone together, Templeton asks Allen to tell him why she wants to be president. Before she can complete her answer, Templeton interrupts her, saying that the only acceptable reason is “that you want the power.” To which Allen answers “that’s not me.” This exchange appears in multiple episode recaps over the series, reemphasizing the importance of that dynamic to the structure of the show and the framing of the lead character. Throughout the series the two characters are contrasted against each other, and it is often a direct contrast between morality and ambition.

Nathan Templeton is constantly emphasized as an immoral politician and Allen’s foil. *The Washington Post* described the character of Templeton as “a bona fide, hard-core, dyed-in-the-wool enemy played with sly, smug malice aforethought.”⁶⁰ We see Templeton double crossing people, making backhanded deals with interest groups, even attempting to blackmail the President, all with the purpose of putting himself closer to the presidency. In the episode “Happy Birthday, Madam President,” speaking of his presidential campaign, Templeton tells his Chief of Staff “this campaign shouldn’t be about consultants and focus groups, it ought to be about me.” Beyond his self centered ambition, he is portrayed as sexist and (at least willing to portray himself as) racist.⁶¹

In the episode “Rubie Dubidoux and the Brown Bound Express” Allen is given footage of Templeton at a political fundraiser in 1965. We see the footage of a young Templeton saying “segregation is the word of god,” “white robes are better than black robes,” and giggling at his

⁶⁰ Shales, “*Geena Davis Sweeps Up the Oval Office.*”

⁶¹ The text does not present Templeton as *holding* racist beliefs, just that he would express them and manipulate them in others when it was advantageous to his career.

own wit. Allen refuses to expose the tape saying “He was just a kid” (although, he is clearly not “just a kid,” as he is running for Congress at the time). When her husband Rod argues that, given the opportunity, Templeton would do the same to her, Allen responds “I’m not going to make Nathan Templeton my role model.” When Rod answers “He’s a politician” Allen shoots back “Well, I’m not going to turn into that.” While holding the highest political office in the nation, Allen is still not a politician.

Rod is proved right in the following scene. Templeton attempts to blackmail Allen about a member of her staff’s HIV status, saying “it’s a contact sport wear, a cup [...] if people go into politics these things come back to haunt them.” Allen’s decision not to make the tape public is framed as moral *because* she chooses not to use it to her political advantage as Templeton ‘the politician’ would. Not wanting to “turn into” a politician, Allen makes an arguably questionable decision not to expose someone who is (at the least willing to portray himself as) racist, promote hate and endorse violence, *because* it would come at her own political gain. She even goes so far as to give him all copies of the tape and invite him to her family Thanksgiving. Politics, political ambition and unethical political tactics are conflated and solidified in Allen’s male opponent.

The episode “The Elephant in the Room” demonstrates the lengths the series creators went to assure that Templeton is shown as an undesirable leader in order to make Allen’s presidency appear more appealing. Allen’s appendix bursts while on Air Force One, necessitating Templeton assume the office under the 25th Amendment while she undergoes surgery.⁶² While acting as president, Templeton resolves an airline strike through a legislative option openly

⁶² At the time Allen is without a VP. Although, necessitate is not quite accurate as the senate pro tempore is set to assume the office as Allen trusts him more and ostensibly so that Templeton can maintain his congressional seat. However, Templeton chooses to assume the office, resigning his seat, and therefore informally announcing his intent to run.

opposed by Allen and established earlier in the episode to be a shortsighted, selfish, and politically motivated choice. Upon Allen's return to the White House she admonishes Templeton, saying "You used this office for your campaign, for your cronies, for your massive ego." She continues "If I ever needed another reason to prevent you from holding this office I have it now. And I'll do everything in my power to see that you don't." Allen's desire to assume the office and her intent to run in the next election are motivated by the same thing—stopping Templeton.

As a subplot develops around Allen deciding to run for president in the next election she remains decidedly unambitious. She shows no intent or desire to run, often commenting that it is her lowest priority. She is dissuaded by her familial obligations, saying to her husband "maybe I shouldn't run, we're parents first."⁶³ Her staff insists that if she does not announce her intention to run, she will be unable to govern. In this way, running becomes a need, and not a desire. Allen's lack of ambition is also highlighted by the dichotomy developed between her and her husband.

Allen is portrayed as ambivalent about remaining in office, and her entrance into politics is shown as something she did not even desire or think to do. Her husband Rod, on the other hand, is shown as a competitive political actor. In a flashback scene, we see Mac and Rod in their living room being approached about a congressional run by two male political operatives.⁶⁴ The conversation in the scene consists predominately of laudatory comments about Rod's political qualifications. When the discussion turns toward the mechanics of congressional elections Mac gets up to put the kids to bed. The two operatives stand up and proclaim "but you're the one we

⁶³ "The Mom Who Came to Dinner"

⁶⁴ This is a fairly specific choice, as this is a much more likely scenario if she was affiliated with a party, and not an Independent.

came to see” “we want you to run for congress.” The scene ends with Allen looking at her husband’s surprised face for his reaction. The audience is assured that while Rod, the elected attorney general of Connecticut, is an established and adept political figure Mac is not.

It is others ambition, and specifically men’s, that bring Mackenzie Allen into the political realm, and once there she remains distinctly removed from it. In a flashback during the pilot episode, we see Allen being approached by Bridges to join his ticket. He tells her “If my raw need for power is what opens the door for a woman, so what, and as for the media kiddo, you’re gonna be a star.” Bridges dialogue is clearly meant to sound dismissive of Allen’s political capabilities suggesting she has only symbolic worth. However, the text itself confirms that her status as a leader is derived from her ‘star’ quality and not her presidentiality or performance of the office. Allen is portrayed as a woman of great public stature, but as separate, even disassociated, from the presidency. This disassociation is connected to the framing of Allen as nonpolitical and unambitious. The show’s creators attempt to make the Allen appeal to the viewer for the same reason posited as creating her appeal with the fictitious public: her “outsider” status. Her popularity with the public is repeatedly tied to her divorce from politics rather than her status as the most visible embodied symbol of the American political system.

The text establishes that popularity existed prior to her becoming president and even constituted a threat to President Bridges. In a flashback during the episode “First Strike,” it is revealed that the President Bridges wanted to replace Allen on his re-election ticket. Templeton remarks to Bridges “she got you elected, she’s bizarrely popular,” and suggests it is a bad political move. She poses no threat to Bridges’ job, could only be beneficial in his re-election, and it is not suggested that she has done anything in particular that was in conflict with his

interests. Yet, President Bridges is set to offer her a place on the Supreme Court “just to get rid of her.” In an attempt to create Allen as a powerful figure, the text focuses on the attention she draws rather than any particular capability she holds.

In the episode “First Scandal,” the distinction between Allen’s status and popularity and the presidency is articulated clearly by her Chief of Staff, who tells her “I think [Bridges] saw you as someone whose presence was becoming larger than the presidency itself, and he was right. The difference is that he thought you were a threat to his legacy, that you were overshadowing him, and I thought {pause} that you yourself were the legacy.” Note that it is not only Bridges’ presidency she is supposedly overshadowing, but “the presidency itself.” Rather than possessing her own legacy as the first female Vice President, she herself *is* the legacy, but the show never reveals how or in what way she achieved that status. Allen accepts this as a compliment.⁶⁵

Despite holding the office, Allen remains removed from the presidency. Mackenzie Allen is figured as a leader who is outside of the political process. She cannot find cooperation with Congress or within her own cabinet (political insiders), but she is inexplicably blessed with approval ratings which are described as “through the roof.”⁶⁶ There are continual reminders embedded in the dialogue about how much ‘the people’ *like* Allen, and Allen, and those around her, continually justify her positions by ‘the people’s belief in her. This separation between her

⁶⁵ The exchange is established as moment of bonding between the two that assures (both Allen and the audience) that her Chief of Staff, who was formerly Bridges’, is loyal to Allen and believes in her leadership.

⁶⁶ “Sub Enchanted Evening.” It is important to note that this is not presented as a just the initial response to her assuming the office after a tragedy. The example given here comes half way through the series and this a dynamic consistently asserted in the text.

and the office expressed in a number of ways through out the text.⁶⁷ In the episode “State of the Unions,” for example, she chooses to give the State of the Union Address from the White House as a televised statement, instead of directly to the Congress, pronouncing that she is choosing “to speak directly to the American people and *not* the people’s representatives.”⁶⁸ The portrayal of Allen’s leadership as separate from the institution of the presidency and the political process suggests that imagining a women who is presidential is more challenging than simply portraying a ‘likeable’ female leader.

The writers and creators of *Commander in Chief* were faced with the necessity of portraying a competent and appealing female leader, but in doing so they created an unambitious woman who remains removed from both the procedures of politics and the traditions of the office. *Commander in Chief* presents Mackenzie Allen as an antidote to partisan politics, while portraying ambition as a negative, and naturally male, attribute. Not only is Templeton ‘bad,’ but the audience is assured that Templeton would also be a bad president. The Speaker is framed as a tightly interwoven representation of immoral ambition, partisanship, and sexism in order to justify Allen’s interloping into presidential politics. Consistently framing Allen as unambitious and removed from politics, and suggesting that she is popular or successful because of this,

⁶⁷ One subtle, example appears in the episode “First Strike” during an exchange between the late President Bridges’ son Tommy and Allen’s daughter Amy, in which he points out the spelling error that is noted on a placard on the Lansdowne portrait of George Washington. Amy answers that “my mom will fix that, she’s the President now.” The mistake is actually an intentional mark to signify the specific copy of Gilbert Stuart’s famed portrait of Washington which has hung in the East Wing of the White House for over two centuries. The portrait itself has great symbolic meaning within presidentiality, as it is a portrait of Washington declining to run for a third term. The painting stresses the presidency as an elected institution with important and long held traditions, albeit referencing one that was codified in the 22nd amendment. Although the text does not note this I feel it is highly unlikely they would have included the painting without being aware of it’s history and symbolic importance.

⁶⁸ This is a particular choice, for Allen and the writers, as the State of the Union has long been televised (although this is not addressed on in the text). Rather than only providing a written address, as is sometimes done, she is specifically choosing not to address Congress.

further a notion of women being somehow ‘unnatural’ in politics, and works to reinscribe masculinity at the centre of the US presidency.

Political Animals

In stark contrast to *Commander in Chief*, *Political Animals* is almost entirely premised on Elaine Barrish’s presidential ambition. Barrish is undoubtedly the protagonist on the program. She is presented in an overwhelmingly positive light and as decidedly ambitious. The opening scene of the pilot is of Barrish giving her concession speech for the Democratic primary, and the series timeline predominantly focuses on a few weeks, two years after said speech, during which Barrish decides whether or not to run *again* against the sitting President Garcetti for their party nomination.⁶⁹ The majority of the plot, and the focus of almost all of the characters, is on her desire to run a second time and the personal and political implications of her decision to act on that desire.

On *Political Animals*, the positive portrayal of ambition is accentuated by the inclusion of a secondary female protagonist to mirror Barrish. In both Barrish, and her mirror journalist Susan Berg, ambition is suggested as an innate and natural quality. Both Berg’s mother and former boyfriend suggest that her desire to succeed is “just who she is.”⁷⁰ The program does address the negative perceptions of women with ambition through a number of offhand comments made to and about Barrish concerning the way she is covered in the media.⁷¹ Although elements of the

⁶⁹ The series also includes other flashbacks of the previous election cycle, as well as the months during her husband’s presidency when his affair with a young staff member is publicly exposed.

⁷⁰ “16 Hours,” “The Woman Problem.”

⁷¹ Throughout the text, Barrish’s press coverage is described as many would describe Hillary Clinton’s, and the idea that she was characterized by many as “cold and ambitious” “an ambitious bitch” and worse is brought up repeatedly.

series' plot lines explore the challenges Barrish and Berg have to negotiate in their personal lives, there is no suggestion that ambition is a particularly male attribute or that it signals immorality.

While Barrish's ambition is shown to negatively impact her family, it is also framed as an innate part of her character. Throughout the series, Barrish's mother is her most outspoken critic. In the episode "The Woman Problem," frustrated with the prospect of another exhausting campaign her mother insists that Elaine is making the family "go through the hell [again], just so you can be queen shit of Elaineland," suggesting Barrish's personal investment in winning. By the end of the episode her mother encourages her to run, and tells her "you're never satisfied, sweetie. And even though you hate all that campaign bullshit as much as I do, you'll be miserable if you didn't go for it." Ambition is framed as a natural quality, and a legitimate reason for Barrish to seek the office.

In the same episode, when the opportunity to get a seat on the Supreme Court is presented to her, she declines "the power to decide what presidents can and can't do," saying bluntly "I don't want to be on the Supreme Court. I want to run for president again." Barrish's desire is for executive power and not the, less masculinized and therefore more appropriate, deliberative power of the bench.⁷² The audience is assured that Barrish *wants* the ultimate prize of the presidency, and there is nothing in the text to suggest that this is an inappropriate desire. This portrayal of women with ambition resists an extremely ingrained cultural stereotype that is perpetuated in media coverage of female presidential candidates and is present in virtually every fictional representation of women in presidential politics.⁷³ However, it does not go so far as to

⁷² Many scholars argue that executive power is the most masculinized political power and that the American presidency is the most masculinized of positions- in part, because of the electoral process, its role in the system of checks and balance and because it is a unitary executive position. Each of which can be contrasted against the highest judicial body, the US Supreme Court.

⁷³ Costantini, "Political Women and Political Ambition: Closing the Gender Gap."

present a woman whose personal ambition is their ultimate priority. This is a realistic choice. The appearance of holding ambition above all else is something a political candidate, of either gender, should be careful to avoid. However, the ways in which *Political Animals* presents the limits to Barrish's ambition reaffirm the appropriateness of women as primarily nurturers, and suggests that they are, and should be, content to work behind the scenes.⁷⁴

In the episode "The Woman Problem," Barrish's law school mentor asks her "convince me that you're not [running for president] because this is still a competition to you and you didn't come in first." Barrish argues that is not *only* her ambition, but additionally that President Garcetti "didn't learn to stand up for his convictions." The bold decision to run against her own party's incumbent is presented by the text as a whole, and by Barrish individually, as a moral choice. *Political Animals* presents an ambitious woman who is likeable and earnest, who believes that she is the most suitable person for the job. However, the text frames Barrish as an appropriate or desirable leader only by casting the sitting President as unpresidential, and, eventually, dead.

Throughout the text, Barrish is deliberately contrasted against President Garcetti. Although *Political Animals*' Paul Garcetti is not quite 'the villain,' in the way that Nathan Templeton on *Commander in Chief* is, he is repeatedly cast as weak, indecisive and lacking presidential stature.⁷⁵ Barrish's decidedness is a result of his indecisiveness, and her desire for the presidency is legitimized through his inability to execute the office. Throughout the series,

⁷⁴ Lawless and Fox, *It Still Takes a Candidate*, 147.

⁷⁵ Arguably, because Clinton is the key to this roman à clef, it would be strong statement to cast the man who beat her, and became President, as a villain. There are suggestions in the text that he won because he was young, a good orator and popular with the media. Garcetti is the first Italian-American president, and this is often noted in a way which suggests that he won in part because of his 'first status,' this, arguably, appears much more palatable than portraying a character who is the first black president as incompetent.

Garcetti is presented as unwilling to make what are framed as the ‘right’ decisions, creating a necessity for her to run for president *because* the sitting President fails to prove himself.

In the final two episodes of the series, once it is assured that she can effectively sway Garcetti’s actions, Barrish’s desire to run is diminished. Another factor that is shown as diminishing her ambition for the office is her children. In the final episode, “Resignation Day,” she is offered the place of vice president on Garcetti’s re-election ticket. She decides to accept for very specific reasons related to her children, telling her confidante “they are both adults but they are still my children. It’s not the right time to take on my boss or my party. I am their mother first.” Elaine Barrish can be seen as simultaneously ambitious and moral, but she cannot also be a good mother. Barrish is also portrayed as most effective, and most appropriate, when operating behind the scenes. When she tells her ex-husband, former President Hammond, that her ability to guide Garcetti’s action is part of the reason she might not run, he tells her “that’s your lot in life Elaine, to see the goodness in flawed men.” Ambition may be a part of Elaine’s personality, but being the President’s moral compass occupies much of the portrayal of her character. Her children and her effectiveness in a subordinate role are both factors in dampening her ambition.

The focus of the characters, what brings them together and establishes tension and conflict throughout all of the series subplots, is Barrish’s intent to run. *Political Animals* six episodes was produced as a complete first season with the hope of it being renewed.⁷⁶ Through a rather unrealistic plot choice in the final episode, Barrish’s decision to run against her own party’s incumbent is made more plausible and palatable. Halfway through “Resignation Day,” the President dies in a tragic plane crash. With Garcetti no longer a factor, her desire to run can

⁷⁶ ' Chris Harnuck, “Political Animals' Canceled: USA Not Pursuing More Episodes,” *The Huffington Post*, Nov 2, 2012, accessed July 10, 2013, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/02/political-animals-canceled-usa-network_n_2065621.html>

be seen as less based in personal ambition, and the audience can be assured that she is willing to abandon it given the right circumstances. This need to soften the scenario in which Barrish's ambition can be legitimized is further exhibited by the ways in which the man who will take Garcetti's place is portrayed.

Vice President Fred Collier is a drastically immoral figure. Collier is shown first as a sycophant to President Garcetti, subsequently insensitive about his apparent death and overly eager to take his place. Collier is shown as willing to use immoral tactics in both domestic and international political maneuvering. In the episode "16 Hours," he almost gleefully suggests that the sinking of a Chinese submarine and the death of its 120 crew members would be a tremendous victory for American counter-espionage by allowing them access to Chinese technology, and advises the President to do nothing. This is the opposing view to Barrish, who attempts to convince the President to save the men.

In the episode "Lost Boys," Vice President Collier is shown blackmailing a Republican Congressman in order to pass a bill.⁷⁷ Barrish voices her outrage and distaste for the VP's actions toward the Congressman. She admonishes him, and attempts to stop him, saying, "Fred your tactics disgust me. When the President hears about this... ." Collier interrupts implying that President Garcetti already knows. Both presidential figures are implicated, whereas Barrish's objection is shown to be on purely ethical grounds and at a personal loss; as Collier says to her, "you have a lot of your own blood sweat and tears in this bill." Throughout the series, there is a careful balance maintained between portraying Barrish as ambitious, and positioning her as the moral authority in the White House. This is often achieved through directly contrasting the

⁷⁷ The show complicates this dynamic by making Barrish's son TJ the man the closeted and married Congressman is having an affair with. However, what is noted here takes place before that information is revealed to Barrish.

character of Barrish to the President and Vice President, reassuring the audience that her ambition, unlike that of the two men, is not as strong as her conscience.

On *Commander in Chief*, Allen's lack of ambition is such a fundamental aspect of her character that it defines her presence as set apart from politics and the presidency. While *Political Animals* portrays Barrish's ambition as an innate quality and a rational belief in her own competence, there remains a gendered character to the limits placed on her pursuit of that ambition. *Political Animals* resists the ambition/morality double bind in their portrayal of Elaine Barrish, but the structure of the series narrative still accounts for its implications. Like *Commander in Chief*, the male alternatives on *Political Animals* must be framed as either completely immoral, incompetent or unavailable. Both women are framed as appropriate political figures only in so far as the male alternatives are framed as inappropriate. And while Elaine Barrish is a more ambitious and political figure than Mackenzie Allen, neither woman is seen to be filling the presidentiality vacuum that exists in both fictional White Houses. This is further illustrated in the performance of gendered public/private roles that is portrayed in both texts.

Public/Private Roles

The White House is consistently understood in relation to separate spheres ideology by the American public.⁷⁸ "The president is analogous to the head of the household, figured as a protector."⁷⁹ The familial roles of mother and wife are formed in contrast to the patriarchal role of protector and the public role of warrior, and female presidential candidates are expected to

⁷⁸ Heldman, "Cultural Barriers," 30; Gina Serignese Woodall, and Kim L. Fridkin, "Shaping Women's Chances: Stereotypes and the Media" in *Rethinking Madam President: Are We Ready for a Woman in the White House*, ed. Lori Cox Han and Caroline Heldman (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2007); Maurine Hoffman Beasley, *First Ladies and the Press: The Unfinished Partnership of the Media Age*, (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2005).

⁷⁹ "Cultural Barriers," 36.

uphold the ideals of both.⁸⁰ The cultural expectations of gender(ed) roles form interrelated double binds for women, in which the performance of each role creates a constraint of “too much/not enough” and at the same time the ability to be perceived as occupying one set of roles is often seen to conflict with the ability to fulfill the other.⁸¹ The notion that women are natural in the private sphere and unnatural in the public sphere, and particularly in executive roles, is a persistently damaging frame that creates barriers for female presidential candidates.⁸²

Presidential candidates vie to fulfill a position that entails embodying both a national patriarch and what Heldman calls the ideal of “the citizen soldier” as head of the military.⁸³ In a 2004 study, Jennifer Lawless found that respondents were most likely to engage in gender stereotyping of candidates around military, security, and foreign policy issues.⁸⁴ In fiction, “[t]he typical hyper-masculine portrayal of ‘warrior’ presidents frames presidential politics as a masculine pursuit.”⁸⁵ These types of portrayals, and the ways in which presidential campaigns are framed, suggest that a successful, or authentic, presidency requires a fulfillment of these roles.⁸⁶

Along with the masculinization of presidential roles, separate spheres ideology also makes it difficult to imagine a female president as unconstrained by familial obligations.⁸⁷

⁸⁰ Heldman, “Cultural Barriers,” 32.

⁸¹ Reiser, “Crafting a Feminine Presidency: Elizabeth Dole's 1999 Presidential Campaign,” 44; Jamieson, *Beyond the Double Bind*, 247.

⁸² Georgia Duerst-Lahti, “Masculinity on the Campaign Trail,” 87-112.

⁸³ Heldman, “Cultural Barriers,” 32.

⁸⁴ Jennifer L. Lawless, “Women, War, and Winning Elections: Gender Stereotyping in the Post-September 11th Era,” *Political Research Quarterly* 57.3 (2004): 479-90.

⁸⁵ Heldman, “Cultural Barriers,” 32.

⁸⁶ Heldman, “Cultural Barriers,” 32; Suzanne Daughton, “Women’s Issues, Women’s Place”; Lawless, “Women, War, and Winning Elections.”

⁸⁷ Heldman, “Cultural Barriers,” 27.

Caretaking is a dominant theme in pop culture depictions of women.⁸⁸ Female voters are depicted by the media, and coveted by parties, as depoliticized mothers.⁸⁹ Portrayals of women as members of the polity, in fiction and in news media, are dominated by ideals of motherhood, whereas, men (directly engaged in politics or otherwise) are portrayed as mavericks, solving problems through violence or antisocial behavior, and very rarely as figures of nurturance or as invested “members of a childrearing community.”⁹⁰ The association of women with the private sphere and nurturing runs counter to conceiving female presidential candidates as “sufficient protectors and focused leaders” without family obligations distracting them from their duties.⁹¹

“The contemporary tensions over women’s place in the political sphere are effectively illustrated by the dichotomies presented in cultural expectations for political leaders and political wives.”⁹² The first lady represents the ideal political spouse, performing a supportive role for her husband and a symbolic role for the public.⁹³ For presidential candidate’s, “wives and other family members often serve as props in campaign messages and appearances, authenticating a candidate’s status in the patriarchy.”⁹⁴ When male candidates appear engaged in family life it

⁸⁸ Chapman Rackaway, “Soccer Moms, Hockey Moms, and National Security Moms: Reality versus Fiction and the Female Voter,” in *Women and the White House: Gender, Popular Culture, and Presidential Politics*, eds. Justin S. Vaughn and Lilly J. Goren. (University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 90.

⁸⁹ Rackaway “Soccer Moms, Hockey Moms, and National Security Moms,” 90.

⁹⁰ Rackaway “Soccer Moms, Hockey Moms, and National Security Moms,” 80, 90; Dana D. Nelson, “Afterword: The President in 2045, or, managed Democracy,” in *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Duke University Press Books, 1998), 227.

⁹¹ Heldman, “Cultural Barriers,” 27.

⁹² Janis L. Edwards, “Traversing the Wife-Candidate Double Bind: Feminine Display in the Senate Campaign Films of Hillary Clinton and Elizabeth Dole,” in *Gender and Political Communication in America: Rhetoric, Representation, and Display*, ed. Janis L. Edwards (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2009).

⁹³ Geri Alunit Zeldes, “Maverick, Escort, Or Style Setter: TV News Framing of Candidates' Spouses during the 2004 and 2008 Presidential Elections,” *Electronic News* 3.4 (2009): 193-213.

⁹⁴ Janis L. Edwards, “Visualizing Presidential Imperatives: Masculinity as an Interpretive Frame in Editorial Cartoons. 1988-2008” in *Gender and Political Communication in America Rhetoric, Representation, and Display*, ed. Janis L. Edwards (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2009), 244.

positively affects their image, implying responsibility and leadership based on stereotypes of traditional male family roles as providers and protectors.⁹⁵ The image of a female candidate next to her husband often sends the opposite message.⁹⁶ As Carlin, Gutgold, and Sheckels point out, while presidential candidates *must* be married, female candidates spouses *must* be “far in the background,” and in fact, in terms of a political career, it is better if they are deceased.⁹⁷ Women are often seen as more “attached” politically and personally to their husbands than male politicians are to their wives.⁹⁸ Female candidate’s marriages are much more covered in the press, and often negatively influence the perception of their viability.⁹⁹ Even when considered smart and capable, female candidates are often perceived as dependent upon, and inappropriately influenced by, their husbands.¹⁰⁰

In order to be “likeable” women are expected to fulfill the private/family roles that are ascribed to them.¹⁰¹ In order to be perceived as presidential, they must be seen as able to fulfill masculine roles associated with the public sphere. These two texts, which have been touted as working to change perceptions of women in leadership, put much greater emphasis on portraying these women performing their familial roles than on portraying them occupying roles associated with military and executive leadership. Neither do these texts de-emphasize the importance of these roles or their masculinization. Both texts’ focus on motherhood, and their portrayal of

⁹⁵ Adams, “Is Family a Moral Capital Resource for Female Politicians?,” 234.

⁹⁶ Adams, “Is Family a Moral Capital Resource for Female Politicians?,” 234.

⁹⁷ Diana B. Carlin, et. al. *Gender and the American Presidency: Nine Presidential Women and the Barriers they Faced* (Lanham,: Lexington Books, 2012), 170. These authors only discuss marriage as a prerequisite for female candidates. I argue it appears as a normative requirement for candidates of either gender.

⁹⁸ Zeldes, “Maverick, Escort, Or Style Setter,” 194; Falk, *Women for President*, 60-83.

⁹⁹ Zeldes, “Maverick, Escort, Or Style Setter,” 194; Falk, *Women for President*, 60-83.

¹⁰⁰ Falk, *Women for President*, 60-83.

¹⁰¹ Jamieson, *Beyond the Double Bind*, 40.

traditionally gendered marital partnership, work to frame women as consumed by their familial roles, and even go so far as to present a fulfillment of those roles in such a way that they appear to conflict with the performance of their political roles and responsibilities.

Commander in Chief

Motherhood

Throughout *Commander in Chief*, Mackenzie Allen is seen as interested in, and accessible to, her children. These are commendable qualities. However, the emphasis on her role as a mother reaffirms assumptions about the unnaturalness of women in public life by constantly asserting motherhood as Mackenzie Allen's primary imperative. Michelle Adams argues that the family plot lines in the series are "more nuanced" and remain "unresolved threads," whereas the political sub plots are simplistic.¹⁰² Although I would argue that the family sub plots are also simplistic, the political sub plots dually suffer from being easily identifiable as unrealistic.¹⁰³ The overall focus on Allen's role as a mother, as well as the ways in which the familial and the political aspect of Allen's life are shown converging, illustrate the text's reinforcement of traditional gender roles, and how the presentation of those roles detract from a portrayal of Allen as presidential.

In every episode of *Commander in Chief*, there is at least one scene which takes place in a family kitchen.¹⁰⁴ This pattern is established in the pilot episode. The family eats breakfast in

¹⁰² Adams, "Is Family a Moral Capital Resource for Female Politicians?," 230. While Adams argues that the series stresses an incompatibility between motherhood and elected office by structuring the show along two parallel plot lines (political and familial), I argue that it is the specific ways in which the series presents Allen's political and familial roles in moments in which the two plot lines overlap, implicates the text in perpetuating a notion that women will be distracted by familial obligations and privilege their personal roles above their public duties. While in some arenas that may be wholly appropriate, the highest executive office of a world super power is not one of them.

¹⁰³ This includes highly unlikely plot points, little to no attention paid to the processes of government, and (although often minor) technical flaws in the representation of the mechanics of the American political system.

¹⁰⁴ In the majority of episodes the first family is shown having breakfast together. In the few episodes in which this scene does not appear, we see them eating dinner together at the same family table.

their kitchen, complete with children's drawings taped to the fridge, and discuss whether Allen should resign or assume the presidency. Mac is shown as invested in her children's thoughts and feelings, more so than in her career or the country. Throughout the rest of the series, despite moving into the White House, we see them exclusively in a small open kitchen. The intimacy around the table assures that Allen is seen as nurturing to her children, and Allen is shown a number of times making sure her youngest is eating nutritiously. The pervasive and repetitive presence of these scenes throughout the text emphasizes Allen's role as a mother.

An emphasis on Allen's dedication to motherhood is asserted even while portraying her performing her political role. In the pilot, on her first day in office, Allen and her staff create a color-chart with four colors for her schedule. She interrupts a member of her staff to insist that they "add another color" for family time. In particular she notes the importance of meals, and says "We always have dinner together as a family, obviously since it's eleven I've missed it." Making up for this lost time becomes her priority, and she immediately leaves her meeting to tuck her children into bed. In the episode "First Strike," on her children's first day back to school, Allen has to be dissuaded from taking them herself and appears ready to drop whatever may be on her schedule for the sake of her children's emotional well-being. Adams' argues that the displays of Mac Allen "doing 'ideal' mother" operate to assure viewers that she is non-threatening.¹⁰⁵ However, the repeated choice to make her commit to these performances of motherhood in the midst of performing her presidential duties stress Allen as a mother by assuring the viewer that her children are prioritized over her professional role.

¹⁰⁵ Adams, "Is Family a Moral Capital Resource for Female Politicians?," 236.

In the episode “First Strike,” while dealing with an international crisis, Allen incidentally sees footage of her children broadcast on television. Storming into the press room, Allen is bombarded with questions about how her foreign policy team will deal with said crisis. Ignoring the questions of policy, Allen admonishes the White House press corp for covering her children. A reporter responds “Ma’am, don’t you think the press should determine what is or isn’t news.” Although she answers “Yes I do,” she argues that her role as a mother overrides the first amendment, because as she says “This isn’t Mac the President talking, this is Mac the mother. Don’t mess with my kids.” This establishes Allen as a fierce protector of her children. However, it suggests that she sees the office as secondary, and asserts her presidential responsibilities as separate from her personal ones.

The figure of the protective mother—which *could* be effectively translated into the maternal protector of the nation—is consistently presented in relation to Allen’s attachment to her own children and not to the nation at large.¹⁰⁶ This is particularly evident in the episode “First...Do No Harm.” Allen is unwilling to inform the public about a potential terrorist attack directed at children, but refuses to allow her own daughter to go on a planned trick-or-treat outing. When her daughter questions why she cannot accompany her friends as had been arranged, Allen responds “there are some bad guys that are trying to ruin Halloween, and it’s my job, as a mommy, to make sure that you’re safe.” Allen’s identity as President is secondary to her “job as a mommy.” Allen’s fulfillment of that role is in keeping *her* daughter close to her, and not in stopping “the bad guys” or in keeping American citizens safe.

¹⁰⁶ Many scholars suggest that female politicians in national politics may benefit from appearing maternal. Leaders such as Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Golda Meir have been successfully framed as the mothers/grandmothers of their respective nations. These women are *also* seen within the ‘iron lady’ frame famously applied to Margret Thatcher. Although Murray argues that the maternal frame would be particularly difficult to maneuver in the American political system. Rainbow Murray, “Introduction” in *Cracking the Highest Glass Ceiling: A Global Comparison of Women's Campaigns for Executive Office*, ed. Rainbow Murray (Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger, 2010), 11.

The text's emphasis on Allen's relationship with her children often overtakes the portrayal of Allen as President. One example appears in the final scenes of the episode "No Nukes is Good Nukes." The scenes appear at the end of a two-episode story arc in which a potential nuclear threat has been defused (as usual, by Allen publicly humbling herself). Disaster averted, Allen is subsequently shown barefoot laying next to her youngest daughter in bed, reading her a bedtime story and assuring her of her safety. Allen walks from her sleeping daughter to be greeted by her teenage daughter, who tells her she is proud of her, reconciling their relationship which was earlier demonstrated as strained. Allen's presidential action on the series is often a means of resolving the plot's familial conflict (i.e her youngest daughter's fear and her eldest's resentment) rather than an opportunity to portray her resolve or capability.

The scenes with her own daughters are directly followed by a scene between Allen and her mother in the family kitchen.¹⁰⁷ Allen's mother asks her "How was your day?" to which she responds "The kids were really freaked." Even in the midst of a potential global crisis, the audience is assured that, Allen's focus has been on her children. The two go on to recount how Mrs. Allen always had fresh-baked cookies waiting for Mac when she came home from school. Allen's mother says "It was our special time together. Every day. Guaranteed." While her presidential success is understood in terms of her ability to be a good mother to her children, the ideal of motherhood itself is reasserted as domestic and traditional with an emphasis on and proximity and nurturance rather than protection.

¹⁰⁷ As Adams points out, the program further emphasizes the appropriateness of women as nurturers with the addition of President Allen's mother to the White House. By providing a surrogate mother figure to care for her children the audience can be assured that Allen has not inappropriately abandoned them to the care of her husband., "Is Family a Moral Capital Resource for Female Politicians?," 236.

Allen as a mother is stressed in every episode, and this emphasis creates a portrayal in which Allen's need to care for her children can be seen siphoning her focus and energy away from the office. Being the mother of her children is repeatedly presented as her primary role and most significant identity. This suggests that the show's creators wanted to assure the audience of Allen's dedication to that role. However, the emphasis on motherhood reduces the appearance of Allen as occupying presidential roles. This can be seen as related to Kathleen Hall Jamison's womb/brain double bind, in that while continually connecting her presidential actions to her "instinctual or natural" maternal feelings, the text fails to demonstrate her actions as a result of an intellectual decision-making process.¹⁰⁸ Within the text, that emphasis results in her maternal role being transposed onto her presidential duty without the formation of a 'national matriarch' model as a counter to an understanding of the office of the presidency as an inherently patriarchal position.

Citizen Soldier/Presidential Protector

Commander in Chief's title itself emphasizes the militarized roles of the presidency. Throughout the series, there is a decided attempt to portray President Allen as a capable and decisive leader. In the pilot episode we see Allen assert herself, stoically deciding to rearrange American battleships abroad in order to increase security when President Bridges is first taken ill. Over eighteen episodes, Allen is portrayed in a number of situations involving the military. However, the text frames her in opposition to the 'role of citizen soldier,' and the few instances in which Allen appears as a protector work in conjunction with the text's over-emphasis on motherhood, do not realign the model of national patriarchy, and work to further feminize Allen.

¹⁰⁸ Jamieson, *Beyond the Double Bind*, 43.

When Allen is presented as a protector it is as the protector of two helpless individual women, not the nation. As noted earlier, in the pilot episode, the desire to save a pregnant Nigerian woman who is going to be put to death for adultery becomes the impetus for Allen to assume the office, when Templeton reveals that if he were president he would “let her die.” Despite the assumedly enormous number of international situations which would confront an incoming president, Allen is focused almost entirely on saving that one individual throughout the entire first episode. The other example appears in the episode “The Mom Who Came to Dinner” which revolves around the scheduled execution of an apparently mentally disabled woman, who is on death row “because of a crime her boyfriend committed.”¹⁰⁹ The episode becomes a discussion about the death penalty which is clearly slanted against it, and frames the woman as an innocent child. Three times the phrase “mental acuity of a five year old” is applied to the prisoner. The woman’s lawyer comes to lobby for the President to commute her sentence and gives Allen a letter from the woman (to Allen) scrawled in a distinctively childlike hand. At the end of the episode Allen commutes the sentence that had been upheld by the Supreme Court.

These assertions of power over individuals are as close to the role of protector that the character of Allen comes, which suggests the difficulty of imagining a woman occupying the role of national patriarch but also signals the text’s failure to effectively re-imagine or realign that role. Allen’s actions to save these women are likely to be perceived by viewers as admirable, as they are framed as such. However, while these instances frame Allen as a person with a strong moral compass, who is willing to act on it, in both cases she takes a unilateral action based solely

¹⁰⁹ The woman was convicted for felony murder because she was present during a robbery gone bad committed by her apparent “boyfriend.” I would like to note that no explanation or discussion is presented for why a person with the “mental acuity of a 5 year old” is involved in a relationship with an assumedly functional adult. As such, this detail works to situate the prisoner as both an innocent child and victimized woman.

helpless on her own moral prerogative; a prerogative which is linked to her status as a woman, through the details of each woman's supposed 'crime, but not her status as the US President. In the first instance saving a Nigerian citizen from her own nation's justice system, and in the second subverting a decision made by the nation's highest court. Although it is her office which provides her the power to intervene, neither of these 'rescues' are related to a democratically elected leader's responsibility/obligation to protect the nation's citizens.¹¹⁰

Authority over the armed forces is the most definitive presidential power. Caroline Heldman writes that the president represents "the ideal citizen [who] is supposed to engage in both civic and martial (military) practices."¹¹¹ For these purposes, the qualities of 'the citizen soldier,' that are deemed most important to presidentiality are the capacity to 'put country first' (before self/family), and the capacity to commit violence in its name.¹¹² Protecting the richest and most despised nation in the world includes projecting strength and a capacity for action (violence). Although perhaps unfortunate, this has arguably been a main line of American foreign policy for the last 100 years.¹¹³ In terms of what is usually defined under the blanket of 'national security' a president must show decisive executive leadership, but is also expected to

¹¹⁰ My intent is in no way to suggest that these would be negative actions to take, or that I personally disagree with them, but rather to argue that if these instances do represent the text's attempts to confront, or overcome, the masculinization of the presidential role of protector that they fail in doing so by not orienting that role toward a concept of 'the nation and its citizens.'

¹¹¹ Heldman, "Cultural Barriers," 24; Lawless, "Women, War, and Winning Elections," 270.

¹¹² Heldman, "Cultural Barriers," 32-3. Heldman uses the term citizen soldier to discuss the tradition of military service and its implications on the presidency in American culture. Although related to Heldman's discussion, these are my specific qualifications.

¹¹³ Though the details may have changed since the Cold War, America's ability to project its military strength and its willingness to use it remain fundamental tenets of American foreign policy. Noah Feldman, "Introduction," *Cool War: The Future of Global Competition* (Random House, 2013), 3. Also see Ken Bolton, *US National Security and Foreign Policymaking After 9/11: Present at the Re-creation* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

fulfill the role of ‘citizen soldier.’¹¹⁴ To be Commander-in-Chief is to take ultimate responsibility for state violence, and to be seen as capable of deploying it.

Allen is framed in opposition to the qualities of the citizen soldier. Her actions during domestic and international crises perpetuate stereotypes of women being adverse to force and preferring talk over action. The text itself points out this stereotype about women, but it also perpetuates it. In the episode “Happy Birthday, Madam President,” Templeton criticizes Allen’s crisis strategy with a sexist comment; “That’s her *instinct*, things’ll work out if we can just talk.” Despite its dismissive tone, Templeton’s comment is an accurate description of Allen’s actions throughout the series. Not only is Allen’s primary strategy negotiation and diplomacy—and very directly ‘talk’—it is presented as a choice she makes *between* humbling herself and (projecting military and/or personal) strength.

Allen is repeatedly shown to triumph through a disregard for the appearance of strength. These instances equate displays of strength with egotism as opposed to strategy.¹¹⁵ Each occasion is framed as brave—as Allen goes against her advisors, and chooses to speak directly with people to resolve problems. In the episode “No Nukes is Good Nukes,” she agrees to publicly apologize to North Korea. In the episode “Wind Beneath My Wing,” Mac speaks directly to a man threatening to blow up Air Force One, in effect negotiating with a terrorist. Her ability to speak to people directly works every time, like a charm. Her decisions are continually framed against the explicit opposition of Templeton and other men around her.

¹¹⁴ Heldman, “Cultural Barriers,” 32-3.

¹¹⁵ This should not be seen wholly as a criticism of what is often considered ‘standard’ American foreign policy, as the program does not present any real argument that it is not an effective strategy; it is simply one that is not Allen’s. In addition, her penchant for unilateral action suggests that it is not an over arching strategy of co-operation in the international arena on her part either.

In the episode “First Strike,” for example, Allen speaks directly to a South American dictator upon his demand. She is told this is a bad idea three separate times from the Joint Chiefs and her National Security Advisor, who insists that “the leader of the free world does not give audience to the unelected head of a thugocracy.” She states that she must speak to him herself because “his ego won’t let him do [what they want him to] otherwise.” Her disregard for her own ego, her propensity for talk, and her disregard for an appearance of strength are shown as effective. However, the limited diversity of the tactics and reactions she is shown using, in addition to the unrealistic political scenarios she is shown using them in, work to present Allen as more feminized than presidential even in the realm of foreign policy. By fulfilling the protector only as a mother, compromising as opposed to warrior like, Allen also fails the citizen soldier test when confronted with idea of ‘necessary’ violence.

In the episode “First... Do No Harm,” a captured terrorist alerts the NSA of an impending threat. Allen makes it clear that she does not want aggressive interrogation used to discover where the targets are. The Attorney General approves the use of “advanced interrogation” behind her back. Mac makes it clear that she would not endorse torture “under any circumstance” and promptly fires her Attorney General. She makes a moral stand, despite the apparent legality and potential efficacy of the tactic. Templeton again serves as Allen’s foil. At the end of the episode he congratulates President Allen on her success in averting the threat. He tells her that he is proud of her for “understanding the necessary evil,” stating “I didn’t think that was part of your

make up.” The last frame of the episode is a close shot of Allen staring out the window of the Oval Office, tears welling up in her eyes.¹¹⁶

The audience is encouraged to like or admire Allen because this is not part of her “make-up.” However, it is a fundamental part of what ‘makes up’ presidentiality. The text stresses its absence in Allen’s character but suggests no alternative. Throughout the series, Templeton is framed as a “war hawk,” continuously chiding her for her inaction. In “No Nukes is Good Nukes,” for example, Allen comments on how she feels it is necessary to run for president because “if Templeton were president we might be at war right now.” The only time she is really situated as the protector of the nation is as a device to remove the taint of ambition from her character—protecting the nation from Templeton. While the emphasis on motherhood overtakes the already underdeveloped portrayal of Allen in the masculinized roles of the presidency, the representation of marriage perpetuates gender stereotypes around women’s role in the public sphere.

Marriage

Lilly Goran argues that Allen’s succession reduces her status as a political actor, writing “[t]his presentation of the fictional Oval Office also reifies the gendered nature of the office, casting the relationship of president and vice president (successor) in the context of a traditional marriage, with the woman as subordinate, in the vice presidency, and thus her path to power and

¹¹⁶ This characterization of Allen as unwilling to stomach violence in “First...Do No Harm” cannot be reduced to a simple ‘Hollywood’ repudiation of the Bush administration specifically or even the (very fair) repudiation of torture generally. The two most high profile male television presidents at the time the episode aired, 24’s David Palmer and even *The West Wing’s* Jed Bartlett, far from repudiating torture. Perry-Giles and Parry-Giles argue that Jed Bartlett “demonstrates considerable ambivalence over using morally disputed tactics as a new reality of modern warfare,” and that this actually works to frame the character as strong and more presidential, acting to counter balance what are seen as his personal character failings. *The Prime-Time Presidency*, 134-36.

her use of power as coming only with the death of the male (husband/president).¹¹⁷ Along with her presidency casting her in a wifely role, her role as wife is seen to directly interfere with her capacity to fulfill the roles of the office. *Commander in Chief* does not ignore that for a woman in presidential politics, marriage can be a sensitive issue of public perception. However, the portrayal of Allen acts to reaffirm the notion that women in power will be unduly influenced by their husbands and distracted by family life.

Commander in Chief explores the public and personal challenges women in politics face as a by-product of being in a marriage. Rod and Mac's marriage is shown as potentially damaging to the public perception of her capability. During an interview, Templeton deploys the sound bite "two for the price of one," an allusion to a highly criticized Bill Clinton quote made during the 1992 election.¹¹⁸ Either as first lady or as President, a powerful woman in the White House signals an inappropriate blending of personal and professional life.¹¹⁹ There is an implicit criticism of this bias through having Templeton use it for his own political benefit.¹²⁰ However, the program reinforces this stereotype through the portrayal of the First Couple's marriage. Allen gets her plans of action from Rod, who is portrayed as more interested in politics and more politically adept than her. She is shown acquiescing to his demands, relying on his opinion, and allowing her marriage to take precedence over the concerns of the country.

¹¹⁷ Lilly Goren, "Fact or Fiction: The Reality of Race and Gender in Reaching the White House," in *Women and the White House: Gender, Popular Culture, and Presidential Politics*, eds. Justin S. Vaughn and Lilly J. Goren (University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 110.

¹¹⁸ "Happy Birthday Madam President."

¹¹⁹ Karrin Vasby Anderson, "From Spouses to Candidates: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Elizabeth Dole, and the Gendered Office of U.S. President," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 5.1 (2002): 105-32.

¹²⁰ This is particularly true as it is during a television interview in which attention is drawn to the construction of public opinion by politicians and the press.

Over the series eighteen episodes the focus of the narrative becomes increasingly centered on the First Couple's marriage. When Allen is Vice President, Rod acts as her Chief of Staff with no apparent issues, personally or politically, suggesting that the problems they encounter are wholly a result of her trespassing onto the presidency. In the pilot, when she keeps Bridges' Chief of Staff she reassures Rod, saying "you're still the most important man in my life."¹²¹ Adams argues that the series portrays "Mac 'doing' gender by enacting traditional gender displays of deference and dependence to alleviate husband Rod's anxiety about her high status job."¹²² However, it is not only verbal reassurances that Allen is seen giving.

Rod and Mac's marriage is portrayed as intimately tied up with her professional decisions. In the episode "Rubie Dubidoux and the Brown Bound Express," Rod gives her an ultimatum that if she does not give him an official role in her administration that "it won't work personally or professionally." Not only is her husband shown attempting to influence her, Allen readily accepts it. Responding to his ultimatum she says "You're right I've always looked to you, counted on you, needed you, we are in this together and if other people can't handle that to hell with them." Allen herself is seen blending the personal and the professional by conflating being in their marriage "together" with her occupancy of the office. The show's creator Rod Lurie, who was fired from the series after the initial seven episodes, stated that "[s]he was always turning to her husband for advice or approval, so the show was beginning to become not about why we

¹²¹ Adams, "Is Family a Moral Capital Resource for Female Politicians?," 234.

¹²² Adams, "Is Family a Moral Capital Resource for Female Politicians?," 234.

should have a female president, but why we shouldn't have one."¹²³ In addition to Allen's relationship bleeding into the office, it is also shown to detract from Allen's commitment to it.

In the episode "State of the Unions," Rod is drugged and tricked into publicly falling on (and as a result touching the breasts of) a young DNC intern. When the incident quickly becomes fodder for the news media, Allen is shown willing to sacrifice her national priorities and use her office in order to restore the stability of her marriage. She plans an extended trip, saying to Rod she will do "whatever it takes to get you and [the intern] off the front page. I don't want to fight anymore." Allen is shown to be more concerned with her marriage than either the good of the nation or her own career. When it is discovered that Rod had been set up, Allen's focus on the event dissipates despite the fact that he is not publicly exonerated. This suggests that it is the threat to her marriage and not danger to her public image, and therefore political career, that dictated her reaction—a damaging message when Allen's jealous reactions amount to presidential action.

By the end of the episode, the 'state' of the couple's 'union' is righted through a restoration of normative gender roles. Mac is left putting the children to sleep while Rob gets ready to go to a meeting. In the final scene of the episode, Rod goes to the DNC headquarters and aggressively threatens a Democratic official, forcing him to publicly apologize to Allen. This episode exploits stereotypes of both men and women. While on one level subverting an expectation of men being overly sexualized, it acts to confirm the notion of men as the appropriate protectors. The representation of Allen portrays women as jealous and distracted by

¹²³ Joshua Alston, "Diversity Training," *Newsweek*, Feb. 2, 2008, accessed Jul. 10, 2013, <<http://www.newsweek.com/2008/02/02/diversity-training.html>>. It is important to note that while Lurie's comment was directed at the series after his involvement, the episodes he was involved in also focus on the couples marriage and are (if at all) only slightly less implicated in such a criticism.

their personal relationships. The portrayal of the couples marriage, which frames Rod as a protector, detracts from the already under developed representation of Allen in that role.¹²⁴

In the opening scene of the episode “First Scandal,” Rod is set to be the first first spouse to hold a job by accepting the position of Baseball Commissioner. However, he chooses to stay in the White House in order to protect Allen from bad press and what he calls “a dangerous, dangerous leak.” Her disassociation from politics means that she requires the protection of her politically adept husband. When his methods become seen as overly aggressive, Allen tells her Chief of Staff “Rod is just protecting me, that’s what he does, I can’t stop him.” At the end of the episode, Mac tells Rod “there is only one person that I know has my back. I don’t want you to go to New York. I don’t want you to be Baseball Commissioner. I want you to stay here, with me.” Allen wants him to stay when he enacts his husbandly role of protector. However, Rod’s decision to stay is reflective of a need to assume a level of power he feels entitled to *because* of his relationship to his wife. He answers “I’d like that. What’s my title?” Because Mac is vulnerable, she needs the protection of her husband, and because she needs that protection he *must* be part of her administration. Though likely an attempt to portray Rod as a loving and protective father and husband, this portrayal of Rod compounds Allen as a non-political figure, while framing her as both vulnerable and dependent.

The marital dynamic between the two is only rectified by Rod having direct influence on the agenda of her administration. The episode that follows “First Scandal” (discussed above), “Rubie Dubidoux and the Brown Bound Express,” begins at night in the couple’s bedroom. The

¹²⁴ A double bind is clear, if he failed to fulfill that role he would be an ineffective (and unappealing) husband and father. However his fulfillment of that role undercuts hers. Like *Political Animals*, it is Allen’s husband who is shown as appropriate to fulfill roles typically associated with the presidency. It is even framed as a necessity for him to do so.

voices of political pundits commenting on the stasis of the Allen presidency can be heard emanating from a small television, revealing that she is “largely perceived as a lame duck.” Allen enters and starts to get undressed. She casually asks Rod’s opinion on a piece of legislation that she feels indecisive about. Rod demands “Are you asking my opinion on the record or off the record?” Rod argues what has been shown as public opinion, that his wife’s presidency “has no forward momentum.” Rod insists that the only way to rectify this is by officially including him in her administration, and by the next morning Allen decides to give Rod an official role as “head of strategic planning.” Her immediate acquiescence to his demand suggests that she is highly influenced by her husband. The way in which she accepts it suggests that she does not view herself as capable of fulfilling or executing the office without him.

Allen brings Rod into the administration as a way to advance it beyond its placeholder status. She announces to her staff “what we haven’t been able to do, to move beyond, is reacting. The time has come to move this administration from one of mourning to one of action, [and it is] with that in mind” that she states she has decided to appoint Rod to an official position. The episode presents this as potentially creating tensions within the staff. However, neither her acquiescence to his demand nor her stated motivation for the action is prodded or addressed. This portrayal of Rob as the creator of action works in conjunction with the representation of him as more invested in her maintaining the office. For example, Rod’s first official action is to hire Dickie MacDonald, the political campaign advisor who becomes the driving force behind Allen’s upcoming bid. Overall, the program perpetuates the notion that women’s professional decision-

making will be highly influenced by their husbands, but also suggests that women will not see themselves as independently capable of the job.¹²⁵

A solid marriage and strong support from a partner working behind the scenes, maintaining the home, and appearing on their behalf seems a prerequisite to a successful career in elected office.¹²⁶ “Nowhere is this support more explicit than in presidential politics, where public and private lives intersect in such pronounced ways and the implications of these roles are so powerful.”¹²⁷ *Commander in Chief* suggests that a female president would not be able to rely on the kind of support that has famously been provided by first ladies.¹²⁸ When Mac comes to her mother to discuss the experiences of occupying the office, she gives her the advice that “You might not want to mention the most powerful person on earth part to your husband” to which Mac replies, “You’re probably right.” Rob’s position in the help-mate role is framed as degrading and therefore natural that he resists it. Throughout the series, Rob’s displeasure with his new role occupies a significant interaction between the two. As a result, Allen is shown as having to navigate conflict in her personal life as opposed to being able to rely on the support and stability provided by a dedicated spouse. This works to confirm what is already perceived as a disadvantage for women in politics, and an actual concern for voters.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ The program does not suggest that women will be incapable of the job, the explicit goal of the series creators being the opposite. However, the idea that this woman, who is already the sitting president, would view herself as incapable without her husband undermines Allen as an independent figure and presents the presidency as needing to be occupied in some capacity by a man.

¹²⁶ Muir and Taylor, “Navigating Gender Complexities,” 2.

¹²⁷ Muir and Taylor, “Navigating Gender Complexities,” 2.

¹²⁸ Candidates are often asked about how they benefit from the support of their spouses. Virtually every president in living memory has participated in a cliché that they would not have been able to succeed if not for the love of their wives.

¹²⁹ Anderson, “From Spouses to Candidates,” 108; Barbara Burrell, Laural Elder, and Brian Fredrick, “Polls and Elections: From Hillary to Michelle: Public Opinion and the Spouses of Presidential Candidates.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41.1 (2011): 156-76.

A man who is put in the position of filling an entirely symbolic role that has represented ideals of motherhood and womanhood for over 200 years will unavoidably face public challenges. For many of the episodes, particularly at the beginning of the series, Rod's role as First Gentleman operates as comic relief. It is also shown to cause him personal frustration and public humiliation. As Heldman and Adams both argue, the program reifies the existing masculinization of the presidency through their portrayal of Rod as emasculated by his new role.¹³⁰

The portrayal of dichotomous gendered public/private roles on *Commander in Chief* illustrates the way in which the cultural implications of separate spheres ideology have created a barrier to women being recognized within existing notions of presidentiality. And despite portraying a female president, the text does not effectively question or realign those notions. The pronounced emphasis on Mackenzie Allen's role as a mother subsumes any attempt to portray her as a protector of the nation, and she is disassociated from the role of citizen soldier. In addition, the representations of Allen's actions in crises and international relations are highly gendered in ways that are damaging to women being understood as effective leaders generally and "presidential" specifically.¹³¹ On *Commander in Chief*, the portrayal of Rod as Allen's necessary political protector frames Allen as dependent and non-political, and links those qualities directly to her gender.

¹³⁰ Heldman, "Cultural Barriers," 35; Adams, "Is Family a Moral Capital Resource for Female Politicians?," 235.

¹³¹ Erika. *Women for President*, 151, 160.

Political Animals

Motherhood

While *Political Animals* manages to portray a likeable, moral, and ambitious woman in the character of Elaine Barrish, the series sends much more traditional and damaging messages about motherhood. The character of Elaine Barrish follows a pattern many suggest is advantageous for a female candidate: she has grown children.¹³² Nevertheless, throughout the series, we see a significant amount of Barrish's time spent on concern for her sons, both of whom are shown as unhappy and dysfunctional adults. Barrish is portrayed as a loving mother, but it is suggested that she has not been a selfless one and that as a result her children have suffered. This plays into a notion that children are irreparably harmed by mothers' active pursuit of their professional ambitions, legitimatizing guilt.¹³³ This is primarily shown through the character of Barrish's son TJ.

TJ is shown struggling with addiction, triggered by emotional anguish, throughout the series. Barrish's concern for him is a central dynamic in every episode. He explicitly blames his mother for "never being there for" him. Barrish also blames her focus on public life; in the episode "Lost Boys," she tells her ex-husband "We made a choice, Bud, we put our goals for this country ahead of the well-being of our child, we are going have to live with that for the rest of our lives." Hammond does not once display guilt or suggest he was neglectful, instead he insists

¹³² Carlin, et. al. *Gender and the American Presidency*, 170; Lawless and Fox, *It Still Takes a Candidate*, 73; Niven, David. *The Missing Majority: The Recruitment of Women as State Legislative Candidates* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1998), 2. These scholars make that point, and it is often cited in the media. In addition, the attention (much negative) that women such as Sarah Palin and Mass. Gov. Jane Swift have received for having young children while running for office also suggests that having small children is a liability. Women such as Condoleezza Rice, who also received questions about their lack of children, further suggests that grown children may be an ideal family composite for female candidates.

¹³³ Brittany L Stalsburg, "Voting for Mom: the Political Consequences of Being a Parent for Male and Female Candidates," *Politics & Gender* 6.03 (2010): 373-404; Rackaway "Soccer Moms, Hockey Moms, and National Security Moms," 90.

that their son take responsibility for himself. Barrish is shown regretting her dedication to politics, saying “I should have packed up and left DC the minute TJ started having problems.” The narrative itself suggests that Barrish is responsible for her son’s tragic struggles. In the episode “Lost Boys,” when she refuses to attend an opening event for TJ’s business venture, his feelings of abandonment cause him to relapse and overdose on drugs, ending up in the Emergency Room. While Barrish’s dedication to politics is shown as a liability to her ability to parent, her role as a mother is also shown to detract from her dedication to her job.¹³⁴

One of the subplots on the series revolves around the fallout from TJ’s past suicide attempt. In the pilot episode, Barrish is shown putting her need to protect her son above her career interest, by agreeing to give a reporter access to her when they threaten to expose the suicide attempt. In one particularly telling example, in the episode “16 Hours,” a choice between her son’s emotional well being and her responsibility to the state is explicitly presented to Barrish. She reveals classified national security information to a reporter in order to protect her son from further public attention. She tells the reporter “I want you to know that as Secretary of State I would never do anything to deceive the American public, but as a mother I would do anything to protect my son.” Like *Commander in Chief*, the roles and responsibilities of her office are shown to be subordinate to those of motherhood. While portraying Barrish as a protective mother may appeal to viewers, it sends a negative message to voters about women’s ability to be dedicated to the office, by suggesting that being a sufficient mother requires lifelong

¹³⁴ Realistically, the basic cable television series was bound to create some kind of personal drama for Barrish and even explore the experiences of women who find themselves torn between professional and family life. However, the program could have explored addiction without framing it as wrapped up with maternal neglect. Similarly, they could have explored the personal drama of addiction and a mother’s experience of guilt without suggesting that being a parent will directly interfere with a woman’s professional life. The conjunction of these dynamics sends a highly problematic message.

dedication to that role above all else, and portraying her dedication to that role as directly impacting her professional actions.

Presidential Protector/Citizen Soldier

As Secretary of State Elaine Barrish is the nation's chief diplomat and is, understandably, not cast as the citizen soldier. Unlike *Commander in Chief*, *Political Animals* does not need to attempt to imagine a realistic female commander of the armed forces. However, it is necessary to show Barrish as someone who is realistically capable of assuming that role. This is achieved by portraying the sitting President as failing in the role of protector and avoiding the role of citizen soldier. Due to the short run of the series (and its corresponding limited time frame) only two international crises are covered on the program; both center on saving small groups of people whose lives are in peril and the text avoids any act of (American) state violence.

Action versus inaction creates the central contrast between Barrish and Garcetti. Patricia Sykes notes that the institution of the presidency "privileges conventional masculine attributes of strength, determination, and decisiveness."¹³⁵ By consistently showing the audience Garcetti's lack of those attributes, the narrative attempts to frame Barrish as potentially presidential. However, the arc of the series plot perpetuates the idea that women are more appropriate in behind the scenes roles than in public leadership. Although the issue of state violence is avoided, the international crisis situations highlight the importance of decisiveness in the person of the president, but also the importance of a masculinized presidential protector to American foreign policy.

¹³⁵ As quoted in Vaughn and Michaelson, "Its a Mans World," 142.

The first two episodes of *Political Animals* are focused on an international incident in which three American journalists are arrested and sentenced to death in Iran. The first time President Garcetti speaks during the pilot episode, he is asking Barrish to shoulder the press “heat” over the crisis. He is shown to be more interested in his public appearance than in saving American lives. This is directly contrasted to Barrish’s selfless responsibility in the following scene. Her staff voices anger that the administration is “using [her] office to quiet the press.” Barrish becomes impassioned, proclaiming “whether this administration is trading on my popularity is not what matters now. All that matters now is the three scared innocent people that are sitting in a jail cell in Tehran wondering what the hell their country is doing to help them.” Barrish stresses both her disregard of self and her dedication to the responsibility government has to its citizens (beyond simply a moral stance toward human life generally). Barrish’s action is responsible and concerned. The President’s inaction is callous and weak; he fails as a protector and then is unwilling to correct his mistakes.

Garcetti is presented as failing to fulfill the functional or the symbolic expectations of the office. Throughout the first two episodes of the series Elaine is shown to be the only person shown determined to uncover the nuances of the situation and focused on formulating a plan to save the hostages. In contrast, it is revealed towards the end of the pilot episode that President Garcetti had known of the plan to imprison and execute Americans, had done nothing to stop it, and plans on doing nothing fix it. Outraged, Barrish demands a moment alone with the President. Toe to toe, Garcetti admits “yes *we* knew. Me, Harris, Sampson a few others, *we* knew about it, but *we* didn’t agree to it” (my emphasis). He fails in his role of protector and shirks personal responsibility for the results of his inaction. Garcetti makes excuses to Barrish, saying “[the

Iranian leader] floated the idea to us through one of his contacts. We floated back a hard no, two weeks later he's doing it anyway."¹³⁶ President Garcetti is ineffectual, and unable to assert his authority over Barrish or control over the Iranian leader.

As the aforementioned scene continues Garcetti uses the fear of looking weak as an excuse for his inaction. When Barrish encourages him to do what ever he can to "save American lives," he says to her "When we ran against each other you were the one who said I was an idiot for even suggesting I'd sit down with Iran. I'd look foolish under these circumstances doing the same thing." Garcetti is shown (in effect) breaking a campaign promise for both lack of gumption and concern for political appearances. What is more, in the face of a crisis, Garcetti is shown as dissatisfied with the office itself. Barrish reminds him that he should be take responsibility and act because, as she states, "I lost." To which the President responds "Be glad you did. I was a dog chasing a car and I caught a bus." President Garcetti is cast as both unappreciative of the honor of holding office, and dogged by its challenges.

Barrish responds to Garcetti's pessimism by asserting her understanding of the demands of the job from the position of First Lady, telling him "I've been here before, I've stood in this office when Bud faced darker hours than these, and I'm telling you now is not the time to be discouraged. Now is the time to lead." Throughout the text Barrish repeatedly articulates the significance of the office of the presidency, but in ways which emphasizes her subordinate role. This is compounded by the choice to intermingle the main plot of her presidential ambition with flashbacks of her and her husband discussing their marriage in the Oval Office, constantly reminding the viewer of her position as First Lady. Throughout the text, Barrish is directly

¹³⁶ The execution of the American's is a means for the Iranian leader to leverage a meeting with the US President and initiate bi-lateral talks between Iran and the US.

contrasted to the presidential men around her. Yet, it is still her husband, the former President, who becomes the standard by which the other characters place within presidentiality is measured.

In the episode “Lost Boys,” Vice President Collier, unwilling to take a political risk to save lives, evokes her ex-husband by saying “I’m not Bud Hammond,” to which Elaine responds “You’re god damn right you’re not.” Throughout the series, there is an assertion that the hyper-masculinized figure of Bud Hammond stands for authentic presidentiality, and an emphasis on the importance of that stature to effectively fulfilling the office. Even the creator’s choice to craft the character of Hammond on Lyndon Johnson, and not Bill Clinton, is one which emphasizes a very aggressive and traditional brand of white masculinity.¹³⁷ Hammond is over-sexualized, outspoken and brash. He is repeatedly shown engaged in masculine pursuits like hunting, and uses his political power to seduce a number of women throughout the series. Despite being out of office, and having endured a sex scandal, Hammond is consistently noted as a highly successful president and shown to be highly popular with the public.

In the episode “Lost Boys,” Hammond is firmly established as the figure of presidentiality in a scene between himself, President Garcetti, and Vice President Collier. Hammond unexpectedly bursts in on the two men in the Oval Office, illustrating his belonging to the space of presidentiality. Once in the room, Hammond asserts his dominance and his superiority; saying to President Garcetti “I think you’re slick, uncommitted and opportunistic, and you lack the backbone to be a great leader, but you do have some principles.” Hammond

¹³⁷ Johnson is well known for his brashness and his aggressive displays of masculinity. Conversely, Bill Clinton is often credited with bringing a ‘feminized’ rhetoric into presidential politics, and is particularly well known for his empathy and sensitivity, none of which we see from Hammond. However, it is stated on the program that Hammond is thought to have [Clinton’s] popularity (something that could not be said of Johnson), and the character’s professional/presidential biography is much closer to Bill Clinton’s. For excellent discussions of these figures see Parry-Giles Parry-Giles, *Constructing Clinton*, and Steven F Lawson “Lyndon Baines Johnson 1963-1969,” in *The American Presidents: Critical Essays*, ed. Melvin I. Urofsky, 486-502. (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2000).

goes on to emasculate Collier, punching him in the jaw and knocking him to the floor of the Oval Office, inciting no protest from Garcetti. This scene solidifies the assertion of Hammond's superior presidency and his presidential stature that are embedded in the dialogue throughout the text. In addition to Hammond being shown as the only character who successfully exudes the symbolic masculinity of presidency, unlike Garcetti and Collier, Hammond is always aligned with the same positions that establish Barrish as moral. The successful two-term President is often presented as filling the void of presidentiality created by Garcetti's failure.

Although Barrish orchestrates Hammond's saving of the hostages, the incident, and the discussion of who will be capable of accomplishing this task, presents Hammond as the only person appropriate to perform the symbolic role of protector. The Iranian leader captures the hostages as a way to leverage the US President into meeting with him. Garcetti's inaction, and then incompetence, created the crisis. However, he himself is unwilling to go out of fear over how it would appear domestically. Vice President Collier offers to go; however it is determined that he lacks both the skills and the stature to deal with such a situation, despite being a seated member of the administration. Hammond is the only person identified as possessing both the capability and the presidential presence. In other words, Hammond is the only one who can save the hostages and protect American interests.

Barrish is portrayed as a capable and moral political actor, but the text consistently emphasizes Hammond in the role of protector and as the appropriate model of the office. Arguably, the premise of the show encourages the viewer to prefer the character of Barrish to her ex-husband. In spite of this, it is Hammond who is constantly positioned in the text as the figure of presidentiality, complicating any attempt to portray Barrish as such. Moreover, the text does

little to cast Barrish in the roles associated with the presidency, and instead emphasizes the gendered character of her relationships with the men who hold the office. This suggests that regardless of a woman's capabilities, fulfilling the office of the presidency remains innately tied to displays of masculinity. Barrish's relation to the presidency is constantly reduced to her subordinate position rather than her future potential.

Barrish is portrayed as being a powerful player in both the Hammond and Garcetti administrations and able to assert great influence over both men. However, this power and influence is often shown to be based in her (gendered) personal dynamic with Hammond and, although more subtly, also with Garcetti. In the episode "Second Time Around," when Barrish informs President Garcetti that she wants him to send her ex-husband, former President Hammond, to Tehran to negotiate the release of the Americans, her ability to control the actions of the current President become clear. Barrish outlines her plan to solve the hostage situation. Her powerful influence and competency is asserted in Garcetti's response of "Seems like you've got all the angles figured out I'm not exactly sure what you need me for?" When she answers "Well obviously I need your blessing Mr. President." Garcetti attempts to assert himself, questioning "And if I don't give it?" Instead of stating an argument Barrish simply gives an audible sigh, upon which Garcetti addresses his Chief of Staff, saying "Announce that we're sending the former President to negotiate with Hakkam." Barrish is able to influence the policies and actions of the administration in her current role. Yet, that power remains intimately connected to a gendered subject position she holds in relation to both the current and former President. This is further compounded through the portrayal of the marriage of the former President and First Lady.

Marriage

Media coverage of politicians marriages generally suggests that there is a finite amount of power to exert.¹³⁸ *Political Animals* draws attention to a perception problem that faces female candidates. In the episode “The Woman Problem,” a pollster gathering information for Barrish’s upcoming run tells Hammond “voters only like her without you. It’s not that they don’t like you, it’s just that they think you make her look weak.” However, despite the couple’s divorce and Barrish’s personal ambition, *Political Animals* reinforces a notion of a married woman’s political life as an extension of her husbands. This brought about in part, as discussed earlier, by Barrish’s (ex) husband being cast as the figure of presidentiality, but also by presenting Barrish’s decision making as highly influenced both directly by Hammond and by the couples (changing) relationship dynamic.

Both Barrish and Hammond are shown conflating their romantic life with their professional ambitions. However, only Barrish is seen to enact gender roles in order to access power. In the first few moments of the pilot, it is clear the former two-term President’s interest in power is only hampered by the constitution. After his wife’s concession speech, a young woman in the crowd asks “Why can’t *you* run again, Mr. President?” Hammond’s first words in the text are “Would if I could,” and the scene which follows between the couple makes it clear that Hammond sees his wife’s career as an extension of his. When her ambition offered him an opportunity to wield presidential power, he is invested in it. However, he is unwilling to support Garcetti for the sake of Elaine’s career (post-primary), because, as he insists, “I held the highest

¹³⁸ Zeldes, “Maverick, Escort, Or Style Setter,” 198; Falk, *Women for President*, 12. Whether the candidate or the candidate’s wife- women perceived as strong act to frame the man in the marriage as weak. This corresponds with what Jamison, and others, have identified as the “zero sum game” of marital relationships. And as Jamison points out, this is not a dynamic that is restricted to a partner who had formally been in presidential politics, or even politics in general. Jamieson, *Beyond the Double Bind*, 34.

office in the land, an office only 41 men before me ever held. I don't eat shit, I serve it." In the text's first exchange between the couple, the presidency is imbedded in the masculinized history of the office and Hammond's presidential status is set against Garcetti's. While Hammond may see her career as an extension of their relationship, Barrish is at first shown considering their marriage in terms of its benefit to her career.

The continual interspersing of scenes and timelines further emphasizes Barrish's political and personal allegiances as intertwined. At the end of the scene discussed above, Barrish asks for a divorce. In the first few minutes of the series, we are shown that when Hammond is no longer willing to help her career, Barrish severs her attachment to him. However, the personal relationship between the two takes up much of the series plot, and that emphasis works to define Barrish through the role of wife. Directly after Barrish's declaration of divorce, the series main time frame of "two years later" is established.¹³⁹ Still, the subject of the scene remains her marriage. Barrish is shown being interviewed by a reporter who is asking for her reaction to accusations that she divorced her husband for political gain. This question is followed by the suggestive statement that Barrish "then quickly developed quite a rapport with Garcetti." Before Barrish's response, the scene cuts to a brief flashback of her at a campaign rally with Garcetti, enticing him to dance with her to the Staples Singers' "I'll Take You There." She is shown to end her marriage, and subsequently align herself with the new President through enacting a gendered role.

Despite her divorce from former President Hammond, Secretary of State Barrish's relationship to the office of the presidency is consistently presented as inextricable from her

¹³⁹ The series flashes the words "two years later" establishing the plot of the main time line through its relation to both her concession of the nomination and her divorce.

relationship to her husband and the role of wife. For example, the episode “Second Time Around” begins with a flashback of Barrish confronting Hammond in the Oval Office about his publicly revealed affairs. This is followed directly by a mirroring of her in the exact physical position in the Oval Office with President Garcetti confronting him about his inaction in saving the American hostages in Iran. Each scene features Barrish urging the President (each man) to be a “better man” and to be “worthy of [the] office.” The coupling of these scenes connects her subservient professional position to Garcetti with her personal one in relation to Hammond. It also positions her in a typically gendered role as each man’s moral compass. In addition, the dialogue between Garcetti and Barrish in the second scene revolves around her arguments for why Hammond’s intelligence and presidential stature make him the only suitable figure to save the hostages.

Publicly, Barrish is able to sway the actions of President Garcetti. Yet privately she is portrayed as continually influenced, and even manipulated, by her ex-husband. Rather than her divorce providing an opportunity to show a female politician ‘making it on her own,’ the couple’s relationship and reconciliation becomes a central plot point and is shown affecting Barrish’s personal and professional decision making. Towards the end of the pilot episode, Barrish has a rendezvous with Hammond at a motel. The two have sex, and afterwards they begin to discuss Hammond’s (upcoming) role in saving the American hostages in Iran. As the conversation progresses, Barrish comes to understand that Hammond had used their relationship to manipulate her into advocating for his involvement as a means for him to wield his presidential stature and one-up Garcetti. As she says “All this just so you can get back in the game?” The two openly discuss the fact that their relationship is both personal and political.

While Hammond sees this as ideal, Barrish is unhappy and feels exploited. Although she still asserts that Hammond is the only appropriate presidential figure, this interaction undercuts Barrish's sense of confidence professionally, as she questions her own decisions and motivations.

The relationship between Barrish and Hammond suggests an inappropriate blending of the personal and the professional when women are involved in politics. Although Barrish divorces Hammond, she defers to his opinion, and he operates as the energy behind her ambition to run again. There is also an implication in the text that she wants to run for president again as an attempt to regain the attention of Hammond. He becomes romantically involved with her again when she is able to provide access to the office, and it is at the end of the scene discussed above that she first voices her attention to run again, telling her driver so as they leave the motel. In the episode "The Woman Problem," her son Douglas even states that he is concerned that a desire to hold her ex husband's interest is the impetus for her second presidential run. Throughout the series, Bud Hammond is shown as invested in Barrish's *presidential* ambition, but not her career generally. He is shown privately urging her to run a number of times. In fact, the last lines of the entire series are Bud attempting to convince her to run against (now acting President) Collier. He is shown attempting to put the words into his ex-wife's mouth, telling her "Just say the words, just say 'I'm going to run for President.' Just say the words Elaine." The final shot of the series is the anticipation of Barrish's response.

The portrayal of Secretary of State Elaine Barrish is preoccupied with her relationship to former President Hammond. So much so that she is cast in a wifely role in relation to the current

President Garcetti.¹⁴⁰ The overall portrayal of the marriage shows that though publicly her ex-husband may be damaging, personally she remains extremely connected to him in ways which undermine Barrish as an independent political figure. This presentation of the couple's marriage compounds a portrayal of Hammond as occupying the role of protector and as the ideal of presidentiality, further distancing Barrish from appearing as a presidential figure.

Presidential historian Forrest McDonald writes that “[w]hether as warrior-leader, father of his people, or protector, the president during his tenure is the living embodiment of the nation.”¹⁴¹ Each of these roles is gendered in ways which render them variably inaccessible to women. Neither *Political Animals* nor *Commander in Chief* successfully portray their female protagonists in these roles. Arguably, little is done in either text to attempt such a portrayal. However, both texts do cast the men close to Barrish and Allen into these roles; re-enforcing both their importance to presidentiality, as well as women's inability to perform them. The role of mother is emphasized in both texts, and in a way in which motherhood appears to directly conflict with each woman's focus and dedication to the responsibilities of public office. Gender roles associated with marriage create a perception problem for women in presidential politics. And while these texts draw attention to this reality, and provide an opportunity to explore its personal implications, they often reify a hierarchical gender dualism as inseparable from marital partnerships. The portrayals of marriage on both *Political Animals* and *Commander in Chief* suggest that women, no matter how powerful, will defer to their husbands and that their husbands will inappropriately influence them. Only in so far as these series are premised on

¹⁴⁰ Interestingly, although President Garcetti's young son is featured in a number of scenes, his wife, the current First Lady, appears only once in the background standing next to Air Force One. Barrish is never shown comparatively or in conflict with any other female political figures, allowing her to appear as the sole occupier of the gendered role of wife.

¹⁴¹ McDonald, *The American Presidency*, 425.

women in politics do they resist the binds associated with private/public roles. The portrayal of gendered roles, both familial and presidential, in both texts exposes the heightened masculinity of the office and implicates these shows in its maintenance.

Femininity/Competency

Michael Kimmel argues that a presidential ‘hardbody’ has operated as an important symbolic in presidential elections since the 1840s.¹⁴² “Today’s mass media intensifies the popular impulse to scrutinize the bodies of leaders and would-be leaders” for signs that inspire confidence in their ability to protect ‘the people.’¹⁴³ The physical embodiment of the office is an important part of how candidates cast themselves as ideal heads of state and ideal representatives of the people.¹⁴⁴ For over 200 years that has consisted of projecting masculine characteristics such as strength, athleticism, and dominance.¹⁴⁵ Candidates are often framed as feminized, by their opponents and the media, when they are unable to project this sufficiently, and women and their bodies have for centuries have been defined against such characteristics.¹⁴⁶

Kathleen Hall Jamison argues that the double bind of femininity/competence is the result of traits seen as masculine being those associated with psychological maturity, rationality, logic and decisiveness, while traits defined as feminine have been associated with immaturity and dependence.¹⁴⁷ Jamison’s femininity/competency double bind is often reframed as more generally “too masculine or too feminine” or more specifically “smart/attractive” and applied to

¹⁴² Referenced in Dana D. Nelson, “Afterword: The President in 2045, or, managed Democracy,” 227.

¹⁴³ Sally Stein, “The President's Two Bodies,” *American Art* 18.1 (2004): 32.

¹⁴⁴ Duerst-Lahti, “ ‘Seeing What Has Always Been’ ” 733; Sally Stein, “The President's Two Bodies,” 32.

¹⁴⁵ Duerst-Lahti, “ ‘Seeing What Has Always Been’ ,” 733; Stein, “The President's Two Bodies,” 32.

¹⁴⁶ Duerst-Lahti, “Masculinity on the Campaign Trail,” 91; Jimmie Manning and Cody Short-Thompson, “Gendered Bodies: Considering the Sexual in Political Communication” in *Gender and Political Communication in America: Rhetoric, Representation, and Display*, ed. Janis L. Edwards (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2009), 251-267.

¹⁴⁷ Jamieson, *Beyond the Double Bind*, 83.

both appearance and behavior.¹⁴⁸ Each of these suggests that, beyond the enactment of roles or the specific characteristic of ambition, the expectations of womanhood, sexuality, and femininity preclude women from appearing presidential. Not only are women associated with the body and irrationality, the female body itself comes to signify a lack of presidentiality, and solidify one's status as an object.¹⁴⁹ Yet, as many scholars argue, the celebrification of politics insists that female candidates appear attractive and fit into ideals of femininity and womanhood.¹⁵⁰ This has often been identified as the most persistent catch-22 for female politicians in America, necessitating that they portray themselves in ways which act to undermine the perception of their capability.¹⁵¹

Sheckels, Gutgold and Carlin note that “it is probably no accident that Geena Davis was chosen for the lead in the short-lived series *Commander in Chief*, for she blended stature and attractiveness—read masculinity and femininity—in a way few political women will.”¹⁵² It was certainly no accident. As these authors suggest, female presidential candidates increase the perception of their capability simply by being tall, while it amounts to a basic requirement for viability that they are attractive.¹⁵³ These texts' representation of what a presidential woman

¹⁴⁸ Heldman, “Cultural Barriers,” 35; Rainbow Murray, “Introduction” in *Cracking the Highest Glass Ceiling: A Global Comparison of Women's Campaigns for Executive Office*, ed. Rainbow Murray (Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger, 2010), 11.

¹⁴⁹ Heldman, “Cultural Barriers,” 30.

¹⁵⁰ Heldman, “Cultural Barriers,” 24; Liesbet van Zoonen, “The Personal, the Political and the Popular: A Woman's Guide to Celebrity Politics,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 9 (3): 287-301.

¹⁵¹ Nathan A. Heflick and Jamie L. Goldenberg, “Objectifying Sarah Palin: Evidence that Objectification Causes Women to be Perceived as Less Competent and Less Fully Human,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 45.3 (2009): 598-601; Falk, “Unnatural, Incapable, and Unviable,” 31-52.

¹⁵² Carlin et al., *Gender and the American Presidency*, 171, 175.

¹⁵³ Carlin et al., *Gender and the American Presidency*, 171. Arguably, male candidates too benefit from being tall.

looks like reveals the challenge the “too masculine too feminine” bind presents simply as a matter of appearance.

When casting the characters of Elaine Barrish (Sigourney Weaver) and Mackenzie Allen (Geena Davis) the shows producers were inevitably attempting to create the image of both a likeable and believable—feminine and presidential—woman. The physical similarities between the two actors, including the type of recognition and respect they could expect from an audience likely already familiar with them (both are Academy Award nominees), all confirm the relevance of the appearance litmus test that authors like Carlin et. al and Rainbow Murray argue prevails for female candidates in American presidential politics.¹⁵⁴ Although there is a ten year age difference between Allen and Barrish both women have dark auburn hair (no greys) cut above the shoulder. Both actors are beautiful women with athletic builds, physiques that are slim, but not thin or frail, and, importantly, both stand at six feet tall. To add to these women’s stature, they are both almost exclusively presented wearing high heeled shoes.

Both of these texts assure that the enhanced physical stature these two women possess is never challenged or diminished by the images of the men around them. None of the male characters appear noticeably taller than these women, and many, including their male rivals, appear noticeably shorter.¹⁵⁵ The one clear exception to this is Allen’s husband, Rod Calloway, played by Kyle Secor who stands at 6’ 5”.¹⁵⁶ Allen is only seen as physically diminutive next to

¹⁵⁴ Carlin et al., *Gender and the American Presidency*, 171-176; Rainbow Murray, “Conclusion: A New Comparative Framework” in *Cracking the Highest Glass Ceiling: A Global Comparison of Women’s Campaigns for Executive Office*, ed. Rainbow Murray (Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger, 2010), 288.

¹⁵⁵ Garcetti and Collier are both noticeably shorter than Barrish. Although Donald Sutherland, who played Nathan Templeton on *Commander in Chief* is a tall man (6’ 3”), due to careful staging (as well as footwear) he does not appear taller than Allen. “Donald Sutherland,” *IMDb*, accessed July 10, 2013, <<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000661/bio>>.

¹⁵⁶ “Kyle Secor,” *IMDb*, accessed July 10, 2013, <<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001717/>>.

her husband. Both series' creators craft a highly specific balance of femininity/masculinity in the female characters appearance. Both texts subvert the femininity/competency bind by portraying extremely attractive (and feminized) women with impressive professional experience, and are effective at their jobs. However, rather than their intelligence being seen as the root of their competence, their ability to appear attractive to men and fulfill ideals of femininity and womanhood is consistently presented as the source of their efficacy.

Commander in Chief

Scholars, and members of the press, have argued that the *Commander in Chief* presented Allen in a highly feminized, if not sexualized, fashion.¹⁵⁷ Caroline Heldman, for instance, took issue with what she described as Allen's "bright red lipstick and suggestive blouses" and argued that it "diminish[ed] her status as a possessor of knowledge"¹⁵⁸ However, I argue that for the majority of the program, Allen is dressed mutely and in well tailored suits which are, in terms of style, realistically comparable to what a male president would wear.¹⁵⁹ Where these criticisms appear most accurate is in the few occasions in which she is show at a formal social function. In other words, when she is performing her function as head of state. At President Bridges' funeral, for example, she is dressed in a very feminine dress with a deep V-neck line. This may challenge the traditional masculinized images of the President. However, it also suggests that a woman would appear as objectified in the role of head of state, arguably something that would appear highly unattractive to the American electorate given the symbolic place of the presidency in

¹⁵⁷ Heldman, "Cultural Barriers," 37.

¹⁵⁸ Heldman, "Cultural Barriers," 37.

¹⁵⁹ Although, much of her clothing at least hints at her cleavage, and more often than not she is wearing a skirt suit they seem reasonable and realistic 'women's fashion' choices.

American culture, and the position of the US on the world stage.¹⁶⁰ One episode in particular provides the most powerful example of these dynamics, and clearly illustrates the text's presentation of Allen's enactment of femininity as the key to her efficacy.

In the episode "First Dance" Allen hosts her first (and only of the series) state dinner at the White House. She appears dressed in a strapless bustier ball gown, rhinestoned at the bodice and the waist, with a very low cut back and clearly visible cleavage. The dress itself is extravagant, particularly compared to the other women in the room—including the Russian First Lady and the former First Lady Bridges. The choice of a strapless gown seems particularly unrealistic and sexualized for the context. First ladies, including the current one, have received harsh criticism that sleeveless gowns and dresses are "undignified" and "un-First Lady-like," making it highly suggestive to have the President of the United States baring that much skin at a formal function.¹⁶¹ Allen's attire in the episode presents her in a highly gendered fashion which compounds the very feminized position she takes up.

The state dinner featured in "First Dance" is the culminating event of Allen's first summit. Throughout the episode her femininity, and physical attractiveness, is suggested as the source of her capability. The conflict of the episode revolves around her bilateral talks with the Russian President, during which she pushes to discuss Russian human rights abuses which have not been slated on the agenda. The Russian President takes offense to her insistence and refuses to attend the state dinner, claiming to have come down with the flu. Allen is at a loss as to how to

¹⁶⁰ Daughton, "Women's Issues, Women's Place," 241; Reiser, "Crafting a Feminine Presidency," 48.

¹⁶¹ Bonnie Fuller, "Michelle Obama's Sleeveagate: Why Can't America Handle Her Bare Arms?," *HuffPost*, Mar 2, 2009, accessed July 10, 2013 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bonnie-fuller/michelle-obamas-sleevegat_b_171172.html>. There are racial overtones the chatter about Michelle Obama, but according to the "first ladies and sleeveless dresses" section of FirstLadies.org, it has been a highly contentious issue, throughout American history, including an assortment of changing rules and proscriptions about occasion and amount of skin. Accessed Jul. 10, 2013, <<http://www.firstladies.org/FirstLadiesandFashion.aspx>>

smooth the situation over, and is only able to solve it by having a conversation with the Russian First Lady over tea. The two discuss their husbands and Allen proves herself accommodating and nurturing, asking his wife if she can get the Russian President anything, “Chicken soup perhaps?” Allen’s ability to relate to the Russian First Lady, *as* a wife, makes her encourage her husband to attend the state dinner. Though the Russian President attends, he insists “I’m not here for [Allen], I’m here for my wife,” and Allen is still faced with the conflict between them. A conflict that is necessary to resolve in order for her first foray into international relations to be viewed as anything more than a failure.

Over five days of talks and negotiations in the West Wing Allen is unable to form an amicable relationship with the Russian President; such a relationship being, as her staff points out throughout the episode, both the purpose of these types of bilateral summits and the only way to accomplish anything productive between the two nations. It is not until the end of the episode, when Allen is situated in a depoliticized social function and dressed in a highly sexualized and feminized way as noted earlier, that she is able to succeed. At the state dinner, the Russian President compliments her clothes and appearance and asks her to dance. It is only when they are dancing together that Allen and the Russian President are able finally to address the concerns that had been stalled during the political meetings. Although Allen does not get the results she had hoped for coming into the summit, the two reach a compromise.

Similar to the ways in which the series frames her ‘talking strategy’ during international crises, her decision to accept the dance invitation is framed as bold and out of disregard for political image making. As the Russian President himself points out “Our staffs must think this is inappropriate.” Her staff certainly does, as one member bluntly exclaims “World leaders cannot

be dancing together!” Her Chief of Staff, covering his eyes, asks “Is she leading?” to which her press secretary answers “Oh, she’s leading alright,” suggesting a double entendre. However, only by taking up a gendered position does she become capable of ‘leading.’ The dance may break taboos, but it also reinforces a notion that femininity is incongruous with presidentiality, as her capability is derived from her fulfillment of a feminized/sexualized role in order to accomplish what she was unable to in her political role.

Political Animals

Political Animals similarly presents Elaine Barrish as only effective as a result of her femininity and sexuality. In addition to the convolution that appears between her professional and personal roles in relation to the presidency, her diplomatic responsibilities are presented as including objectification. In the pilot episode, when Barrish is subjected to a public “ass-grab” by the Russian foreign minister, she chastises him privately by hyperbolically threatening to “cut off his balls” in Russian. While likely an attempt to portray her as both attractive to men while being powerful and assertive, this appears highly problematic. Not only does *Political Animals* portray Barrish as *having* to endure sexual harassment as the natural by-product of her job, and insists that she has to deal with this problem privately and individually through demonstrating aggression and violence, the program subsequently presents her sexuality as her source of power and not her authority or competence. When she needs a favor from that same foreign minister she threatens to “tell on [him]” to his wife, to which he responds that he will help her, “but not because you threatened me, because you have balls, and I respect balls, and a great ass.” This suggests not only that the most effective strategy available to her is to align herself with the role

of wife, but that if she was not an individual that was available to this kind of sexualization and aggression, then she would be ineffective as a diplomat.

This becomes a pattern throughout the series. In another episode, under a great time constraint, Barrish is forced to find a (geographically and politically appropriate) nation to hold Hammond's impromptu negotiation with the Iranian leader. The Turkish ambassador becomes her only option which causes her to visit a Turkish bath. The highly gendered location of the scene mirrors the masculinist domain of politics that she must traverse daily. The space becomes sexualized with her entrance.¹⁶² We see Barrish walking through rooms full of sweaty men in various stages of undress leering at her in a violet skirt suit. Finding the Turkish ambassador dressed only in a towel, dripping in sweat, she tells him she needs a favor. Barrish suggests a number of diplomatic favors she could do for his nation, each of which he is disinterested in. She finally asks "What do you want Circan?" To which he responds "Perhaps than you would agree to go to dinner with me." Shocked, she questions him "You would use the lives of three Americans to leverage me into going out with you?" To which he answers "You would sacrifice their lives to not go out with me?" Not only is her objectification shown to be her source of power and efficacy, her submission to this type of objectification is framed as necessary, and would be resisted only out of extreme selfishness. This scene also suggests that not only that women should expect to be, and accept being, sexualized when entering the political realm, but also that their entrance into that masculinist domain sexualizes the political sphere.

¹⁶² Arguably such a location, a Turkish bath in Washington, D.C, is likely sexualized whether there are women there or not. However, the details of the scene overwhelmingly frame it in this way. It is clearly an all-male Hamam and the men all turn their heads and look at her in a mixture of surprise, curiosity and arousal. The camera maintains a full body shot of her walking, in a violet skirt suit and heels, and maintains focus on her legs.

Both texts subvert the femininity/competency double bind through the portrayal of the lead characters. Both women are highly feminized and both text's creators were highly invested in framing their lead characters as competent. However, the ways in which they do so reinforces a smart/attractive bind for women. Rather than presenting two competent women whose appearance and femininity, while perhaps normative or even ideal, is coincidental to their competence, both texts bind their efficacy to their displays of femininity and to the objectification of their bodies. This sends a highly problematic message that such standards of femininity and beauty are legitimate measures of a female candidate's ability to be an effective politician. At the same time, these representations fail to depict these 'feminine and competent' women as intelligent or skilled, suggesting that while only attractive women belong in presidential politics they only belong there because of their sexuality and femininity.

Conclusion

It would be surprising if these programs, or any other mainstream television, earnestly suggested that women were wholly incapable of executing the office of the presidency. The intention of this programming, at least in part, is to make (positive) representations of women in presidential politics available.¹⁶³ As Fiske suggests, television performs a bardic function which draws these representations into socio-centrality. As images of women in presidential politics become more commonly available in popular culture, they have the potential to normalize the understanding of women as natural players in national politics. These texts fill a dearth, and, in that sense, something very well may be better than nothing. However, the symbolic importance

¹⁶³ An executive from USA implied as much in an interview about the series. Cheney, "USA Network's 'Political Animals' Offers Miniseries Fix for Junkies." And Rod Lurie wrote "I have to admit that all of us creatively involved with *Commander* absolutely intended to put the term 'Madam President' into the zeitgeist. I can't deny it." Rod Lurie, "Why America Needs a Black President," *HuffPost* Feb 22, 2008, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rod-lurie/why-america-needs-a-black_b_87891.html >

of US presidency suggests that these two texts inability to successfully imagine a woman fulfilling the office, or even portray the office itself in a way that is not dripping in masculinism, greatly limits these programs' positive or emancipatory messages.

Justin Vaughn and Stacy Michaelson write that while “it is likely that we may one day see America’s first female president inaugurated into the nation’s highest office,” they point out that “this eventuality may be brought about as much by female politicians successfully embracing masculinist characteristics as by the American public becoming reconciled to new ways of imagining the presidency.”¹⁶⁴ *Commander in Chief* and *Political Animals* negotiate the double binds considered here in varied ways. However, these two texts fail to present “female politicians successfully embracing masculinist characteristics.” Neither do these texts successfully reconcile themselves “to new ways of imagining the presidency.” Although at times resisted, none of the double binds considered here could be considered overcome.

Although political parties do in a sense ‘cast,’ these texts are not limited by binds related to appearance in precisely the same way as real female candidates. It seems unlikely that these commercial television creators and producers would *not* hire famous and traditionally beautiful actresses to star in their programs.¹⁶⁵ However, the physical similarity of Barrish and Allen says something about the high degree of specificity involved in attempting to portray a believable female leader in America. In addition, by presenting such images, these texts suggest that only women who possess such an appearance are appropriate in presidential politics; that women with smaller, older, or less attractive bodies do not belong. The representation of these women’s

¹⁶⁴ Vaughn, and Michaelson, “Its a Mans World,” 142.

¹⁶⁵ Arguably, given the industry, these creators would have had to make a very specific choice to hire someone who did not fit into beauty norms.

efficacy as directly tied to their sexuality, femininity, and appearance, can be seen as resisting the femininity/competency double bind. However, it also illustrates the failure to present these women as intelligent and skilled politicians by suggesting that their femininity and sexuality is the most appropriate and effective strategy available to them.

These two texts put up no resistance to the double binds associated with the dichotomous gendered roles associated with women and the presidency. Time and again, these two texts emphasize the roles their lead characters perform in their private lives in an attempt to assure their protagonists 'likeability' (and familiarity) with viewers. Both programs' representations of motherhood and marriage reify a notion of women's appropriateness in the private sphere, and confirm negative stereotypes about the impact women's familial roles have on their professional lives. Both *Commander in Chief* and *Political Animals* fail to portray their female protagonists as successfully fulfilling the presidential roles of protector and citizen soldier. Rather than de-emphasizing their importance, the representation of the men around the two women as fulfilling (and having to fulfill) those roles reaffirms them as both fundamental to the office and exclusively male. On *Political Animals* the creation of a figure of presidentiality that is both hyper-masculinized and Barrish's sexual (and marital) partner results in a remarkably masculinist representation of presidentiality, one which operates to the exclusion of Barrish being recognized as capable of fulfilling that role. Although both texts were credited with the potential to change existing perceptions, examining both texts portrayal of the performance of gender(ed) roles exposes how they operate to reify normative expectations of gender.

In American popular culture, women have been portrayed, at worst, as interlopers, and at best, placeholders in the masculinist domain of politics. These two texts address the challenges

women in American politics face as a result of cultural perceptions of gender. However, more often than not, these texts work to reproduce the same dynamics that they overtly critique. *Commander in Chief*'s characters and narrative are structured by the ambition/morality double bind. While imagining a female president may challenge the assumptions of masculinism, by presenting Allen as removed from politics and disassociated from the office operates to reinscribe masculinism central place within presidentiality. Although *Political Animals* presents a positive portrayal of women's ambition, in striking contrast to *Commander in Chief*, the limits placed on Elaine Barrish's ambition remain highly gendered. In addition, the fact that Barrish is modeled on the life and character of Hillary Clinton suggests that, rather than changing perceptions, this type of programming has simply tapped into an existing shift that has been most highly signaled by Clinton.¹⁶⁶

At this time, it seems virtually impossible to discuss the idea of a female president without addressing Hillary Clinton. Arguably, that has remained true over the last three decades.¹⁶⁷ Clinton remains the most discussed democratic presidential contender for 2016, as she was in 2006. She is the assumed frontrunner and to many the de facto Democratic nominee.¹⁶⁸ If Clinton does run and win she will be one of the most qualified, and well

¹⁶⁶ There are certainly individuals who have a negative view of Clinton, and her ambition, however, it seems very unlikely that they would watch this program.

¹⁶⁷ Journalist David Brock's 1996 biography *The Seduction of Hillary Rodham*, for example, begins with a chapter entitled "Hillary for President."

¹⁶⁸ She has already received highly publicized endorsements from a number of seated Senators, former four star General Wesley Clark, and other key players in the Democratic party and in the media.

recognized party nominees of the last 100 years, and importantly one of the most experienced in presidential politics.¹⁶⁹

In her concession speech Clinton stated that “[i]f we can blast 50 women into space, we will someday launch a woman into the White House.” The dearth of women in the types of positions which provide a path to the White House suggests that the goal of a female president may remain much farther in the distance than the current discourse suggests.¹⁷⁰ Although Clinton’s success should in no way be discounted, if Clinton herself does not, as she put it, “shatter that highest, hardest glass ceiling in the world,” women in presidential politics will remain trapped in an airless atmosphere until someone, ‘someday,’ manages to do so. Women with qualifications only comparable to their male counterparts, women who are not already known political commodities both nationally and internationally, face astronomical challenges based on gender.¹⁷¹

Masculinity still forms the litmus test for presidentiality. Though conceptions of masculinity have changed over two hundred years, this basic linkage between the presidency and masculinity remains.¹⁷² In the twenty-first century, it is imperative that we evaluate and confront the artificial constraints on office holding that exist in American democracy. It is imperative that we confront the biases and barriers that, as Clinton herself pointed out in her concession speech, are “often unconscious.” These limits have operated consistently over the

¹⁶⁹ The only other contenders being G H W Bush (VP, CIA, China liaison, UN ambassador, congress, RNC head) who, like Clinton lacked elected executive experience. Eisenhower (name recognition, qualified in historical context), and maybe Nixon in name recognition and experience/longevity in presidential politics. Not counting incumbency (FDR) or TR’s failed 1912 run.

¹⁷⁰ Duerst-Lahti, “ ‘Seeing What Has Always Been’,” 733; Falk, *Women for President*, 69.

¹⁷¹ Falk, *Women for President*, 29. I do not intend to suggest that Clinton herself has/does not faced such challenges.

¹⁷² Georgia Duerst-Lahti, “ ‘Seeing What Has Always Been’,” 733-7.

now three centuries that women have been seeking the presidency, and their persistence should not be diminished simply because the sharp edges seem to have been worn down.

While it seems likely, at this juncture in history, “someday” a woman will be elected president, the issue that arises with the longstanding narrative of inevitability is that it avoids challenging the barriers and biases that exist for presidential candidates who are understood through their difference. It avoids confronting these limits for what they are: undesirable today. And by doing so, it allows them to persist into tomorrow. If equality in American democracy has the potential to be improved, then it can only be through a constant awareness of its trajectory, and not faith in a teleology which has proven itself insufficient if not false.

The unequivocal endorsement of these programs by the White House Project may operate to obscure the damaging messages these programs send about both women in politics. In addition, these programs do not actively challenge the masculinist understanding of the office, and in many ways operate reaffirm it by presenting it as natural or insurmountable. However, what is perhaps most frightening is how unsuccessful these programs were, neither being picked up for a second season despite enormous promotion and publicity for their premieres.¹⁷³ Although surely in part due to circumstances of production, and less than stellar writing on both programs, the failure of these shows suggests that the American public is disinterested in seeing women in these positions of power at this time.

What is more, is that The White House Project itself was forced to close its doors in February of 2013, citing the current fundraising environment. This is surely due in part to the

¹⁷³ *Commander in Chief* was the highest rated, most promoted, and most publicized premiere for ABC in 2005. *Political Animals* was promoted by an enormous marketing campaign in which USA and The White House Project co-ordinated. Both series also benefitted from promotion by The White House Project in the form of a multitude of laudatory television, print, and online interviews about each show given by the organization’s President and Vice President. Heldman, “Cultural Barriers,” 34; Zurawik, “USA’s ‘Political Animals’ and The Way TV Helps Us See What We Can Be.”

economic climate. However, it is also likely in part due to a political atmosphere which currently equates the discussion of gender biases in presidential politics, and the promotion of female candidacy, with the endorsement of a specific candidate: Hillary Clinton.¹⁷⁴ The 2016 election cycle will likely end speculation about a Clinton presidency, either way. However, the analysis of these texts, heralded to present emancipatory images of women in presidential politics, suggests that the barriers formed by cultural expectations of gender remain remarkably prevalent in American political and popular culture, all the more damaging for being left unrecognized and unchallenged.

¹⁷⁴ Rod Lurie himself stated that when producing *Commander in Chief* he was repeatedly, and harshly, “accused of making nothing more than a commercial for Hillary Clinton.” Rod Lurie, “Why America Needs a Black President.”

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