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Madam Secretary: A Case Study in the Media Representation of Female Foreign Policymakers

Jessica F. Gibbs

The first season of *Madam Secretary* aired in September 2014; it was renewed twice, and the third season began in early October 2016. This review will cover the first season of twenty-two episodes, as it is the only one I have so far been able to watch in Britain. The premise of the first season is that Conrad Dalton, ex-CIA director and president of the United States, has cast back to his days at the CIA to select a former senior analyst, Dr. Elizabeth McCord, as a replacement for his first secretary of state, Vincent Marsh, who was killed in an airplane crash.

At the time, Elizabeth and husband Dr. Henry McCord are professors at the University of Virginia (UVA) who run a horse farm on the side, and Elizabeth is both surprised and challenged by Dalton's invitation to join the administration. As she puts it to her former colleagues at a spy reunion dinner before the offer is made, in her post-CIA life she and her husband are teachers, parents, and horse owners, "and every morning we wake up that's all we've gotta be."¹ The season develops in real time: it is 2014 when Elizabeth McCord is appointed secretary of state, and the scenarios, which range from the banal (Greek debt) to the sinister (Russian nuclear submarine crisis) to the faintly comic (Venezuela), are topical and at least somewhat plausible.

As Téa Leoni, who plays Elizabeth McCord, explains, the season attempts to portray "the gal behind the seal," and the interest of the season does not lie entirely in the foreign policy challenges with which the female secretary of state grapples, though the episode-long scenarios, the long-running pursuit of a treaty with Iran, and an undercover investigation of the suspected murder of her predecessor Marsh consume considerable screen-time. It lies also in the challenges of office management, romances, and politics, and of family relationships. Elizabeth, who is forty-six during the first season, is mother to Stephanie (Stevie), who is twenty and at college as the season begins; Alison (a fifteen-year-old); and Jason (a thirteen-year-old). She is wife to Henry (played by Tim Daly), a former Marine who saw active duty in the 1991 Gulf War, an academic theologian, and a prolific author with a particular interest in military ethics.

Henry is initially content with a transfer from UVA to the Washington-based Georgetown University when Elizabeth becomes Madam Secretary, but he is "reactivated" by the National Security Agency (NSA) early in the season so that he can participate in the surveillance of a foreign religious scholar who is an NSA suspect. By the end of the first season, he is contemplating a new post at the National War College. It would be a real job training the future military leaders of the United States rather than simply "cover," but it would still give him the high-level security clearance he would need to fulfil the calling to public duty he shares with his wife in ways beyond academic instruction.

My discussion will begin by focusing upon three aspects of *Madam Secretary*: women in the public eye and the media's focus on their appearance; women as high-level foreign policymakers and how people within and outside the U.S. political system respond to them; and women as jugglers who combine demanding professional lives with their non-negotiable responsibilities as mothers to minor children. The first of these aspects is given relatively little play by the writers, at least after the pilot episode. In the pilot, it is made clear that Elizabeth is not by nature a clotheshorse or a preener. She dresses quite casually for her workplace, where she is seen in conversation with a pushy young male student, and appropriately for mucking out the stables on her estate. With her hair in pigtails, and perhaps still smelling faintly of horse manure, Elizabeth is offered the position of secretary of state by President Dalton, who is dressed impeccably in suit and tie.

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Fast-forward two months, and the pantsuits and plain, rather masculine, shirts that Elizabeth chooses for the office do not cut it in Washington, D.C. Russell Jackson (played by Željko Ivanek), the president's chief of staff, who is at odds with Elizabeth over how to respond to the plight of two young Americans imprisoned in Damascus, recommends a stylist, claiming that the suggestion has come from a president aware that image is an important part of the job. The stylist, or "personal appearance specialist," is introduced to Elizabeth by Russell the following day. The secretary puts her off (she is shepherded away by Elizabeth's young male personal assistant, Blake Moran), noting that "I have never met a situation where I don't have a choice in the matter." However, the next call on her time is almost as trivial: arrangements

for a protocol dinner with the king of Swaziland and his many wives. When she urges her speechwriter to include "something of substance" about "global health issues" or "developing economies" in her speech at the dinner, Press Secretary Daisy Grant (Patina Miller) demurs: "I just don't think now is a good time for substance." In response, Elizabeth produces her own example of nothing-speech: "I am grateful for the opportunity to expose the world to a variety of cultural differences as we move toward a more global-thinking society."

The next day, however, when it turns out that the parents of the boys held in Damascus have given an interview to the *New York Times* that is likely to make a splash if it is not a big news day, Elizabeth calls in Russell's image consultant to create a diversion. Dressed in a bright red coat, dress and shoes, and with a fetching new hairstyle, she greets the public. Her new look gets substantial and positive TV coverage, to the mild disgust of son Jason, who comments that "a new outfit isn't really a global event." At the dinner with the king of Swaziland, Elizabeth manages to be both

gracious and full of substance. After the king toasts to the “beautiful secretary of state,” she offers U.S. assistance to put the AIDS epidemic in Swaziland back at the top of the king’s agenda, noting, as she acknowledges each wife by name, that he has no shortage of female counsel.

Following this episode, much less attention is paid to Elizabeth’s personal appearance or to the harsh standards typically used by the media in judging public women (think Hillary Clinton’s “Cleavagegate” in summer 2007).² We never see the red-coat-and-dress combination (or the shoes) again during the season, but the way Elizabeth dresses, now that she has discreet (off-screen) input from a stylist, is no longer the story. Her outfits are generally conservative though sometimes a little more fashion-forward: fitted pants, sometimes with coordinated jackets; short, but not too short, skirts and dresses; smooth and expensive-looking blouses. She never wears patterns and she chooses low-key accessories, except for the dark-framed glasses she sports from time to time. Her subtly highlighted blonde hair, shoulder-length and almost always worn loose (no “scrunchiegate” here), is sufficiently high-maintenance and feminine without slipping over into trophy wife territory. Just as we do not see the cleaning staff who presumably keep her Washington residence spic-and-span, we witness neither the effort that goes in to maintaining this public shield, nor the consequences of a crack in it. Unlike the narcissistic presidential wife Clare Underwood in *House of Cards*, Elizabeth is not seen running to keep herself fit, strong and slim. In episode 22 she rejects the suggestion from Blake that she might be “fitbitting,” though in an aside to troubleshooter Mike Barnow we learn that she has at least some acquaintance with the gym.

Employing a stylist does not turn Elizabeth into a fashion hound. Flipping through a magazine on the sofa, she reacts with equanimity to a reference to her outmoded footwear.³ On the other hand, the objectifying of the political spouse now works both ways. Henry McCord makes number three on a list of Washington arm candy.⁴ The female staffers dress appropriately for the workplace themselves, but make little comment about their own or *Madam Secretary*’s style choices. It is a non-story once professional help has been accepted. It is only in a flashback to 2005, in the last episode of the first season, that a link between Elizabeth’s emotional state and her appearance is visible. Hair scraped back in a high and unbecoming pony-tail, glasses on, she is scrubbing out a pot the morning after a critically important argument with her husband.

As one would expect with such a current political drama, there are references throughout the season to the public image of both Elizabeth and President Dalton. But rather than her looks or clothes, what is important is what is referred to in jargon as the “optics” of a particular situation. Elizabeth standing next to the female foreign minister of India outside an American industrial plant on the banks of the Ganges is good optics, but not when the plant begins to leak toxic materials into the sacred river.⁵ Yet she sounds faintly irritated by the attempts of her press secretary to clean up her image in the public mind before the problem itself has been resolved. Instead, Elizabeth works on fixing the leak by getting the Texas Hotshot firefighters flown out to India. Once again, it is substance over style.

The second aspect of the show, women as foreign policymakers, is one that has been explored in media representations before, though the scope of President Dalton’s commitment to gender equality in *Madam Secretary* is perhaps unusual. Not only does Dalton appoint Elizabeth, he also has Admiral Ellen Hill, USN (Johanna Day), who is

presented in a much less feminine way than Elizabeth), as chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and an African American woman as attorney general (Anna Deavere Smith). When the first season was released, a female secretary of state was not the novelty it had been in the 1990s. Three of the last five actual secretaries of state had been women (one made a guest appearance as herself in the second season of *Madam Secretary*). Yet the presence, which by 2014 was undeniable, of women in circles of power outside the United States is somewhat underplayed in the first season. An exception is the female chancellor of Germany, Frieda Schulz, whose character is a virtual impersonation of Angela Merkel.

Elizabeth’s gender is relevant not only to the American media, but also to others within the political system. Russell Jackson’s initial approach is by turns to patronize and undermine the new secretary, though Dalton does try to rein him in when he is present. Jackson mansplains how the withdrawal of the U.S. ambassador from Yemen would appear to the Yemeni government: “It’s tantamount to an act of war . . . that’s not an invitation to a sleepover. We’re not braiding each other’s hair after that.”⁶ The president himself is for the most part respectful, though he does not appreciate the exaggerated show of respect Isaac Bishop, the CEO of private security firm Vesuvian, pays to Elizabeth in episode 2, “Another Benghazi.” Bishop keeps the president and joint chiefs waiting in the situation room until the arrival of Elizabeth, who has eaten her own academic words about the perils of private security to choose him to provide additional forces to protect the ambassador.

Elizabeth refers to the possibility that her gender has an impact on the way people relate to her in a couple of jokey asides in this episode. In reference to Everard Burke, the chair of a key congressional committee who would need to approve an increase in U.S. military personnel for the embassy, she asks an advisor, “Is flirting going to get me anywhere?” Later she suggests that her golf game was too good for the congressman’s comfort. She is proved correct in her contention that the ambassador, a personal friend, is too macho to appreciate correctly the danger he faces from the demonstrators outside the embassy. Her own intuition that the new Iranian foreign minister might be someone “who could help lead us to peace,” is accurate, and her hunches, sharpened by her twelve years at the CIA and based upon a firm understanding of global realities and a willingness to accept advice from others, prove good in several other episodes as well.

We see Elizabeth interacting with foreign men, typically from countries where women have not taken a leadership role, and we see her responding to the human angle of the situations she encounters. Three episodes are particularly important in this regard. The eighth episode opens with separatist unrest in Moldova and a plea from the Moldovan prime minister, Diacov, for U.S. assistance to deal with the rebels. The Foreign Relations Committee is not due to meet in time, and in any case, the season consistently depicts Congress as a real or potential obstacle to the Dalton administration doing the right thing, so instead Elizabeth offers the help of a former CIA colleague. Jim, an ethnic Moldovan who can aid Diacov in building up a counterinsurgency capability, leaves for Moldova with the prime minister.

Meanwhile, we see that Elizabeth has also become the butt of the sexist comments of Russian General Kolba on social media, though she does not deign to respond. When the co-pilot, in league with the separatists, lands Diacov’s plane in Kolba-controlled Moldovan territory, Elizabeth devises a plan based on an earlier CIA operation in Sarajevo that guarantees U.S. special forces the advantage of surprise.

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As Kolba treats the secretary to some heavy-handed flirtation over a video link, the rescue team drives a replica of the general's car into the compound, kills Kolba's guards and quickly finds the hostages (Diacov is dead, but Jim is still alive). Kolba is only made aware of what has happened when his helicopters explode. The episode ends well: most of Kolba's followers desert him after the destruction of his air force; the new female Moldovan prime minister takes the credit for the attack; Jim is ecstatically reunited with his wife at an American airbase; and Kolba, one assumes, now views the "little lady" with the "beautiful legs" at the State Department rather differently.⁷

In episode thirteen, Elizabeth's sympathy is engaged by the plight of an emaciated Indonesian maid imprisoned for three years in the home of a couple attached to the Bahrain embassy. Pursuing the couple through the American courts for human trafficking and false imprisonment would fit with the stress on human rights that Elizabeth is pursuing, but the Defense Department has an interest in Bahrain as the location for an important U.S. naval base. This leads to a testy exchange with Admiral Hill, who suggests State will lose if it comes down to a clash with Defense. Elizabeth feels she has an advantage because of her long-term friendship with Crown Prince Yusuf of Bahrain, who attended the same (fictional) boarding school she did and is a liberal hope for his country. As he flies into Washington, Elizabeth is optimistic that he will allow the couple, who have been arrested and strip-searched as they attempted to fly home, to stand trial.

Elizabeth greets Yusuf warmly, listens as he explains the sensitivities of the case, and invites him to experience her terrible cooking and meet her two younger children (as luck would have it, Henry's steelworker father is also visiting). As they part, Elizabeth is hopeful that he will persuade his father to do the right thing. The Bahrainis instead choose to promote the diplomat to a rank at which he is automatically entitled to immunity from prosecution.

Welcoming Yusuf to her home, Elizabeth reminds him of "all the times that you defended equality for women and vowed to stop the exploitation of the underclass." He replies, "We're not seventeen anymore," but she notes that they now have a chance to really make a difference. At dinner, Elizabeth is disappointed and her family members intemperate. Henry's father chides the crown prince, remarking that his country's wealth is "is built on the backs of the poor", and Henry has to step in to enforce good manners. As they say goodbye, Elizabeth quotes the words of Yusuf's younger self about the value of principled dissent back at him. In Elizabeth's conversation with the maid, we learn that the prince has "secured financial reparations", and she is also given the opportunity to apply for asylum in the United States. Instead, the maid says that she will accept the offer of a job in Bahrain from the diplomat's brother—perhaps a less frightening option than going it alone in a foreign country. Upon leaving, Daisy reminds Elizabeth that it is the maid's choice, and Elizabeth replies, "I wish her circumstances allowed her to make a different one." Immediately following this conversation, we see Yusuf on television saying that the couple will be prosecuted in Bahrain, using the same words Elizabeth had quoted back to him: "some dissent is good, especially when standing up for the right reasons." In mid-speech he is shot down by a radical opposition gunman.

The crown prince's funeral is rapidly scheduled, and at this point, the requirements upon Elizabeth become gender-specific. As a woman she cannot be an equal participant at her friend's funeral, but would instead be kept with the other women behind a curtain. Yet as U.S. secretary of state she cannot be seen to be thrust into the background. As Elizabeth puts it, "I'm not here to sit in judgment of the Bahraini culture, or to change it, but it is my job to represent ours without devaluing my office

or gender." The dilemma of representation and cultural differences is posed acutely here. The Defense Department is disgruntled by her hesitation to attend the funeral. The Bahrainis have already started to hold up deliveries to the U.S. base. When Elizabeth is helped by Henry to find a compromise (she flies in on a low-key visit to pay her condolences to the bereaved father, but not to participate in the funeral), the base problem is resolved. A coda to the episode is a revealing conversation between Elizabeth and Admiral Hill. Hill notes that she was previously speaking for the chiefs of staff as a group. They had been disappointed by her decision, but "then again, I don't think any of them have ever sat in a staff meeting and had their ideas undermined by male subordinates to their face."⁸

The importance of gender is obvious also in Elizabeth's interview with the Chinese foreign minister over China's designs on the Ecuadorian rainforest.⁹ She is at this point suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, following a brave flight into the eye of an Iranian coup. During the coup she witnesses the violent deaths of her bodyguards and Iran's foreign minister, with whom she had been building an important diplomatic relationship and something approaching a friendship. The encounter with the Chinese foreign minister is prologue to a panic attack for which she is hospitalized, but the episode plays to a belief that norms of behaviour are stricter for women in public life than they are for men. The Chinese foreign minister is visibly discomfited at the expression of Elizabeth's disdain even before it becomes a harangue about the environmental legacy the current generation will leave for their children.

The third of the aspects under discussion, the juggling act performed by professional women who are also still in the intensive mothering years, is exemplified by the fictional Elizabeth McCord in a way it has not been by any of the three women who have actually served as U.S. secretary of state. The first female holder of the position, Madeleine Albright (born in Czechoslovakia in 1937), whose best-selling autobiography is referenced in the title of the show, became secretary of state in 1997 at the age of 59 and had three grown-up daughters.¹⁰ Like Albright and the fictional Elizabeth McCord, the second woman to occupy the role, Condoleezza Rice, appointed secretary of state in 2005 by George W. Bush, came from an academic background in political science, and like McCord, she became Madam Secretary at a relatively young age (50). However, Rice was famously single and unencumbered by children. Hillary Clinton reverted to the Albright model: she was older (61) and had one grown-up daughter when she was appointed secretary of state by Barack Obama in January 2009.

The show seems to have been informed by a high-profile article in the *Atlantic* by Anne-Marie Slaughter, which exposed the difficulties faced by a woman in a real-life position strongly resembling that of Elizabeth McCord.¹¹ Slaughter's prominent post as the first woman director of policy planning in Hillary Clinton's State Department had been made possible by a two-year release from Princeton University, where both she and her husband had tenure and she was dean of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. She commuted to Washington on a weekly basis, leaving on the 4:20 a.m. train from Trenton, but in January 2011, when the two years were up, she resigned and returned to Princeton. The article, which carried the provocative title "Why Women Still Can't Have It All," was an attempt to explain and justify her decision. Slaughter, aware of her own privileged status, argued that for "highly educated, well-off women" fortunate enough to have choices, there were still "social and business policies" in the United States that kept women, particularly mothers, from achieving their potential. Slaughter discussed the "maternal imperative" that made women feel that there was no real choice between work and home when children

demonstrated their pressing need for a mother's time and attention, referred to emerging evidence suggesting that flexibility in the workplace correlated with high performance, and ended the article with a call for Americans to "stop accepting male behavior and male choices as the default and the ideal. We must insist on changing social policies and bending career tracks to accommodate our choices, too."¹²

By October 2015, Slaughter's article had been viewed an estimated 2.7 million times, and her husband, Andrew Moravcsik, joined the debate, writing a companion piece for the *Atlantic* entitled "Why I Put My Wife's Career First."¹³ However, while Moravcsik comes across as a well-intentioned man who recognizes and values his wife's ambition and is a supportive spouse and "lead parent," the article does not touch upon why *he* did not up and move to Washington with their children, as so many women have done in the past. This is odd. As he points out, "a female business executive willing to do what it takes to get to the top—go on every trip, meet every client, accept every promotion, even pick up and move to a new location when asked—needs what male CEOs have already had: a spouse who bears most of the burden at home." So why does he not address the question of the family's failure to relocate head-on? There is a hint of an answer when Moravcsik comments that "to buck gender roles . . . you need the type of secure professional reputation that an Ivy League professorship offers," and when he recounts an anecdote of being asked by a woman in the audience at one of Slaughter's public events to stand up in the audience so she could see if "he really still is an alpha male." Although content to be less "alpha" than his wife, there were some sacrifices of self-esteem and career achievement that Moravcsik was not prepared to make or, perhaps, that his wife would not ask for.

The fictional Henry McCord goes to a little more trouble to accommodate Elizabeth's new state department position: he transfers to Georgetown University, though it is hardly a sacrifice. As he notes to his older daughter Stevie when she visits him in a rather beautiful lecture room, Georgetown, as a Jesuit college, is well-resourced for theology.¹⁴ The writers, however, seem to lack the courage of their convictions. Though they have plotted Henry as a college professor, this is not "alpha" enough, and Elizabeth's sudden promotion might impair the couple's marriage. The balance in their relationship is referred to directly by Elizabeth in the pilot. She remarks on a change since the move to Washington: "We used to have week-night sex. . . . Is it my masculine energy? I've got too much of it? Because I know some men are turned off by women in positions of power." Henry responds on cue, "I totally love women in power positions. I am completely attracted to your masculine energy. Tell me what to say."

To make up for any shortfall in Henry's alpha qualities, the writers have given him a number of roles. He is Elizabeth's ethical guide, he has a prestigious academic position, and he has a macho-man past. But he also takes control physically of a drunken U.S. serviceman who calls him "Mr. Secretary of State" and then calls Elizabeth "a real piece of work" for her deal with Iran (episode 5); he gets an important assignment from the NSA (episode 7); he risks his own safety in Bolivia to avert a mass suicide in an American religious cult (episode 18); and he goes shooting with the Russian president at a time of high tension between Russia and the United States and helps solve the puzzle of this episode by drawing upon his cultural knowledge (episode 20).

The McCords operate as a parenting team to their teenagers with only the most minimal friction. In episode two, when Stevie, who had been living out of the public gaze at Lovell University (a fictitious elite institution), comes under the press spotlight for protesting a shift in

college admissions policy from "need-blind" to "need-aware," Henry appears to needle Elizabeth for her lack of parental attention. "I listened to my daughter. Guilty," he says. Elizabeth asks, "Really, you're going to go there?" "I'm already regretting it," a rueful Henry replies.¹⁵ Later in the season he praises her for her success in combining parenting with work, noting that while she had returned after 4 a.m., she still remembered to get in the laughing string, a birthday tradition in the McCord family.¹⁶

Henry and Elizabeth consult with their children but remain in charge. They do hold a family meeting (off-screen) about whether Elizabeth should accept the job of secretary, but that does not mean that every decision is discussed in front of the children. At a later conference in which the family is briefed on Elizabeth's subpoena to appear before a senate committee, Alison and Jason move a vote on who "is officially over Mom's job," but Stevie breaks in, arguing that "we made a commitment as a family."¹⁷ When Stevie drops out of college, unable to stand the way in which classmates react to her mother's position, she is not given the luxury of time to work on a novel, but expected to look for a temporary job. Eventually, when she finds out that working as an intern for a cause she believes in—the microloan project at the State Department—is impossible without a college affiliation, she decides to apply to study at Georgetown. Elizabeth and Henry together beard the formidable female director of the private Quaker school they chose for Alison and Jason, perhaps a stand-in for the Sidwell Friends school attended by Sasha and Malia Obama, and both sympathize with Jason's determination to leave following a violent altercation with a bullying fellow student.¹⁸ They have some minor disagreements; they quarrel, for example, about the security detail that is necessary for Jason when he starts at a public school, but this dispute is clearly related to the post-traumatic stress disorder Elizabeth suffers.¹⁹

The McCords value the affection and closeness of their children, and are distressed when family bonds are strained. There are obvious and more subtle ways in which Elizabeth's job affects the family. Both Jason and Stevie have difficulty dealing with their classmates as a result of it. Stevie takes time to process the knowledge that as a CIA agent, her mother had authorized the torture of an Iraqi suspect in Baghdad (in mitigation, the episode stresses that he had participated in terrorism and had time-sensitive information). At the end of the season, Stevie has taken some wise decisions and some foolish ones. She has fulfilled her parents' trust by chaperoning her sister adequately; decided to return to college; ended her budding relationship with Arthur, the divorced thirty-nine-year-old boss of the microloan project; and reconciled herself to both parents. On the other hand, shaken up by the fear that her mother might be sent to prison for violating the Espionage Act, she is embarking upon an almost equally inadvisable relationship with the president's son Harrison, who has just come out of rehab. The younger children are depicted as basically sensible and reasonably well adjusted, though Alison is understood by her parents to be vulnerable to peer pressure (episode 2), and Jason needs some lessons about respecting girls from his father (episode 8).

It is this family closeness that makes implausible the backstory to Elizabeth's career choices, which we are given in the final episode. In 2005, after Dalton (then CIA director) shows the president her extremely critical report into interrogation practices in Iraq, she is offered the post as station chief in Baghdad. This is a promotion (as Henry puts it, "an enormous job") and a chance to put her ethical beliefs into practice, to oversee on behalf of the United States a system of intelligence that relies on increased human intelligence on the ground rather than on torture. However, she is the mother of three children, one of whom is only four, and it takes her husband, that

evening, to remind her of the impact that at least a year in Baghdad, away from the family, will have upon them. "I am talking about our marriage and our children." Yet even if Elizabeth's first response to the offer had been gratification at the honour and the vote of confidence and excitement about the challenge, surely her second thought, not hours, but only seconds later, would have been for the family. After a difficult conversation at night and a frosty morning, the "higher purpose" Elizabeth speaks of, which she would be serving if she went to Baghdad, is sacrificed to her immediate duty to family.

Through the lens of gender, and as a result of several hours spent getting to know the McCords, we are led to see her decision as the right one. The only person who questions it on-screen is Juliet Humphrey, the childless CIA friend who Dalton then sends to Baghdad. But Juliet's moral position is undermined by the ruthlessness with which she has dispatched those in the way of the coup she and CIA Director Andrew Muncie had been planning for Iran, and it is while being interrogated by Elizabeth that Juliet, handcuffed and shackled to the floor, charges her with abandoning the CIA.

In fact, the exact circumstances of Elizabeth's departure from the CIA remain unspecified. We are led to one interpretation of events in episode 22 (Elizabeth left because her husband convinced her of the negative effect a posting to Baghdad would have upon their family), but it does not square with the explanation she gives Stevie in episode 10 (the use of torture by the CIA was "ultimately . . . why I left") or with what Dalton says at the outset to Elizabeth. Dalton claims that her predecessor, Marsh, "was always running for office. You have no such ambition. You quit a profession you love for ethical reasons. That makes you the least political person I know."²⁰ This suggestion that women are not ambitious is problematic, though it is clear that Dalton is making a distinction between personal ambition and the ambition to serve.

The further difficulty with this narrative line is that if people with minor children should be precluded from serving the United States in dangerous posts abroad because they owe a greater duty to their families, people such as Alice Milavoy, the Foreign Service Officer featured in episode 10, will necessarily get more than their fair share of such assignments. Alice complains at some length to Nadine Tolliver, Elizabeth's chief of staff, that she has been reassigned to Angola instead of Lisbon not because of her unique language skills or experience but because, as single woman in her fifties, she is regarded by the State Department as dispensable. This is a new take on the longstanding problem of discrimination in the foreign service, and it is one that both Nadine and Elizabeth find convincing.

While not the most pressing gender issues around the world, these may be the most salient to an affluent American audience. Yet the very nature of that audience leads to some odd omissions and curious visual frames. I have already mentioned the unseen domestic help in the McCord household. But in addition, Elizabeth's final "private" exchange with the Iraqi translator who has threatened to expose her to the world as a torturer takes place in English in a function room at the State Department in front of two African American waitstaff who appear to be invisible to Elizabeth. These characters are immaterial to the narrative, serving as scenery, not people. We also see Harrison and Stevie get physical in the back of a presidential limousine, seemingly oblivious to the presence of the chauffeur and

bodyguard in the front seat.

Despite the fact that Henry and Elizabeth come from radically different backgrounds (one grew up with a steelworker union rep for a father, while the other was raised on a horse farm in Virginia), class relations within the United States are almost entirely unexplored. Global inequality and capitalist exploitation are rarely the focus of the storylines either, though the rapacity of American business is occasionally pointed out by Elizabeth or one of her foreign interlocutors (the Ecuadorians and the Chinese in episode 17, and the Greek prime minister in episode 20, for example).

Perhaps more important, the writers' emphasis on Elizabeth's (and by extension, the Dalton administration's) good intentions for the world minimizes some of the less pleasant aspects of U.S. foreign policy. The most glaring instance of this is the mention of fake evidence of civilian casualties from an American drone strike in Yemen in episode 2. Elizabeth, who represents the United States to the world, is doubly justified in this episode. She was right to engage Vesuvian to protect the ambassador (the protestors were indeed a threat), and she was right to criticize the operations of private security contractors when she was an academic, a public critique that led the firm to amend its practices ("Our men did not fire first"). Finally, she retains the humanity to reach out to the widow of the private security guard who lost his life in the operation. While this is an exceptionally positive ending, the episodes typically conclude with a win-win for both the Dalton administration and the admirable foreigners through the ingenuity of Elizabeth and her advisers in finding a solution that serves ethics and the U.S. interest. It is notable that the writers took a different approach towards concluding the season. It ends with Elizabeth and her husband triumphing over congressional opposition and the possibility of prosecution, but with the secretary's growing self-doubt regarding her crowning achievement of peace with Iran.

Notes:

1. *Madam Secretary* (2014/15). Season One, Episode 1.
2. Megan Garber, "Why the Pantsuit," *The Atlantic*, August 2, 2016.
3. *Madam Secretary* (2014/15). Season One, Episode 9.
4. *Madam Secretary* (2014/15). Season One, Episode 5.
5. *Madam Secretary* (2014/15). Season One, Episode 7.
6. *Madam Secretary* (2014/15). Season One, Episode 2.
7. *Madam Secretary* (2014/15). Season One, Episode 8.
8. *Madam Secretary* (2014/15). Season One, Episode 13.
9. *Madam Secretary* (2014/15). Season One, Episode 17.
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