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ABC's 'Scandal': Women in Washington, Political Power, and Holly Petraeus

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Alyssa Rosenberg explores how ABC's "Scandal" mishandles women in Washington and female political power.

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Scandal. Shonda Rhimes's portrait of Washington, D.C., fixer Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington)—a character based on real-life crisis-management expert Judy Smith—is meant to be a kind of power fantasy. Olivia is not only one of the few African-American female main characters on both network and cable television, she's also one with a direct line to the president of the United States. In her cool suits (and sometimes great lingerie), there's no one she can't stare down, no scandal she can't defuse, no trial she can't undermine, no truth she can't uncover.

But while it may be fun to imagine being Olivia Pope, particularly for those of us who live and work in Washington, Scandal actually has a remarkably conservative view of what power women have in the nation's capital, and how we use it. If Aaron Sorkin's HBO drama The Newsroom was about the theory, as NPR's Linda Holmes put it, that "nothing is more dramatically important than a man becoming great, and men cannot become great without women to inspire, provoke, and drive them," Scandal explores an almost inverse idea. In Olivia Pope's Washington, the most potent power a woman has is to destroy men who believe in their own greatness.

Before discussing what women in Rhimes's Washington do with their days, it's worth a reminder of how actual powerful women in Washington spend theirs. Five members of Barack Obama's cabinet in his first term were women, and they served in roles deeply concerned with American security and the economy. As secretary of state, Hillary Rodham Clinton has helped build a strong Democratic advantage on foreign-policy issues. Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano has presided over President Obama's tough, and controversial,

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deportations of undocumented immigrants. At Health and Human Services, Secretary Kathleen Sebelius is responsible for implementing the president's signature accomplishment and a major expansion of the social safety net: the wholesale restructuring of the health-care system. They alone mean that Washington is no longer, as [Nora Ephron](#) wrote in "Crazy Ladies," her 1973 essay about Washington wives, "a city of men and the women they married when they were young."

And it moved even further away from that tradition on [election night this year](#). A record 20 women will be serving in the United States Senate come January, thanks to victories by Democrats Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin (who will also become the first openly gay person to serve in the U.S. Senate), Mazie Hirono of Hawaii, Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota, and Republican Deb Fischer of Kansas. In the House, new representatives mean that women and people of color [will outnumber white men in the Democratic caucus](#).



Kerry Washington plays Olivia Pope on ABC's "Scandal." (Vivian Zink / ABC via Getty Images)

“Even Michelle Obama gets to do more than decorate a White House nursery.”

Scandal began its run with one such woman in a position of power, President Fitzgerald Grant's (Tony Goldwyn) vice president, Sally Langston (Kate Burton). But that character, a religious Christian who the more moderate Grant added to his ticket to bring along the conservative wing of his party, has been a minor part of the show, appearing in only three episodes of the first season. Even when she's present on screen, she's overshadowed by one of her own aides, who ends up complicit in the death of his pregnant lover. And ultimately, she's blackmailed out of causing trouble for Fitz to improve her own presidential prospects in a plotline that mined the most predictable beats of conservative hypocrisy: her teenage daughter turned out to have had an abortion. She's a problem to be contained, rather than a player.

By contrast, Fitz's wife, Mellie (Bellamy Young), is able to carve out some power for herself in the Grant administration, but only by using her femininity and fertility as public-relations tools. On the campaign trail, she garners sympathy for her husband by suggesting that the coldness in their relationship was the result of a traumatic miscarriage. In the second season, she's used her pregnancy with "America's Baby" to push Fitz toward military intervention in an ongoing

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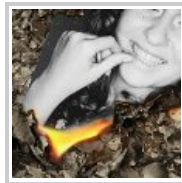
genocide. What gives her status is exactly what granted the Crazy Ladies in Ephron's essay the little power they had over their husbands: the ability to continue playing, or to abandon, the role of a good political wife. That she acknowledges that Mellie is a brilliant woman who had a promising career she put aside to stand by her husband doesn't make it any more depressing to see her so neutered. Even Michelle Obama gets to do more than decorate a White House nursery.

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Kinnamon

2 days ago

Geeze...so steeped in "cultural progressiveness" that we can't discern TV drama versus the reality of the Capitol? Or is this more about the filter of privilege assuming the prerogative of imposing a litmus test of acceptable creative product developed by minorities?? Not quite sure what Shonda would do without your critical guidance....

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dixonom

3 days ago

"Mishandles women in Washington and political power"?? It's a TV drama. On ABC. It's not a documentary or am I missing something. This kind of deep analysis of a

fictional TV show makes me scratch my head and wonder about the intellect of some commentators, not only here, but in pop culture in general. (Note I wrote pop culture and not history!) There seems to be an inability to discern real from unreal. Entertainment from reporting. Well, at least I have Michael K at dlisted.com.

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FaithDiva

3 days ago

Alyssa,

I find it interesting that you have nothing but praise for Claire Danes neurotic character on Homeland that sleeps with a married man as well as the occasional stranger. Different standard for this character, I wonder why.

Your snark is misplaced. Trying to use Holly Petraeus for your obvious bias is low and a stretch. She's going through a real life drama. Trashing a very good fictional one isn't going to change that.

1 LIKE REPLY

Tanna T

3 days ago

Girl i love SCANDAL because its SCANDALOUS!!!

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