

Paranoid Empire: Forever Wars in Popular Culture

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Examining iconic media productions, this essay explores a shift from the immediate post-9/11 period characterized by uncritical support for the U.S. military as a litmus test for patriotism to an increasingly paranoid worldview in which the United States is at once the victor and victim, laying the cultural foundation for authoritarian populism. Unlike Cold War–era productions in which skill, expertise, and diplomacy come together to thwart disaster, in the murky world of the war on terror, military intervention and even torture appear inevitable, with no space for diplomacy. Even as post-9/11 mass entertainment productions collaborated with the military, they increasingly drew on a familiar feature of American culture suspicious of institutions and glorifying of vigilante “justice.” In a world where true justice and security are achieved only by going outside of political and military institutional structures and where war and the violation of international law are the only alternatives to terror, authoritarian populism resonates as an alternative to suspect institutions.

In the post-9/11 wars on terror, popular culture worked figuratively and literally to conscript Americans into supporting military intervention in a forever and everywhere war, in which violence can erupt unexpectedly in the most mundane spaces. In this essay, I point to iconic media productions that exemplify synergistic meaning-making across popular culture and U.S. foreign policy. I identify a shift from the immediate post-9/11 period characterized by uncritical support for the U.S. military as a litmus test for patriotism to an increasingly paranoid view of the world in which the United States is at once the victor and victim. Unlike Cold War–era productions such as *The Hunt for Red October* or *The Peacemaker* (not to mention a slew of Bond franchise films) – in which skill, expertise, and diplomacy come together to thwart disaster – in the murky world of the forever and everywhere war, war and even torture appear inevitable, and there is no space for diplomacy. Even as post-9/11 productions retained strong institutional links with the military and offered a robust defense of military intervention, many of these productions increasingly drew on a *longue durée* feature of American culture that signals deep suspicion of institutions and glorifies vigilante “justice.” American audiences grappled with depictions of war and torture via special ops

agents and snipers who go outside of political and military institutional structures to deliver true justice and security. With shows such as *24* overtly defending torture, in this newly imagined geopolitical reality, the United States does bad things, but U.S. hegemony undergirded by war and the violation of international law is the only alternative to terror.

Across the arc of post-9/11 cultural production, TV, film, and video game producers often worked directly with the U.S. military, signaling authenticity to the audience, who come to think they are in the know. Popular culture also lent cultural capital to the military; in Activision's *Call of Duty* advertisement "There's a Soldier in All of Us," we are called to duty, conscripted into the war on terror.¹ The structural intimacies between the military and cultural production suggest the urgency of an account of the anti-institutional turn.

Just as the *Call of Duty* video games conscripted players into the war on terror, right-wing, authoritarian anti-institutionalists such as Steve Bannon lurked in the online spaces of *World of Warcraft*, building an empire by monetizing bots and intuiting the potential to create an army of young men ready to do battle against a corrupt "deep state."² This experience, argues journalist Joshua Green in his 2017 book *Devil's Bargain*, introduced Bannon to "a hidden world, burrowed deep into his psyche, and provided a kind of conceptual framework that he would later draw on to build up the audience for Breitbart News, and then to help marshal the online armies of trolls and activists that overran national politicians and helped give rise to Donald Trump."³

Bannon and Trump's attack on a "deep state," produced within an emergent world of popular culture, worked in tandem with shifts in older production modes. Increasing portrayals of political and military institutions as inherently dysfunctional, redeemable only by the vigilante who goes outside the law, helped to produce skepticism about expertise and elite institutions.⁴ I consider a tipping point from ambivalence to full-scale skepticism of institutions through a close reading of Showtime's *Homeland* (2011–2020), in which the extreme unpredictability and mental illness of the major character, CIA agent Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes), is the country's greatest asset, mirroring Trump's thinking that unpredictability is an asset in foreign policy and, perhaps, previewing the acceptance by part of the U.S. electorate of a felon, malignant narcissist, and serial liar as president.

Ironically, given its embrace by the intelligence community, the inherent anti-institutionalism of *Homeland* – which focuses on corrupt government officials and U.S. intelligence officers operating outside the law and CIA regulations – anticipates and undergirds a "populist" sympathy to Trump's turning on the military, as he promises to purge the military of "woke" generals, with his team "drawing up its own list of generals to remove from their posts and perhaps even court-martial." In a world of authoritarian "populism," the military is as suspect as any institu-

tion because, as political scientist Ronald R. Krebs has argued, “populists cannot abide strong, independent institutions that might prevent them from doing as they please.”⁵ Trump’s purging of senior African American generals and top-ranked women was enabled by a dynamic explored by Katharine M. Millar in this volume: namely, the persistence of a model of a racialized and gendered martial citizenship within the military, even as the military became the most diverse and multicultural institution in the country. Thus, the attack on expertise, and the replacement of four-star generals with less-qualified and sometimes unqualified leadership, constitutes an overt attack on civil rights, as it undermines national security and reasserts a norm of gendered white supremacy.⁶

Krebs argues: “That the Trump administration would put the military in its sights should not come as a surprise. When they first take office, populists often try to curry favor with the armed forces by encouraging the public to venerate officers and soldiers, especially fallen ones. But this love affair with the military is typically short-lived.” Looking at parallel examples of authoritarian leaders, Krebs explains that

in countries such as Hungary, India, Israel, Poland, and Turkey, populist leaders eventually turned on the military. They variously attacked senior officers as incompetent or treasonous elites, purged those they deemed disloyal and appointed political allies in their stead, seized control of traditionally autonomous military functions, and redesigned military command structures.⁷

Krebs’s contention that authoritarians’ “rhetorical attacks undermined public trust in the top brass” is well-taken, as is his warning that “their efforts to politicize the military rendered their countries’ armed forces less capable of contending with national security threats.” I argue that just as early post-9/11 popular culture called into being a public that was uncritical of U.S. militarism, an increasingly prevalent celebration of vigilantism and suspicion of institutions have called into being a public among whom Trump’s attacks on the military resonate (even as he promises nineteenth century–style imperial takeovers of sovereign countries). In this “paranoid empire,” Trump stoked “deliriums of absolute power and forebodings of perpetual threat.” And he promised to protect Americans from threats coming from within the country and its own corrupted institutions and from threats coming from outside its borders.⁸ And as we will see, the deeply gendered and racialized mapping of threats in the post-9/11 imaginary helps to account for Trump’s targets in the military.

In post-9/11 popular culture, film, television, and video games shaped the geopolitical imaginations of audiences, crafting a common sense about the new military protocols of war. The 2001 film *Black Hawk Down* and the television drama series *24* were released in the immediate wake of 9/11. While their devel-

opment preceded the terrorist attacks, they offer a critical window into imagined military and official enactments of revenge.

Black Hawk Down, a dramatization of the 1993 debacle of U.S. troop casualties in Mogadishu, was a love letter to the American military. Producer Jerry Bruckheimer and director Ridley Scott worked closely with the U.S. military, and like the 1999 book it was based on, the film was part of a growing corpus of novels and movies that extolled the basic goodness of the U.S. military against its critics.

Black Hawk Down made uncritical support for the U.S. military a litmus test for patriotism. To journalist Evan Thomas, it “seemed to enhance the desire of Americans for a thumping war to avenge 9/11.”⁹ Finishing first in box-office earnings at opening and holding that status for three consecutive weeks, the film was acclaimed for its unprecedented “realism” in depicting battle.

David Robb, who has studied the official channels of U.S. military-Hollywood collaboration since World War II, argues that *Black Hawk Down* is a classic case of self-censorship. The filmmakers’ requests for military cooperation, in the form of borrowed warships, aircraft, location access, and troops, were submitted to the Pentagon with five copies of the film script, to accommodate Defense Department requests for script modification if needed. In addition, an on-site technical adviser, what Robb calls a “military minder,” was part of the collaboration. The Department of Defense loaned the film’s producers a platoon of Army Rangers, flew in military helicopters, and used aircraft from the 160 Special Operations Aviation Regiment with pilots involved in the 1993 operation. In return for the Pentagon’s support, Robb says, there was an unstated, mutual understanding among the film’s producers:

Let’s leave out the whole part about the soldiers being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu. Jerry Bruckheimer knows that if they have that in there, the military’s just going to tell them to take it out or they won’t help them....So there’s this self-censorship. When you know the government is looking over your shoulder while you’re typing, that’s a very bad situation.¹⁰

Bruckheimer sounded like a spokesperson for the U.S. military when he defended the film against charges of racism on *The O’Reilly Factor* on Fox News.¹¹

As *Black Hawk Down* fueled jingoistic sentiments, the everywhere war moved into Americans’ homes and smartphones through video games, TV, and film. Through popular culture, the citizen-warrior could immerse themselves in the geopolitical imaginings of a U.S.-led global war on terror in which Americans were at once victors and victims.

Narrated in “real time,” the series 24, premiering on Fox in November 2001 and running for eight seasons, paralleled the structure of the everywhere war. Each episode covered one hour of counterterrorist agent Jack Bauer’s life, and each season covered one twenty-four-hour day. Using split screens to represent constant,

relentless conflict, the series suggested that the war on terror was being waged everywhere.¹² Critics charged that 24 both normalized torture and erroneously demonstrated its efficacy. That and other condemnations, including the show's negative depiction of Muslims, led producers not to examine the show's assumptions but to seek advice from the military on how to "tone down" the torture.

The 2007 movie *Charlie Wilson's War* celebrated rogue characters who go outside of the law to achieve their political ends. The film is based on the true story of the eponymous Texas congressman (played by Tom Hanks), a rakish backbencher who forges an unlikely partnership during the 1980s with right-wing evangelicals on their anticommunist crusade to get Stinger missiles to militant insurgents in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan. The film contests the fact that U.S.-funded militants became the Al Qaeda and Taliban nemeses of subsequent decades. Wilson, or at least his fictionalized version, fancied himself a reincarnated British imperial adventurer who had fought in nineteenth-century Afghanistan. The film insists that later U.S. conflict with Afghanistan was *not* the outcome of the onetime U.S. alliance with anti-American fundamentalists gone horribly wrong, but was the result of the United States departing after the Soviets had been driven out, rather than sticking around to build schools and hospitals.

Other films were more critical of the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the CIA's use of torture in Guantánamo and its secret prisons. Stephen Gaghan's 2005 geopolitical thriller *Syriana*, based on the memoir *See No Evil* by former CIA agent Robert Baer, was deeply skeptical of U.S. policy in the Middle East, challenging American exceptionalism and its assumptions of moral and epistemological superiority. *Syriana* included a sympathetic Middle Eastern modernizer who landed on the wrong side of the CIA because he stood in the way of their cynical short-term goals. The film also sided with exploited laborers in the transnational workforce building and maintaining U.S. bases.¹³

Against a backdrop of news exposés of indefinite imprisonment and the torture of terror suspects at Guantánamo Bay detention camp and CIA black sites, some blockbuster films portrayed U.S. intelligence using its formidable surveillance capabilities to mete out violence for no higher purpose than to shield top secret operations from public exposure. The original Jason Bourne trilogy, based on the novels of Robert Ludlum, was striking in its indictment of the CIA.

Bourne (Matt Damon) is a superagent unwittingly programmed to be a skilled and remorseless killer through a top-secret CIA assassination program called Operation Treadstone. In *The Bourne Identity* (2002), the first film of the series, Bourne is sent to assassinate the leader of an African country, but his programmed ruthlessness falters as Bourne recognizes the humanity of the leader, who shields his children from harm's way, leaving himself exposed. The integrity of the leader stands in contrast to the CIA's illegal assault; for some viewers, the fictional assassination plot resonates with a well-documented history of CIA-involvement in

coups and assassinations removing leaders of countries critical of U.S. policies. As Bourne attempts to recover his identity, he retraces his steps as an assassin, finding his victims' families and confronting the pain caused by his actions.

Despite its depiction of endemic corruption in and out of government in *The Bourne Supremacy* (2004) and *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007), the CIA and, by extension, U.S. policy are absolved in two critical ways. First, Bourne is helped by a virtuous agency insider, Pamela Landy. When Bourne confronts Landy, asking, "Why did you help me?" she responds, "Because I didn't sign up for this, this isn't who we are." Though both are relentlessly surveilled and hunted by high-level officials in the agency, Landy's response tempers the series' portrayal of the agency's sinister actions and values. Second, the possible redemption of the agency ultimately depends on Bourne's prowess as the supreme agent. For all of the repugnant actions and wanton violence the films lay at the agency's doorstep, they have no intention of questioning its legitimacy. Despite everything we might know about CIA assassinations and coups, and more recent evidence of the depravity and ineptitude of the agency (as in the failure to "connect the dots" of warnings before 9/11 or the "slam dunk" evidence of weapons of mass destruction, the pretext for the 2003 invasion of Iraq), the film lacks the courage of its convictions, stopping short of imagining a more democratic and diplomatic approach to global security. We still need agents like Jason Bourne, his rehabilitated humanity symbolizing the redemption of the hegemonic power of U.S. empire. With the public airing of examples of CIA bureaucratic incompetence and human rights violations, cultural production returns to the lone hero reminiscent of the classic Hollywood Westerns, their penchant for violence saving civilization from lawless threats but also marking them as inveterate outsiders. We still need the virtuous vigilante superagent. U.S. empire may be the problem, but it is also the only solution, and flawed institutions can always be rehabilitated.

Superagents – and by extension their high-tech tools – embodied the high-altitude drone strikes of the U.S. wars in Afghanistan, supposedly executed with surgical precision. Our confidence in the superagent has its corollary in an implicit trust in high-tech wars among the general public, as a preferred alternative to the massive deployment of ground troops. Fought in the border zones of Pakistan and Afghanistan – termed "Af-Pak" by the Obama administration, where targeted drone strikes were said to avoid collateral damage and civilian casualties while neutralizing the bad guys – this new mode of warfare flouted international law and relied upon a self-serving distortion of Cold War history.¹⁴

In November 2010, television viewers encountered a one-minute action-packed commercial featuring heavily armed young people and adult civilians (including global NBA superstar Kobe Bryant in Nike sportswear) engaged in fierce urban combat, the rapid fire of automatic weaponry and explosions punctuating

the strains of “Gimme Shelter” by the Rolling Stones (“War, children, is just a shot away”), ending with the tagline: “There’s a Soldier in All of Us.” Although that sentiment evokes U.S. military recruitment ads, the commercial in fact promoted *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, an installment of the hugely successful Activision video game franchise, widely acclaimed as a “state of the art” first-person shooter game. Upon release, the *Black Ops* edition broke first-day sales records and sold 9.4 million copies in its first week. In its review, *The New York Times* called *Black Ops* “exciting, intense, and engrossing . . . the definitive first-person shooter game.”¹⁵ Enlisting gamers in a figurative war on terror through the activation of Cold War tropes that merge fact and fiction, the *Black Ops* games (there are six at the time of writing) have broken several industry sales records, and Activision reports total sales of the *Call of Duty* franchise to exceed five hundred million units.¹⁶

The commercial markets the allure of fun, fantasy, and empowerment through an equal-opportunity, multicultural orgy of decontextualized warfare: an adorable little plump girl, a hotel concierge, a cab driver, and a short-order cook strike cinematic poses as they do battle alongside Bryant and late-night TV host Jimmy Kimmel. Activision, which helped lead the multibillion-dollar video game market to eclipse Hollywood, beckons to the gaming community and beyond – to the “Soldier in All of Us.” One may wonder how actual combat veterans might react to the ad’s avowedly realistic, albeit low-risk, portrayal of military combat heroism as a recreational activity available to ordinary civilians. Be that as it may, the ad’s corporate, multicultural, and neoliberal scenario of decontextualized and sanitized war (children, just a shot away) is celebrated as cathartic and patriotic – just a game.

The synergy of meaning-making across and between seemingly unrelated cultural and political spheres is evident in the narrative arc and gameplay elements of the *Call of Duty* games as well as in the institutional partnership between the U.S. military and Activision and other game developers. From the tightly scripted first-person shooter modes where the gamer is offered no alternatives or moral choices, to zombie and other group modes where players have opportunities for strategy, to online social sites, the subjectivity encouraged in the game fosters a mindset of people-to-people undiplomacy.

Elsewhere, I have employed the oxymoron *black ops diplomacy* to designate a popular geopolitical imaginary that views military operations, particularly special force covert operations, as the default mode of conducting international relations. It is an approach to international relations that exudes contempt for diplomacy.¹⁷ The discrediting of diplomacy by foreign policymakers and among the public against a background of escalating U.S.-Russian tensions gained traction through popular culture. Immersive video games and other products were critical for shaping an alternate geopolitical reality dismissive of political compromise, diplomacy,

and conceptions of human rights. These sentiments enabled elites to mobilize consent for an interventionist foreign policy, first put forth by neoconservative Republicans and later backed by hawks in the Obama and Biden administrations.

Popular culture was a critical site for the production of a geopolitical worldview in which Americans are at once victors and victims. The *Call of Duty* franchise mediates between triumphalist claims that “we won” the Cold War through military strength, on the one hand, and that we won through fear, on the other, emphasizing American innocence and victimhood. *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, released in 2007 and set in 2001, and its sequel, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, both depict terrorist attacks on Europe and the United States by an alliance of separatists in an unnamed but small and oil-rich country in the Middle East and ultranationalist Russians. The game’s fictitious dictator, Khaled Al-Asad (a crude evocation of then Syrian President Bashar al-Assad), suggests an indiscriminate Islamophobia, conflating diverse Islamic cultures and states into a homogenous and violent whole.

Trump, Bannon, and Michael Flynn, who served as Trump’s first National Security Advisor, rekindled the post-9/11 Islamophobia that mischaracterizes Muslims as lacking a religious or cultural tradition, and as having instead chosen to embrace an ideology of political violence. In February 2016, Flynn tweeted, “Islam is not necessarily a religion but a political system that has a religious doctrine behind it.”¹⁸ Resuscitating the Cold War logic that labeled the totalitarian Soviet Union a slave society to which its adherents have willingly submitted, Bannon described Islam as submissive, asserting on his Breitbart radio program that it “is not a religion of peace – Islam is a religion of submission.”¹⁹

A long-developing partnership between the U.S. military and video game industry joined right-wing cable television and talk radio to shape messaging about the war on terror, in what journalist Simon Parkin has aptly termed the “military-entertainment complex.”²⁰ Rhetoric and media scholar Roger Stahl has documented the extensive use of video game technologies by the armed forces in the training of soldiers.²¹ In the 1980s, the U.S. Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) approached video game developers with “the idea of writing video games that could be used to train soldiers.”²² Current and former government and military officials who lent their imprimatur by consulting for the video game industry have included Colonel Oliver North, the unsuccessful U.S. Senate candidate and television commentator known for his role in the Iran-Contra scandal, and members of the Navy Seals and other special operations units.²³ The U.S. Army has its own consultation bureau to manage solicitations of military expertise by Hollywood filmmakers and the video game industry for project development and production assistance.²⁴

The synergy between the *Call of Duty* franchise and the U.S. military included paid consultation and promotion of *Black Ops 2* by North. In a typical consulting ar-

rangement, Hank Keirse, a “retired Army lieutenant colonel and decorated combat veteran of the cold war and first Gulf War,” had advised on the initial game development. Overcoming his suspicion of game developers, Keirse acquired a respect for what he saw as the shared energy and commitment of soldiers and game developers. Impressed by the commercial success of the *Call of Duty* franchise, its stories’ “realism and authenticity,” and its implications for envisioning future warfare, a former Pentagon official helped appoint *Call of Duty* writer and producer Dave Anthony to the Atlantic Council, the foreign affairs think tank with close ties to the Defense Department.²⁵ Having demonstrated “out of the box thinking on the nature of future threats,” Anthony’s charge was to “propose proactive solutions” to tomorrow’s conflicts.²⁶

Reporting on the interface between the military and the Treyarch Group (a subsidiary of Activision) in producing *Black Ops 3*, MSN revealed that the military – through DARPA, the section of the Department of Defense formed in 1958 in response to the 1957 Soviet launching of Sputnik and responsible for emerging military technologies – was interested in “bio-augmentation or human enhancement” involving the use of “various neuro-technologies, including neural implants to improve the performance of the human mind and body.” This far-fetched instance of the eternal quest for a strategic advantage for the combat soldier may have originated in *Black Ops 3*, which features augmented special ops soldiers: players can customize their soldiers with a new cyber system, programming not only to run faster and jump higher, but to process information faster and more efficiently. Indeed, the collaboration was facilitated by the Obama administration’s commissioning of a Brain Research Advancing Innovative Neurotechnologies (BRAIN) initiative, backed by \$300 million, to research and develop “reliable neural interface technology.”²⁷

As military research and development took inspiration from video game producers, U.S. forever wars continued to provide fodder for imagining ever new modes of power and warfare, and segments of popular culture followed Trump’s authoritarian “populism” in increasingly anti-institutional turns.

Hailed by critics as an era-defining TV series, Showtime’s *Homeland* (2011 – 2020) elaborated a dark and counterintuitive but ultimately triumphalist vision of American power. Although it was embraced by the U.S. military and intelligence communities, it depicted institutions so dysfunctional that they could only be redeemed through psychosis. In this way, the show prefigures Trump’s fantasy of a glorious “America First” exceptionalism undergirded by a madman theory of power-through-unpredictability. CIA agent Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes) suffers from bipolar disorder. Carrie’s erratic behavior stemming from her illness routinely puts fellow agents and family members at risk. She is manipulated by fellow agents and foes alike; her Pakistani counterpart (an ally

turned nemesis) tampers with her medication. Held captive in Russia for seven months, she involuntarily goes off her meds, and neither she nor the viewing audience knows whether she has become a Russian asset. For all its dangers, bipolarity is also Carrie's superpower – a wellspring of unique insight. *Homeland's* final season closed on a note of triumphalism and nostalgia, playing out its closing scene at an American jazz concert in Moscow, as Carrie visibly responds to the rhythms of the uniquely American art form. The premise garnered critical and insider acclaim for the series. It was showered with eight Emmys and 39 Emmy nominations, and U.S. presidents and CIA officials alike nodded their approval.²⁸ Showrunners and cast were granted annual “clandestine meetings with the intelligence community – part of a yearly writers and cast symposium in Washington dubbed ‘Spy Camp.’”²⁹

In *Homeland*, in a posttruth world as unhinged as ours, one needs special powers to access truth. Carrie's mental illness, contrary to any reality-based worldview, gives her the right stuff to defeat terrorism. This unpredictable power is a decidedly mixed blessing, and deeply gendered. Carrie is a terrible mother, regularly putting her own daughter and her niece at risk; but for national security, she is the only hope. In the final season, even after Carrie has possibly been compromised by Russian intelligence (showrunners noted that the show got a boost from the election of Donald Trump and the investigation of his campaign's possible collusion with Russia), Saul (Mandy Patinkin), Carrie's mentor, insists on bringing Carrie on his peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan. As Patinkin says of his character, “The only real hope Saul feels for this planet is Carrie Mathison.”³⁰

Homeland invites viewers into a sophisticated world of realpolitik, and supposedly the unvarnished truth. We – the viewers, showrunners, and actors – have all read the *New York Times* 2004 exposé of the CIA torture memos and seen the photos from Abu Ghraib prison of the brutalization of detainees by U.S. troops. *Homeland* purports frankness about the misdeeds of the CIA and U.S. and foreign intelligence: violence and sadism are tools of the trade of allies and enemies alike. In *Homeland*, agents call each other out on their illegal and immoral acts, such as killing people remotely and sexually exploiting young innocents for information. Duplicious Pakistani intelligence agents accuse the CIA of hypocrisy. In the series' somewhat novel argument for U.S. moral leadership, American conduct is reprehensible, but Russians are worse. (Nodding to Islamophobia, the show depicts Middle Easterners, Central Asians, and South Asians, specifically Pakistanis, as the worst of all.)

Homeland prides itself on mirroring and even anticipating “real world” events. The killing of Osama Bin Laden on May 2, 2011, five months before the show premiered on October 2, 2011, benefited the series. After the first reviews, explains cocreator and showrunner Alex Gansa, “we took over the entertainment world for a time. Steven Spielberg would call for DVDs.” Dana Walden (then chair of

Twentieth-Century Fox) added, “People in the highest levels of government, of entertainment, of business in general, were calling. Within a two-week period, the Obama administration and Secretary Clinton’s office called for early cuts of *Homeland*.”³¹ At one of the shows yearly Spy Camp retreats, producers, directors, writers, and actors joined with members of the intelligence community for a Face-Time meeting with Edward Snowden. During the meeting, a starstruck John Brennan, who was running the CIA at the time, said, “I don’t know what your show is, but I know it matters to my people.”³²

Given the U.S. intelligence community’s endorsement of *Homeland*, it is no wonder that critics have taken it seriously as a source of geopolitical verisimilitude. *Homeland*, explains one critic,

has also always been excellent at demonstrating the level of kabuki theater that is often involved in international diplomacy, and the finale also put a spotlight on how the rising tide of nationalism in the U.S. and Russia and other major global players is influencing the art and science of international relations.³³

In season three of *Homeland*, Nick Brody, the CIA agent who had been turned during his eight years in ISIS captivity – and who became Carrie’s lover while she pursued the question of his loyalty to the United States – emerges as the key to a CIA operation in Iran. Suspected of bombing the CIA and willing to denounce the United States on Iranian television, Brody gains political asylum in Iran. His mission, however, is to infiltrate the Iranian government on behalf of Saul and to assassinate the leader of the Iranian National Guard. He succeeds, paving the way for Iran to agree to halt the development of their nuclear program in exchange for the United States lifting economic sanctions. *New York Times* critic Alessandra Stanley writes,

It turns out that Saul’s efforts to infiltrate the Iranian government worked: As they relax over the morning newspaper, Mira [his wife] reads a headline saying the Iranians have agreed to pause their nuclear program if the West removes sanctions – a breakthrough that in real life is unfolding in real time.³⁴

As Stanley intimates, Iranian nuclear power was an urgent geopolitical issue in “real time.” In 2015, the Obama administration achieved its historic deal negotiating the cessation of Iran’s nuclear weapons program. Although later jettisoned by the Trump administration, the agreement marked a victory for diplomacy. Negotiated by the United States with Iranian as well as European diplomats, it averted the threat of war and prevented Iran’s development of a nuclear bomb.³⁵

In *Homeland*, Saul – the veteran CIA agent – helps achieve the nuclear deal through successful covert action, obscuring the painstaking negotiations of Iranian and U.S. diplomats. This matters, not simply because the show is widely viewed as mirroring events, but because, as further propaganda for black-ops di-

plomacy, it doesn't allow the audience to imagine diplomacy as a means of policy-making, or even to regard Iranians as rational political actors. They had to be mastered by subterfuge.

Claiming to "mirror reality," *Homeland* uses peoples and places ravaged by U.S. wars as mere backdrop to its dramatic scenarios. One sustained example is Pakistani intelligence agent Tasneem Qureishi (Nimrat Kaur), who is first introduced in season four. A villainous character that audiences and reviewers alike "love to hate," Tasneem blackmails U.S. agents and poisons Carrie by switching out her medication. Called dastardly, sinister, and mysterious, one reviewer voiced frustration at the end of season four that Tasneem had not received her "comeuppance."³⁶

Tasneem returns in season eight, the series' last, as a far more powerful nemesis, now heading Pakistani intelligence. By positioning Tasneem and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) as the U.S. nemesis, the show distorts the United States' decades-long support of Pakistan and ISI. Saul, the pragmatic moral compass of the show, tells Tasneem that he wants to work together; that they both want peace. Tasneem's answer – and critique – is *not* that the United States has done too much damage in militarizing Pakistan and pulling it into U.S. wars. Instead, echoing the argument put forth in *Charlie Wilson's War*, she argues that the United States should have stayed in Afghanistan near the Pakistan/Afghanistan border after the Soviet war in Afghanistan. It was not the U.S. arming of Mujahadeen fundamentalists that sowed chaos; it was the U.S. withdrawal from the region after the Soviet-Afghan war. Supposedly wanting to punish the United States, Tasneem is tacitly confessing to having wanted U.S. support all along. Ultimately, Tasneem is chastened by superior American wisdom. Like the rest of world, Tasneem relies on Carrie to fix things. Only Carrie can prevent nuclear war.

Although the showrunners claimed to have struggled with charges of racism and othering, especially toward Pakistanis, the final season remained steeped in tropes of Western superiority. Another character, Samira Noori, a prodemocracy investigative reporter whose husband was killed in a car-bomb intended for her, enlists Carrie's aid in the fourth episode, "Chalk One Up," as her brother-in-law uses his ties with the Taliban to force her into an arranged marriage. Carrie and her team disable the brother-in-law's car and hold the Taliban abductors at bay as they extricate Samira. Facing criticism for racist portrayals of Pakistanis, the showrunners responded with an equally racist trope, expounding the pervasive idea that U.S. policy is saving Pakistani women from a backward society, and that white women are the saviors of brown women.

Indeed, the show's concluding dramatic arc centers Pakistani lies: After the U.S. president is killed (alongside the Afghan president) in a helicopter crash over Afghanistan, the new U.S. president threatens war with Pakistan on false intelligence (pandering to viewers' self-awareness, because we all know *that* happened).

The only way to prevent a nuclear war between the United States and Pakistan is to obtain the flight recorder of the downed helicopter, now in the possession of Russia. Carrie collaborates with her former Russian captor, Yevgeny Gromov, a GRU (Russian military intelligence) officer who had tormented her in captivity by taking away her medication. Yevgeny has access to the recorder but demands that Carrie turn over the name of Saul's asset in Moscow – Anna – the last American asset in Russia.

For Carrie, averting nuclear catastrophe and saving potentially millions of lives is worth sacrificing an asset. Saul angrily tells Carrie that she “permanently crippled our intelligence capability in Russia.” Again, echoing real-world events, Saul says that Anna is the only remaining “live source” in a nation that is America’s “mortal enemy,” that is “slowly but surely strangling our democracy.”³⁷

Defying her CIA mentor and siding with Yevgeny, Carrie obtains the flight recorder, proving that the crash killing the American president was an accident, not a Taliban assault. But Carrie’s defiance and betrayal of the asset make her a traitor. It’s a good thing that the showrunners and cast had FaceTimed with Edward Snowden in Moscow, because the finale jumps ahead two years for its final minutes, with Carrie living with Yevgeny Gromov in Moscow. Carrie has just published a book, *Tyranny of Secrets: Why I Had to Betray My Country*. To celebrate, she and Yevgeny attend a jazz concert to hear the tenor saxophonist Kamasi Washington. Visiting the women’s room, Carrie and another woman swap identical purses. Unbeknownst to Yevgeny, Carrie has reestablished U.S. assets in Russia and is sending intelligence back to Saul. Echoing the nostalgia of *Skyfall* and the Bond franchise for vintage spy gadgetry, at a moment when Russia had effectively hacked the U.S. electoral process through cyber-based psychological operations, Carrie is passing intelligence back to Saul through a copy of her book with messages hidden in the binding; Carrie wrote an account of her purported act of treason as cover to establish U.S. operatives in Russia.

The show’s final moments cut back to the jazz concert. From the first season, producers had perversely employed jazz as background soundtracks for Carrie’s bipolar episodes, often drawing attention to Carrie’s fondness for the music of Thelonious Monk – music whose fractured beauty the show’s writers associated with mental illness. In the series finale, jazz offers assurance, American culture is still an object of desire. It also signals American victory – harkening back to Willis Conover’s role broadcasting jazz into the Soviet Bloc through the Voice of America and his claims that jazz won the Cold War.³⁸ Russia may have helped throw the U.S. election to Putin’s American authoritarian charge, but Carrie has our backs.

After receiving Carrie’s book through the same routes used by his former asset, an initially distressed then profoundly moved Saul finds Carrie’s message outlining Russian weapons development and promising more intelligence soon. The scene cuts back to the concert with Carrie listening to a soaring saxophone phrase

with a wide and joyous smile. Carrie's breach with Saul is healed and America's global dominance is restored.

As feminist scholar and public intellectual Anne McClintock has argued, in another context, "pleasure is located in paranoid empire – in the deliriums of absolute power and forebodings of perpetual threat."³⁹ Saul was pragmatic, Carrie was fearless, and together they represented the perfectly balanced attributes of an American agent, their partnership recasting American power in the symbolic shift from male leadership to liberal feminist heroics. The feel-good resolution masks an unconstructed American exceptionalism on steroids. Americans not only do bad things, they are dangerously unhinged. No matter, Americans like Carrie are the only hope for world stability. The standing of America as the indispensable, unipolar global power is secured by the bipolar disorder of jazz-loving, atrocious-mothering Carrie Mathison.

Productions like *Homeland* provide a commonsense lens through which viewers can understand illegal U.S. wars, as in Iraq, and America's embrace of torture. For Trump, everyone is awful, so we (the United States) just have to be the biggest, baddest kids on the block, flexing military muscle and masculinity. Promising rape, pillage, and plunder, we will just TAKE Panama and Greenland, no need for the niceties of the international order, which critics on both the left and the right understand has one system of rules for the United States and another for everyone else. A thorough disregard for institutions, national and international, along with a strong dose of utter insanity, offers the sure road to a restoration of American power.

Homeland imagined a world in which U.S. power and institutions prevailed not despite but because of ruthless vigilantism. In Trump's delirium of unchecked power, the constant manufacturing of threats attempts to justify a radical and unconstitutional remaking of the U.S. military, taking a wrecking ball to government agencies, including those vital to national security. The very notion of alliances as essential for national and collective security is shunned. Brazenly violating international law and illegally deploying troops to police and occupy U.S. cities, the Trump administration mobilizes racialized fears of crime and urban disorder to justify its lawless actions. The vigilante is in the house.

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