 House of cards context

Frank Underwood is the protagonist in David Fincher’s Netflix political drama, House of Cards. Fincher’s tale begins with a clear take on Washington: It is the source of evil. Not a place reduced to evil, because of political infighting or external financial pressure. No, this is a story about the Beltway as a magnet for bad actors.

The players and wannabes hustle through town, constantly measuring and modulating their proximity to the power centres of the White House and the Capitol. The show's opening sequences feature Washington in time-lapse photography, emphasizing the rush of the town—a blur of replaceable people against a backdrop of immovable buildings, temporary cogs working in the permanent power structure.

One critic dubbed Fincher "the king of glossy decay," a mood that is evident here. Washington is presented as a hypocritical sanctuary for high-functioning power-addicts, a place where people who don't like to be controlled can gather and try to control others.

Frank Underwood, played with an almost ridiculous intensity by Kevin Spacey, is the leader and narrator of this gathering. The South Carolina congressman is a close adviser to the president, a hidden hand in the media, and the majority whip in the House of Representatives.

Underwood may be a dramatization, but his ticks are familiar. He is a hopped-up version of a dominant archetype in national politics: People who enter the arena for the same reasons a big audience still watches it—the thrill, glory, and ambition. Policy and morality run a distant second and, even then, often serve as props to underscore "the stakes" of the manoeuvres involved, not as dimensions of independent substance.

Washington is deeply frustrating because so many of the positions that politicians hold are a product of ephemeral self-interest. They reverse themselves, for themselves, all the time. In his seminal 1957 study, "An Economic Theory of Democracy," Anthony Downs, a political scientist who served on commissions under the Johnson and Bush administrations, traced how political parties hold very few firm policy positions. Rather than build public support around their ideas, he proposed, they usually pick ideas in order to win support. Downs documented how in a two-party system, that approach means that the parties often end up altering their platforms to match each other.

In the aggregate, those trends can be comprehended, and even sanitized, as the essence of democracy. When the public reaches consensus on big questions, why shouldn't the parties reflect those judgments? At the individual level, however, it's a harder sell. Hypocrites are more enraging than extremists, as every campaign operative knows.

House of Cards is full of hypocrites, some ashamed, many proud. There is no silver lining here, no appeal to a just system that is temporarily thwarted by corrupting forces. So far, it is simply bad people using democracy as tyrants use tyranny.

Adapted from [The Terrible, True Insight of ‘House of Cards’](https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/02/the-terrible-true-insight-of-house-of-cards-bad-people-run-dc/273063/): https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/02/the-terrible-true-insight-of-house-of-cards-bad-people-run-dc/273063/

Other articles:

[The Very Real History behind the Crazy Politics of House of Cards](https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/02/the-very-real-history-behind-the-crazy-politics-of-house-of-cards/273370/): https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/02/the-very-real-history-behind-the-crazy-politics-of-house-of-cards/273370/

[The Post-Hope Politics of ‘House of Cards’](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/02/magazine/the-post-hope-politics-of-house-of-cards.html): https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/02/magazine/the-post-hope-politics-of-house-of-cards.html