

THE STATE OF AFFAIRS OF FICTIONAL POLITICAL WOMEN:

A CRITICAL RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF

THE TELEVISION SERIES MADAM SECRETARY

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## Chapter One:

### INTRODUCTION

In November of 2014, writer for *Vogue Magazine* Patricia Garcia asked the question, “What’s behind the rise of powerful political women on TV?” commenting on the surge of fictional political women on television. Starting in 2014, almost all major networks had shows starring women in positions of political power. On ABC, there was Olivia Pope in *Scandal*; on HBO, there was Selina Meyer on *Veep*; and on Netflix, there was Claire Underwood on *House of Cards*. Garcia (2014) went on to note, “As women take over our ballots, isn’t it only logical they take over our TV screens too?” (para. 3). In decades past, few political women have been showcased on television. Although shows like *The West Wing* and *Commander in Chief* did feature political women, both shows were anomalies in a sea of television shows with powerful male leads.

One show in particular has gained recent attention for showcasing a fictional political woman: CBS’s *Madam Secretary*. *Madam Secretary* follows Elisabeth McCord, played by Téa Leoni, as she negotiates being the Secretary of State and a mother, wife and friend. The series begins with the previous Secretary of State being killed in a plane crash, and the President coming to Elisabeth McCord’s home to ask her to be his Secretary of State. The show follows Elisabeth and her family, including her husband Henry and her three children Stevie, Allison and Jason as they navigate their new life in Washington.

The show garnered critical attention due to noteworthy actors like Téa Leoni and Tim Daly, and the show’s focus on a strong, female lead (Gliatto, 2014). Attention has also been paid to Elisabeth McCord’s similarities to current Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, with one

columnist asking, “Is CBS’ *Madam Secretary* Just Hillary Clinton Propaganda?” (Feldman, 2014). It is that critical attention, the corresponding political moment of 2014, and the comparisons to Hillary Clinton that brought this show to my attention and encouraged me to make it the focal point of this thesis.

Given the current cultural moment of fictional political women, it is imperative to analyze *Madam Secretary* to understand what constructions of fictional political women such shows are presenting the public and what potential endorsements these shows have of female leadership for the wider public in an election year. Therefore, I ask the questions:

RQ1: How does Elisabeth McCord negotiate her private and public life in *Madam Secretary*?

RQ2: How does the show *Madam Secretary* uphold and defy traditional notions of leadership?

In order to answer these research questions, this thesis is organized as follows. The analysis of *Madam Secretary* begins with a rationale for this thesis in Chapter One. The literature review begins in Chapter Two with a discussion of fictional political television, moves to an exploration of feminism on television, and concludes by combining the two to examine past work on fictional political women. In Chapter Three, I establish the critical orientation I use in this project. I begin by explaining how rhetoric shifted from exploring more traditional texts like public address, to examine mediated texts. I then explore McGee’s (1990) notion of fragments, and how critics can take fragments to create their own texts. I also establish how utilizing critical rhetoric allows scholars to uncover power structures, particularly in terms of gender. Chapter Four is where I apply a critical rhetorical perspective to examine the television show *Madam Secretary* and how

the show portrays fictional female political leaders. Finally, in Chapter Five I discuss the implications and conclusions of this project.

## **Rationale**

The rhetorical study of *Madam Secretary* is vital for three key reasons. First, these shows are situated in a larger cultural moment where women are portrayed in fictional politics more so than ever before. Second, these shows serve as representations of a larger cultural conversation that is happening across the country regarding women in politics. Finally, these shows are critical for rhetorical critics to study as they establish the ways in which society is presented with views of women in leadership.

To understand why this show is necessary to study, it is important to understand the larger cultural moment showcasing fictional political women. This cultural moment encompasses a multitude of television programs highlighting women in political leadership. Sonya Saraiya (2015) notes, “on TV, there’s a whole subset of politically leaning shows that are grappling with the idea of a female president—the ambition of this woman, what her marriage would be like, and the specific, gendered obstacles that she would have to deal with” (para. 7). And this subset of shows continues to grow in an age where women are increasing in real political representation. Although this moment has been intensified by Clinton’s presidential campaign, the move to showcase women in fictional political power started a decade ago with the ABC show *Commander in Chief* starring Geena Davis. The show was cancelled after one season, yet it seemed to be a catalyst for a multitude of television shows. Shows such as *Veep*, *Scandal*, *Parks and Recreation*, *Political Animals*, *The Good Wife*, *Homeland*, *House of Cards*, *State of Affairs*

and *Madam Secretary* all showcase women in positions of political power. As Serena Evalia (2015) notes:

When it comes to electing a female head of state, America still has a way to go, but almost 10 years ago, the short-lived ABC series ‘Commander in Chief’ introduced the idea to television audiences via a character played by Geena Davis. Since then, NBC’s political thriller ‘State of Affairs’ has become the sixth show to feature a woman in situ in the Oval Office ... (para. 1).

In addition to the portrayal of women in the Oval Office, like on *State of Affairs*, *Veep* and *Commander in Chief*, this cultural moment encompasses shows that showcase women in a variety of political positions. Leslie Knope on *Parks and Recreation* serves in her town’s Parks and Recreation Department, and as a city council member. On *Scandal* Olivia Pope serves as a press secretary and as a political strategist. Claire Underwood on *House of Cards* serves as not only the first lady, but also as a woman with political aspirations of her own. *Madam Secretary* features Elizabeth McCord as the Secretary of State. Patricia Garcia (2014) notes, “Only ten years ago, the landscape of political women on television was basically nonexistent” (para. 2). The landscape of political women has been vastly changed with popular networks including ABC, CBS, NBC, HBO, Showtime and even a Netflix original series adopting this cultural trend.

This cultural moment is exciting for feminists, as women in leadership are portrayed in numbers like never before. One television program stands out in this cultural moment: *Madam Secretary*. The show portrays a woman in a powerful leadership position that deals with national security, and the show has caused conversations about women in leadership.

*Madam Secretary* premiered on CBS in the fall of 2014. From the start, *Madam Secretary* was well received, premiering to 14.750 million viewers (*Madam Secretary: Season 1*,

2015), making it “the most-watched fall drama premiere in three years among total viewers” (Hibberd, 2015, para. 2). The show follows Elisabeth McCord, the Secretary of State, as she deals with trying to balance her political duties, and her time with her family. The show ended its freshman year with positive ratings - averaging 14.9 million viewers and with over halfway of season two complete ratings are positive, with an average of 10.33 million viewers (Madam Secretary: Season 1, 2015; Madam Secretary: Season 2 Ratings, 2016).

*Madam Secretary* received healthy criticism as well, particularly for the similarities many saw between the lead character Elizabeth McCord and real life former secretary of state Hilary Clinton (Elavia, 2014; Goodman, 2014; Heil, 2014). However, others have chastised this comparison. Mary McNamara (2014) notes, “But as tempting as it may be to link ‘Madam Secretary’ to former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, it's also ridiculous” (para. 3). Beyond the debatable comparison between actress Téa Leoni’s Secretary of State and Hillary Clinton, critics have commented on the plot of the show, with Todd VanDerWerff (2014) suggesting, “It's this crisis-of-the-week storytelling that sinks the show, because it's constantly boxing the program into corners it can't write its way out of” (para. 11). Critics have even suggested that Elizabeth McCord is too under-accessorized, with State Department veteran Tara Sonenshine noting, “The Secretary of State would be wearing earrings” (Heil, 2014, para. 12). Whether it is comparisons to Hillary Clinton, questions of politics, or objections to her fashion, fictional Secretary of State Elizabeth McCord has caused quite a stir on television and in popular discourse.

Some suggest that women in political power on television simply makes for good plot points, yet I argue that fictional political women have a larger impact than dramatic cliffhangers. The second reason why *Madam Secretary* is worthy of study is that there is a cultural moment in

material politics where women are being represented more than ever before. Some have already written on material changes occurring due to shows in this cultural moment, with news outlet *Politico* noting Geena Davis's recent efforts to push for gender equality, and writing "that more fictional women in power will lead to more real girl power in Washington" (Brietman, 2015, para. 7). Television can serve as an entry into the material world for female politicians, and can show viewers realms of possibility not previously imagined.

In the case of fictional political women, like Elisabeth McCord on "Madam Secretary," blogger Alyssa Rosenberg (2015) put it best noting, "their sacrifices on screens small and smaller may be part of the way we get ready for progress in the next election cycle in our real world" (para. 17). Television portrayals have an impact as Steven Fielding (2014) argues the "fictional representations matter because they do more than (imperfectly) reflect how we imagine our real democracy: they can also shape how we come to think about it" (para. 2). Not only have Geena Davis, Rosenberg and others noted that portrayals of women on television can impact perceptions, but it also can serve as an empowering example for women to follow in their lead.

Geena Davis notes, "Some of the best representations of women in television shows are forensic scientists in CSI shows... As a result, women are flocking to forensic science programs in colleges" (para. 19), and scholars have found similar results (Harrington, 2015). The same outcome has been noted of women in fictional political power and that if women see other women in those positions, it can encourage women to enter the field of politics themselves. These shows also often spark conversations about current women in politics because "by shifting the paradigm on what we see in the media -- factual or fictional -- TV professionals can harness an opportunity to show a captive audience that real women are running and winning elected office" (Lee, 2012, para. 12). Fictional political women can challenge gender stereotypes,

empower women to run for office, and shed light on women who are currently in the political arena.

In tandem with this fictional political moment, women were running for office more in 2014 than ever before. The makeup of politics was filled with political women, as Fang (2014) notes, “the current Congress contains a record number of women: 20 serve in the Senate, and 82 serve in the House of Representatives” (para. 2). PBS has even declared 2014 as the “year of women voters and candidates,” as both Republicans and Democrats in local, state, and national elections have larger numbers of female candidates than ever before (Desjardins, 2014). This cultural moment is filled with more women gracing our television screens, voting ballots, and voting booths more than ever before, and *Madam Secretary* is important to take seriously, as it provides a glimpse into this moment.

Although television has immense power to do important work in regards to identity politics, it also can be counterintuitive. As a result, scholars must study shows like *Madam Secretary* because they present the public with ideas of women in leadership. However, as Dow (2001) notes, when discussing the political impact of the show *Ellen* on LGBTQ rights, “such politics as practiced in popular culture can serve a masking function as representation is mistaken for social and political change” (p. 137). As Dow writes about the show *Ellen*, just because the show had progressive representations of the LGBTQ community, it did not necessarily lead to material change. Yet, Dow herself has written numerous articles about the immense power television holds to shape public belief and ideas. Particularly with the popularity of post-feminist shows, or television shows where feminism is not needed because women do not face adversity due to their gender, it is important to see whether programs that feature powerful women fall into

this same trap. Thus, it is important to turn a critical eye to the shows of this cultural moment to understand if these shows serve a masking function or are tools to further material change.

As Bonnie Dow (1990) notes, “I am convinced that entertainment television does some of the cultural work that formerly was done through public speeches” (p. XV). She continues, arguing television entertainment can serve the “function of interpreting social change and managing cultural beliefs” (p. XV). With statements like Dow’s, it is evident that work must be done on television – particularly on shows that showcase female leadership. Kristen Hungerford (2010) exemplifies the need to engage in such work, noting in her work on fictional political representation of women in the films:

if women continue to be portrayed as submissive, sexually objectified, and confined to the private sphere of life, then the American public will continue to view women as less capable of being the president. Constructions of gender in American popular culture should not hinder women from finally obtaining Commander in Chief. (p. 72)

Hungerford, in her critique on fictional political representation of women, notes the enormous material impact that these shows have, and given the current cultural moment it is vital to continue her work into the arena of television.

Although scholars have weighed in on the show *Commander in Chief*, and scholars like Hungerford have done necessary work on popular films of the early 2000s, little work has been done on more contemporary political dramas. Bonnie Dow (1990) notes, “... much as I believe that television and media culture operate through recurring hegemonic patterns, I also believe that media is continually adaptive” (p. 262). Society, politics, and media have changed drastically in the past decade, and given the cultural moment of fictional political women it is important to analyze these new texts to understand if current shows are fostering the same old

tropes, or if perhaps, the shows of this cultural moment, such as *Madam Secretary* offer different narratives for women as compared to political dramas of years past. I recognize that such questions about how politicians balance work and home are not asked of men, and are questions that our culture all too often asks of women. Yet as this is a dominant theme of women on television, such questions are worth investigating. As *Madam Secretary* utilizes tropes found in traditional political dramas as well as feminist and postfeminist television programs, in the next section I will review literature about fictional political television, feminist and postfeminist programming, and fictional political women.

## **Chapter Two:**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

In this literature review, I will discuss relevant literature regarding fictional politics on television, and how such depictions impact cultural understandings of politics. Next, I will discuss postfeminism on television, and specifically how portrayals of postfeminism impact cultural notions of motherhood and the private and public life dialectic. Finally, I will review past literature regarding fictional political women on television, and note how there has been a gap in the literature since the show *Commander in Chief* ended in 2006. Through this literature, I argue that the depictions of fictional political women matter in how they shape the public's overall understanding of women in leadership, and that there is a current need for research on fictional political women.

#### **Prime Time Politics**

Fictionalized politics establishes what the public views the presidency to be, and such entertainment establishes norms and expectations the public holds for political leaders. Not only are fictional politics entertaining, but they also rhetorically construct what viewers conceive government to be, and how government functions. As a result:

Fictionalized representations of politics are powerful and accessible rhetorical forms, increasingly influential as they improve in technological sophistication and mimetic capacity. Such discourses play a central role in the definition and expression of political culture and political leader. (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2002, p. 211)

The portrayal of fictional politics is central in shaping the public's understanding of politics overall. Thus, it is important to understand what particular functions such portrayals possess, and what possibilities this entertainment medium holds. Thus, in this section I will outline the research that has been conducted on fictional political television, the impact that such portrayals have had on viewers, and the overall potential of those shows to impact society and politics.

Although political dramas have graced almost every network, one of the most well known and critically acclaimed dramas is Aaron Sorkin's show, *The West Wing*, which ran from 1999-2006. Spanning a decade on network television, and having new fans due to the show's arrival on Netflix, the show serves not only as an example of a political television show, but as a show that had critical acclaim and was a part of the public consciousness. Numerous scholars, in a variety of disciplines, have studied *The West Wing* (Holbert et. al, 2007; Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles 2002; Jones & Dionisopoulos, 2004; Gans-Borskin & Tisinger, 2005; Journell & Buchanan, 2012; Anderson, 2007; Phalen, Jones & Osellame, 2012). Due to the multitude of literature on *The West Wing* and the critical acclaim and large viewership the show has received, it serves as an exemplar of the political drama, and a foundational show for the purposes of this thesis.

Fictional portrayals of politics are often heralded for their entertainment value, with numerous political dramas receiving Emmy nominations (*The West Wing*, *Homeland*, *House of Cards*), and having had relatively high numbers of viewers. For example, *The West Wing* had an average of 17.2 million viewers at its peak (West Wing eyes successor for Bartlet, 2004), and won a total of 117 awards (Awards, n.d). However, these shows move past simple entertainment and serve a function of teaching politics to the public. For many, political dramas are one of the only exposures they have to politics. When writing about *The West Wing*, Holbert et al. (2007) argue the "show offers something to the American public that it can not get from any other

source, an insider's view of what it is like to be president on a daily basis" (p. 506). Through typical forms of media, the public gets a glimpse into presidential life through highly controlled press conferences and meetings, but through fictional politics the public gets to see the behind the scenes view on politics that is simply not shown anywhere else. Boessen (2006) adds, "there has been a clear effort by its producers to present the fictional West Wing as materially similar to the actual West Wing..." (p. 11). Shows like *The West Wing* do not simply allow the public to get a glimpse of a presidency, but a realistic one at that.

In addition to giving viewers an inside glimpse into the presidency, political dramas actually teach civics and argumentation to viewers. In their work, "Making Politics Palatable: Using Television Drama in High School Civics and Government Classes," Journell and Buchanan (2012) use shows like *The West Wing* to teach how government works to high school and college students. They explain, "At the very least, *The West Wing* presents students with a portrayal of politics that is more compelling and, in many ways, more authentic than what they see on television or uncover through traditional political instruction" (p. 8). Journell and Buchanan demonstrate the persuasive appeal political dramas have, and their ability to transcend entertainment. Students learn about the political process by watching the political process, and instead of reading both sides of an issue they can watch them being debated in Sorkin's *West Wing*. Journell and Buchanan (2012) write, "The *West Wing* provides an enjoyable and authentic way for students to 'see' arguments for and against many controversial political issues being played out in real life" (p. 7). The power to see an argument is extremely important in forming political beliefs, and political dramas aid in this process.

Political dramas teach viewers political processes, like how a bill becomes law, but they also teach the public about particular political issues in a vastly different way than the nightly

news. As Mutz and Nir (2010) note, fictional representations of politics can impact real life policy preferences. Fictionalized politics can respond to the issues of the times, like how Sorkin's episode "Isaac and Ishmael" of *The West Wing* was a response to 9/11 (Jones & Dionisopoulos, 2004). Although mainstream news was covering the events of 9/11 frequently, *The West Wing* attempted to deal with the foundational issues involved. In this instance, not only was the show able to respond to a current event, but it also dealt with current issues in the United States: terrorism and Islamophobia. As Gans-Borskin and Tisinger (2005) argue:

To some, studying a fictional television's depiction of terrorism may seem frivolous in a time when real people are fighting and dying in a real war on terrorism. However, it is our argument that messages in fiction matter; they matter in real and political ways. The depictions of terrorism and other public issues in fictional media affect how people think about the world. (p. 100)

Even the government of the United States is involved in the fictional portrayal of terrorism, as "the U.S. Department of Defense routinely advises film companies and television networks on the portrayal of the military in their storylines" (Gans-Borskin & Tisinger, 2005, p. 100), demonstrating how powerful such portrayals can be to viewers. For those who do not follow the news but watch political dramas, such portrayal is critical because "Sorkin and the other writers of *The West Wing* have offered explanations of the origins of terrorism and rationales for particular methods of handling it" (Gans-Borskin & Tisinger, 2005, p. 112-113). Political dramas give the public a vocabulary to talk about issues, and attempts to humanize the decision making process behind those issues. On *The West Wing*, viewers are exposed to the humanity of President Bartlett, as he must make decisions with immense consequences. In the material world, the public is informed on the decisions President Obama makes but without this humanizing

element, and a clear vision of what his decision making process entails, it is difficult to understand why decisions are made.

It is one thing to read and think about politics in an abstract, theoretical way, but it is another to see “real” material examples that mimic real life. Phalem, Kim and Osellame (2012) write:

Prime time dramas can show the complications inherent in political compromise, the actual motives of world leaders and the complexities of decision-making. Audiences can empathize with these presidents on a personal level because they see the complexity and risk of every major decision. (p. 547)

Typical media coverage is focused on the facts and, as a result, does not often inspire empathy between audiences and politicians. By being able to personalize the White House, shows like *The West Wing* make politics all the more human. Through establishing to the public what the presidency is, political dramas establish “presidentiality” or what Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles (2002), define as “the larger political and cultural understanding of the presidency” (p. 209). They state further, “Presidentiality, thus, is responsive to context and collective memory and it defines, in part, the national community by offering a vision of this central office in the U.S. political system” (pp. 209-210). By establishing "presidentiality," political dramas shape how the public not only understands politics, but also the expectations the public develops for political leaders. Research on "presidentiality" has focused on the impact on public memory and thought (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2002), but little research has been done that addresses "presidentiality" and gender.

Although critical insights have been gathered surrounding *The West Wing*, the United States television and political cultures have shifted drastically since the show ended in 2006.

Political research must be continued on current shows to answer the call that many in our field demand. Holbert et al. (2007) argue, “We encourage future work not just on *The West Wing*, but all types of television content that reflect the diversity with which the political world is presented to the American public” (p. 518). One shift that has been welcomed in the United States political atmosphere has been higher numbers of women in political office. Given that there has been little work on how fictional political women are portrayed, further analysis of new political dramas, particularly ones that portray female politicians, is vital. Some previous work has touched upon the portrayal of female politicians, but considering the increasing amount of political dramas where political women are central to the plot, new research is necessary. Since *Madam Secretary* deals explicitly with a female leader, I turn my attention to the portrayal of women on television.

### **Prime Time Feminism**

Although the fight for advancement in women’s rights has spanned centuries, with the advent of television, feminism has entered the American living room. With television shows holding such a pervasive role in daily life for many, and being an entertainment medium that continues to expand, scholarly criticism of feminism on television becomes crucial. Bonnie Dow (1992) has written extensively about how feminism and women are portrayed on television in her book *Prime Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970* and as Dow writes, “feminist rhetorical criticism of television asks what view of symbolic reality about women is encouraged by a television text and what function that view of reality might serve” (p. 144). Thus, studying how feminism and women are portrayed on television is important, as it plays a key role in shaping how women and feminism are viewed in the public eye. Through review of literature about postfeminism on television, I first explore postfeminism

on television, and then address two themes that are apparent in postfeminist television: the dialectic between private and public life, and the construction of motherhood.

In her discussion of the television show *Ally McBeal*, Dow notes that the feminist identity is easily understood through “White, straight, single, professional women working in a supposed man’s world” (p. 260). Thus, substantial work has been completed on shows that showcase these characters such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Murphy Brown*, and *Ally McBeal*. Shows featuring white women defying typical female roles in the workplace have become popularized so much so that the image of a woman in the workplace has become normalized on television screens.

*Ally McBeal* is such a show featuring women in the workplace, and literature regarding *Ally McBeal* has highlighted a trend in popular culture with a number of postfeminist shows. Modleski (1991) defines postfeminist shows as “that, in proclaiming or assuming the advent of post-feminism, are actually engaged in negating the critiques and undermining the goals of feminism—in effect, delivering us back into a prefeminist world” (p. 3). Postfeminist television programs featuring women in the workplace have become commonplace, as the struggles it took for women to be accepted into the workplace have been easily forgotten. The influx of postfeminist shows poses problems for scholars because many scholars desire to see a connection between programming and women’s current struggles. If television presents women in the workplace having “made it,” serious questions arise about whether such portrayal is reflective of women’s realities. Ouellette (2002) writes:

we need to consider how television’s new post-feminism hooks up with actual gender struggles, for the next generation of feminist cultural studies will have to come to terms with the possibilities of this discourse as well as its failure to deliver. (pp. 333-334)

Such critique of postfeminist shows demonstrates the need for scholarship on feminist television.

Postfeminist shows often have characters focused on their individual experiences, removing such experiences from larger cultural movements. Essentially, although going through struggles that many women go through, characters on postfeminist shows are not able to see the personal as political. One such show is the hit series *Friends*, which Rockler (2002) argues:

What *Friends* does not provide, however, is equipment for living for understanding women's issues within political contexts. The self-absorbed characters do not exhibit a consciousness that their personal struggles with careers, relationships, and even issues such as single motherhood are part of a systemic, political context that transcend their own circumstances. In other words, to quote the slogan of Second Wave feminism, the program does not demonstrate that 'the personal is political'. (p. 245)

Without connecting their struggles to larger political issues, postfeminist shows are stripped of their ability to ignite change in larger society and instead, de-politicize the issues that the characters on these shows face. Doing so has consequences for scholars and the public, as Rockler (2002) argues, "When women's issues are framed in such a way as to shift blame away from the system to individual women, systemic changes that would improve the material conditions of women are ignored or deemed undesirable" (p. 245). Postfeminist portrayals continue to grace television screens, and new postfeminist programs continue to be produced.

One popular show, Lena Dunham's *Girls*, has received substantial attention from scholars regarding its postfeminist perspective of what it means to be a young woman in New York City. Lauren DeCarvalho (2013) notes, "As 'Girls' illustrates, when televisual feminism collides with recession anxiety, not only are both trivialized, but male authority is reinforced for good measure" (p. 367). Systematic changes are ignored, and instead of the show having the

potential to ignite change for women in their 20's, the characters' struggles are deflated to simply the problems of spoiled "girls." The show exists in a postfeminist universe where the issues these women face are not due to the patriarchy, but because of their own failures.

Postfeminist shows portray women as having "made it," rejecting the struggles that women have in achieving success in the workplace due to patriarchy. Even on shows when women are supposedly to have "made it," these women still struggle with negotiating between private and public life and this struggle is portrayed as the fault of feminism, not systematic factors. Tensions between employment and wanting a family are a common theme for women on television, with women's desires for employment often hindering their private lives. When writing about *Ally McBeal*, Oulette (2002) notes, "Ally becomes the emblem of the suffering of the overly 'feminist' woman who chose career over family, but longs for both, and forever struggles with the decision" (p. 275). This idea of a woman wanting too much, or struggling to balance work and family is common in the portrayal of women on television. Oulette (2002) explains, "Ally becomes the site of what occurs when women desire too much, when they want to have it all -- career, family, and equality" (p. 335). The character thus communicates to the public that women cannot have it all and cannot be content. While Dow (1990) does not explicitly talk about the tension between public and private life, she does argue that in the show *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, because Mary "had it all" in the public realm, she was never shown having success in the private realm. As a result, the division between public and private life was reinforced, and for Mary, the tension between the two spheres meant that "success" in one sphere, her private sphere, had to be sacrificed.

This tension between public and private is common in multiple genres of television shows. When writing about *Law and Order: SVU*, Cuklanz and Moorti (2006) contend that there

is a new type of TV feminism, in which they note, “SVU’s misogynist feminism includes false claims of rape; negative portrayals of feminine characteristics such as intuition, emotion, and manipulation; criminal use of interpersonal power by woman; and the figure of the monstrous mother” (p. 318). Summarizing this new genre, Cuklanz and Moorti (2006) argue that the show’s “construction of crime and criminals maintains a gender division between public and private spheres” (p. 318). Writing on motherhood on *Sex and the City*, Tropp (2006), notes “Contradictory discourses about women’s ability to have it all by achieving motherhood while maintaining a successful professional career and personal life circulate in the popular press and culture” (p. 861). In media portrayals of the workplace, women can exhibit positive feminist ideals but in the home, they are utterly incapable of doing so - ultimately unable to bridge the divide between public and private life.

One area that has been a popular site for feminist television criticism has been in television’s construction of motherhood (Walters & Harrison, 2014). In more traditional shows, a woman’s role of mother trumped all but, as Walters and Harrison (2014) note, in contemporary television there is more variety in the portrayal of motherhood - and it is not always positive. On the show *South Park*, motherhood is the punch line of many jokes, and other studies have found that television mothers are shown as passive (Nagy, 2010; Dail & Way, 1985). Not only have scholars questioned the portrayal of motherhood on television, but have also studied how television portrays mothers’ ability to “have it all.” Whether it be “monstrous motherhood” on *Law & Order: SVU* (Cuklanz & Moorti, 2016), or motherhood being the key source of empowerment on *Dr. Quinn: Medicine Woman* (Dow, 1996), there are various portrayals of motherhood that have material consequences on women’s symbolic reality of what motherhood means.

These three elements of feminism on television: postfeminism, the dialectic between private and public life, and the construction of motherhood have manifested in a multitude of genres of television. However, one area of television that has received little critical attention is fictional political women and feminism on political dramas. In the next section I review the limited literature that analyzes fictional political women.

### **Fictional Political Women**

With Geena Davis' role on the short-lived ABC drama, *Commander in Chief*, rhetorical scholarship has been conducted on the show to understand how the show frames gender and women's roles in politics. In her work on *Commander in Chief*, Adams (2011) argues that family serves as a resource for moral capital for Geena Davis' character, President Mackenzie Allen. President Allen constantly struggles with the tension she finds existing between being President and being a mother. However, in moments where she makes key political decisions, she is confronted with family matters that divide her attention. However, in other popular political dramas, such as Aaron Sorkin's *The West Wing*, male politicians are rarely shown making decisions based on their families. In President Allen's case, this is the norm. As Hungerford (2010) critiques:

Presidential Allen was constructed as a mother first and as the president second. The program included many similarly unrealistic scenes where Allen's parental responsibilities compete with her presidential duties, leaving viewers with the impression that a woman president must divide her time between two jobs. However, *The West Wing*'s use of familial storylines doesn't compete with President Bartlett's presidential duties. (p. 63)

Typically portrayals of fictional political women focus on their interpersonal relationships, particularly their role as wife and mother, and reassert the notion that motherhood is tied to a woman's identity (Rittenour, Colaner & Odenweller, 2014). Even as President, Mackenzie Allen was not excused from these stereotypical notions of motherhood

In addition to the focus on her as a mother, President Allen is framed as stereotypically feminine. In an essay about the character, Avila-Saavedra (2009) states, "As a President, Mackenzie Allen possesses all emblematic feminine values" (p. 12), and notes how often fictional female presidents embody conventional female characteristics. Beyond the political role of President, other political dramas have focused on the gender of female politicians. In Aaron Sorkin's *The West Wing*, women play an important role in the drama but their gender is not forgotten, as "All of the women are valued and praised but in gendered ways" (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2002, p. 221). The authors continue, "Although there are positive depictions of women, the drama is often dismissive of the feminine, further coupling masculinity and presidentiality" (p. 221). For the countless male politicians on the show, their gender is not addressed but for the women in Sorkin's *West Wing* it is never forgotten.

This marriage of the masculine and "presidentiality" is exemplified in *Commander in Chief*, where the show had a "female president executing the very masculine issue agenda that has generally disadvantaged women in national politics" (Semmler et al, 2013, p. 257). Noting the power of *Commander in Chief*, Semmler et al. (2013) continues:

Commander may not have provided the first depiction of a female president on prime-time television; however, it was the first time that such a president was presented in a contemporary and realistic setting. For that, *Commander in Chief* should be praised as a sincere effort to promote a woman to the Oval Office. A woman has yet to break through

that glass ceiling, but in *Commander in Chief*, a female president broke through the translucent wall of America's television sets. (p. 259)

Although *Commander in Chief* was a historic moment in the television portrayal of female politicians, political women have graced film for decades. The movie *Kisses for my President* (1964) shows a female president, and the central plot focuses on the first gentleman and his comedic struggle to handle his position. The movie does not focus on the President's politics but rather the first gentleman's injured sense of masculinity. When the President becomes pregnant, she promptly resigns as Commander in Chief. Her husband replies to her decision with, "It's just proof of the innate superiority of the male," he grins. "It took forty million women to get you into the White House, and one man to get you out" (Walzer, 2009, p. 102). As Walzer (2009) argues, "Although the film purports to be about a female president, she -- and all of politics -- is largely ignored. We are preoccupied by her husband, the inflexibility of male gender roles" (p. 102). By today's standards, the scene seems to be absurdly sexist, yet more subtle sexist portrayals continue today. The focus on the husband of political women is a common theme in the fictional portrayal of political women, as it is prevalent in *Commander in Chief* as well. Walzer (2009) notes:

Perhaps the message of this series [*Commander in Chief*] is that it is too difficult for a woman to be president. In between the intrigues in the White House meant to undermine her, Mac is faced with as many domestic troubles as a desperate housewife... (p. 103)

Jennifer Newsom, director of the documentary *Miss Representation* notes that, even in the current cultural moment with shows featuring powerful women, the shows avoid dealing with this tension between mother and politician. Commenting on Newsom's remarks, Ulaby (2013) notes, "almost none of those characters have children. Nor do the career-obsessed heroines of her

two favorite shows, *Homeland* and *Scandal*” (para. 6). The dialectic between private and public life is furthered exacerbated for political women, as shows of the past have either framed this tension as central to the character or have avoided the conflict entirely. With the influx of shows about political women, more analysis on how this dialectic is portrayed for political women is crucial.

The leadership roles and expectations for fictional political women are not isolated to the small screen, but are seen in the material political realm as well. A considerable amount of research has been done on the impact gender has on politics. In studying female politicians, researchers have found that they cannot openly talk about discrimination based on gender (Falk, 2013), they are sexually objectified, with Sarah Palin being ascribed the title of a MILF (Perks & Johnson, 2014), and they are portrayed in far more degrading ways than men in their online presence (Ritchie, 2013). Similar to fictional politics, in material politics, representation does not always equal progress when it comes to female politicians (Sisco & Lucus, 2015). Several traits have been ascribed to female leadership and female politicians, and much of this has come from media coverage of female politicians. Carlin and Winfrey (2009) outline key themes prevalent in the coverage of Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton in 2008 including sexual objectification, focusing on their role as mother, and framing women as either “pet” or “child.” Gibson and Heyse (2014) note that Sarah Palin gave rise to the term “mama grizzlies,” or political women that are aggressive and irrational in protecting their children.

Some scholars have noted more feminine styles of leadership as well, with Sarah Rudnick (1989) commenting on the notion of “maternal thinking” as a political strategy. Rudnick notes that such thinking encourages training, nurturing, and protecting in the political world, but Rudnick argues that these traits are often ignored as political strategy or assumed to only belong

to women. Radosh (2008) notes, “Sara Ruddick’s central thesis proposes that maternal thinking is that which finds strategies for life, growth, and social adjustment” (p. 304), and such tenets of leadership have been applied to political women. To be a “maternal thinker,” one values peace and cooperation over violence, and embracing emotions as not a fault, but a natural part of life.

*New York Times* reviewer, Eva Hoffman (1989) argues that maternal thinking:

reminds us that mothering is a conscious activity that calls for choices, daily decisions and a continuing, alert reflectiveness that may seem so ordinary as to be unnoticeable but that is fully as challenging and important as more "elevated" forms of thinking. (para. 12)

Due to the applications maternal thinking has towards politics, maternal thinking is useful in regards to analyzing political women.

It remains clear that the portrayal of fictional political women has been complicated, and there is a clear need for further research on the subject. Although scholars have weighed in on the show *Commander in Chief*, because the show aired in the early 2000’s, and with the current cultural moment of female politicians, more work must be done. With new political women in material political realities, and the advent of social media and the Internet, politics have changed drastically since the early 2000’s. The literature clearly shows that there are consequences to the portrayal of politics and feminism on television, making research on this genre crucial for scholars. Considering the cultural moment of fictional political women and the lack of research on the subject, this thesis fills a much-needed gap in the literature.

### Chapter Three:

## CRITICAL ORIENTATION

In this section, I outline my critical approach to this project and key terms necessary to understand the methods I employ in the thesis. After establishing the fundamentals of a critical rhetoric approach, I discuss how critical rhetoric is used to analyze gender and mediated texts, and discuss what texts I used in this project to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How does Elizabeth McCord negotiate her private and public life in *Madam Secretary*?

RQ2: How does the show *Madam Secretary* uphold and defy traditional notions of leadership?

### Rhetoric Takes a Critical Turn

For decades, rhetorical scholars focused on whether or not a singular text was effective in communicating a message to an audience. The rhetorical world before critical rhetoric looked much different, with scholarship focusing on singular texts, and the effect these texts have on a population. For example, scholars like Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (1993) engaged in this type of scholarship with the rhetorical analysis of female speakers in her book, *Women Public Speakers in the United States, 1800-1925*. Campbell analyses singular speeches given by women in the United States, and the rhetorical strategies used in those speeches. Although useful scholarship, as the humanities took a post-modern turn, rhetorical scholars found this approach limiting because a focus on effect did not account for a fragmented culture. Thus, McGee's initial essay

in 1990 on fragments allowed scholars to examine new texts that are multi-faceted, fragmented, and mediated.

Michael Calvin McGee's notion of how we live in a fragmented society provides justification for studying texts like *Madam Secretary*. McGee (1990) explains, "The public's business is now being done more often via direct mail, television, sports, documentaries, mass entertainment and 'quotable quotes' on the evening news than through traditional media..." (p. 286). Thus, using the work of McGee helps a critical scholar to identify texts that are multi-faceted, and texts in which public discourse is housed, such as a television show. For example, in the case of *Madam Secretary*, the text is not simply one episode of the show. Rather, the text consists of fragments of various episodes, critical and lay responses to the show, and how the show fits into a larger cultural moment.

McGee provides a foundation for scholars to not only study fragmented texts, but also provides scholars with the necessary vocabulary to address power dynamics within the material world and in texts. McGee draws heavily from the work of Foucault, arguing how power has always been fundamental to rhetoric, and even what was considered worthy of study. In his work, "Text, Context and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture," McGee (1990) notes "Discourse practices reflected the presumed homogeneity of western cultures" (p. 285). With these ideas in mind, critical rhetoric scholars are interested in how power functions in a text.

McGee's scholarship on fragments allows critical rhetoric to flourish when paired with the work of Raymie McKerrow. McKerrow (1989) notes, "critical rhetoric seeks to unmask or demystify the discourse of power" (p. 91). Working from the ideas of Foucault, McKerrow pushes the field to analyze how power functions in a text. McKerrow (1989) posits that the goal of critical rhetoric is "to understand the integration of power/knowledge in society -- what

possibilities for change the integration invites or inhibits and what intervention strategies might be considered appropriate to effect social change” (p. 91). A critical scholar identifies how power functions in the text, the impact this has, and ways in which audiences and critics can intervene. Due to McKerrow’s emphasis on power, his work becomes extremely helpful when identifying systems of power, such as patriarchal structures.

With McGee and McKerrow’s contributions, rhetoric shifted from a focus on singular texts, and work emerged that analyzed fragments of texts. For example, before the critical turn in rhetoric, Bonnie Dow’s (2002) piece, “Ally McBeal, Lifestyle Feminism, and the Politics of Personal Happiness,” would be difficult to publish, as the work relies heavily on ideological criticism, and uses various fragments of the television show, such as several scenes, seasons and characters as the artifact. Thus, with the critical turn in rhetoric, a multitude of opportunities have opened up for rhetorical scholars.

### **Critical Rhetoric and Gender**

With the goal of “demasking the discourses of power” in mind, critical scholars have begun to analyze texts focusing on gender. For example, John Sloop has published a significant amount of literature regarding gender in mediated texts, through a critical approach inspired by both McKerrow and McGee. Sloop (2004) identifies three elements of critical rhetoric that inspires his work: that critical rhetoric is doxastic, that it is a political practice and that it is concerned with the materiality of discourse (p. 18).

Critical rhetoric is useful when attempting to uncover power structures, as McGee and McKerrow note, and John Sloop’s work is particularly useful for scholars who take a critical approach to write about issues of sex and gender. Explaining how critical rhetoric is doxastic in terms of gender and sexuality, Sloop (2004) writes:

For example, even if one held that 'sex' had a particular nature in and of itself that could be known outside of culture - an extremely questionable proposition at best- a critical rhetoric study would be interested in how gender and sexuality are culturally understood. (p. 18)

This focus on how gender is culturally understood is an important facet in understanding how shows like *Madam Secretary* construct political women, and studying the materiality of discourse allows critics to identify how such television texts have real life consequences.

As much of Sloop's work has centered on mediated texts, Sloop provides further guidance for scholars who wish to analyze such texts. Mediated texts, such as television shows, present an image to an audience that gives them the rules and guidelines for how they should behave and present themselves. Although some have noted that individuals can engage in resistance by ignoring such texts, Sloop (2004) argues:

while meanings are negotiated and 'agreed upon' by large groups of people - that they can in fact be read transgressively - the meanings presented in mass mediated texts are ones that place 'governing' interests at the center, making visible the meanings that most clearly fit the interests of those in the strongest positions of power. (p. 22)

Thus Sloop provides scholars with the tools to dissect mediated texts in terms of sex and gender. Sloop (2004) argues, "in highlighting the discursive elements of ideological discipline... (critics) are simultaneously deconstructing it" (p. 22). Using a critical framework has allowed scholars to examine television through a critical lens to examine how power, privilege, and gender function in the shows. Through television, audiences are introduced to new ideas that can serve to be emancipatory or limiting in regards to women's roles in the "real" world.

For example, Sloop (2012) used a critical approach to study gender in the case of Caster Semenya in his work “‘This is Not Natural:’ Caster Semenya's Gender Threats.” Sloop’s work has inspired many other scholars to utilize his work in their own scholarship. Additionally, Stephanie Young’s (2015) work, “Running Like a Man, Sitting Like a Girl: Visual Enthymeme and the Case of Caster Semenya” draws from Sloop’s work on critical rhetoric and gender. In her analysis, Young examines Caster Semenya, and the ways in which gender was rhetorically constructed for the athlete.

Bonnie Dow’s work is also useful to scholars who analyze mediated texts, especially if one is analyzing the text for feminist themes. Dow’s work *Prime Time Feminism*, published in 1996, is relevant and useful for scholars who study feminism and television. Dow uses critical rhetoric to analyze popular shows, such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Ally McBeal*, *Ellen* and *Dr. Quinn: Medicine Woman*, among others, and provides scholars with examples for how to engage in similar work. She lays the groundwork for other scholars to follow in suit as she writes, “When the series becomes an artifact for a critic, it becomes possible to do the kind of close readings that reveal patterns of plot and character, recurring rhetorical strategies and ultimately, repetitive rhetorical function” (1996, p. 22), making analysis of current programming necessary.

Although I did not conduct an explicitly third-wave feminist analysis, the works of scholars who do engage in third wave feminist analysis inspired me, and I analyzed a text that was created in a third - wave feminist world. For example, Naomi Rockler (2006) in her work “‘Be Your Own Windkeeper’: Friends, Feminism, and Rhetorical Strategies of Depoliticization,” uses a third wave viewpoint of feminism to critically analyze the television show *Friends*. Similarly, Katherine Bell (2013) conducted scholarship in response to a third-wave world, in her piece “Obvie, We’re the Ladies: Postfeminism, Privilege and HBO’s Newest Girls,” where she

analyzes postfeminism on the show *Girls*. In my analysis, I focused heavily on postfeminist themes, such as the myth of “having it all” and the public/private divide. Additionally, inspired by Dow and the work of similar scholars, my work took a critical rhetoric approach, influenced by third-wave feminism, in order to pay close attention to politics and the impact *Madam Secretary* has on material realities.

### **Texts Chosen for Analysis**

As Dow (1996) argues “television representations of women change over time, just as the conversation about feminism in other areas of cultural life change over time” (p. 21). The current cultural moment of fictional political women is the latest representation of women on television, and by critically analyzing television’s construction of fictional female politicians, this project seeks to be in line with similar feminist rhetorical scholarship as Dow. In this project I analyze the television show *Madam Secretary*.

I obtained the entire first season of *Madam Secretary* from Amazon.com, and the second season from CBS.com. I chose to analyze all episodes of the show that were available at the time of this project, to get a holistic understanding of the program and the trajectory of Elisabeth McCord’s character. Season one of *Madam Secretary* has a total of 22 episodes and, at the time of this project, 14 episodes of season two had released. Each respective episode runs for roughly 47 minutes. I watched *Madam Secretary* completely, taking notes while watching the episodes and consulting transcripts of the episodes. I was open to see what themes surfaced as I watched both shows, but I recognized that I was heavily influenced by the literature I read regarding television, gender, and politics. After analyzing the series, themes emerged regarding “having it all,” blending of traditional spheres, and the personal informing the political. Once these themes

emerged, I addressed the feminist and scholarly implications of all three. Through a critical rhetorical analysis, I explored the following research questions:

RQ1: How does Elizabeth McCord negotiate her private and public life in season one of *Madam Secretary*?

RQ2: How does the show *Madam Secretary* uphold and defy traditional notions of leadership?

## Chapter Four:

### ANALYSIS

Secretary of State Elisabeth McCord has attracted the attention of audiences and critics for a myriad of reasons. Popular news outlets have commented on her politics, her fashion, and her witty banter since *Madam Secretary* premiered in the fall of 2014. However, one core component of Elisabeth McCord's character that has struck a chord with many has been her identity as a wife, friend and, perhaps most notably, as a mother. The show highlights McCord's familial role quite frequently, with numerous storylines focused on her relationship with her husband and her relationship with her three children: Stevie, Allison, and Jason. Téa Leoni notes the impact of her character, commenting, "There's a portrayal that has been sort of accepted of choosing between a strong career and a successful family life, and I think we've accepted a myth. This show is breaking down a myth" (Garcia, 2014, para. 2). Presumably, the actors and creators of the program hoped for this show to challenge traditional myths about work-life balance. It is the potential disruption of this myth that I will examine in this chapter as I analyze how *Madam Secretary* treats both familial and political storylines.

I begin by analyzing how Elisabeth McCord negotiates work-life balance, and specifically how the show confronts the cultural narrative of "having it all." Next, I discuss how the show challenges the traditional spheres of public and private. Then, I move to examine how the show demonstrates how the personal informs the political and I argue that Elisabeth's politics are informed by her interpersonal relationships and that maternal thinking is instrumental in her

work. I also argue that Henry McCord utilizes this framework as well. The idea that both characters struggle with work-life balance and privilege a feminist way of thinking, means that I can make claims regarding the feminist potential of the show. I argue that *Madam Secretary* resists being a postfeminist television series, and frames work-life balance as a political issue. Further, the show privileges the notion of maternal thinking in professional life for both characters, a much welcomed change for 21<sup>st</sup> century television programs.

### **Can She Have It All?**

From the first episode, it is abundantly clear that Elisabeth is conflicted with her public role as Secretary of State and her roles in the private sphere. The series begins with Elisabeth being asked to step into the role of Secretary of State after the previous Secretary was killed in a plane crash. Elisabeth accepts the job offer and the show jumps two months into the future, where Elisabeth is confirmed and has been working at the State department for two months. Despite her two-month tenure, she still questions whether accepting the job was the right decision for her family. She asks her husband, Henry, questions like “Did we do the right thing?” and “You're sure that I didn't push us into this?” (Pilot). From the start of the series, Elisabeth frames decisions as familial ones, as she asks Henry if “we” did the right thing. Despite her acknowledgement of the decision being a familial one, she still is concerned that her ambition, and her desire for this job are manipulative in the decision process. Beyond this particular moment in the show, Elisabeth consistently comes back to the questions of whether this was the right move for her family, whether she can balance her work and her family, and ultimately whether it is realistic for her to “have it all.” The fact that she is asking the question at all shows that “having it all” is not as easy as popular culture may make it seem. Elisabeth is not alone in

asking these questions, as the show highlights the popular and frequent cultural conversation about whether women can “have it all.” As Kornfield (2014) argues:

U.S. culture is debating whether women can “have it all,” where “all” is implicitly defined as a fulfilling career and a fulfilling home life, and a fulfilling home life is constituted by a stable, passionate, heterosexual romance, a close relationship with happy and healthy children, and a well-groomed middle-class (or above) home. (p. 191)

As a result, past television programs, like *Ally McBeal*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and *Dr. Quinn: Medicine Woman* have focused on women, and only women, achieving this notion of “having it all.” *Madam Secretary* does tackle the tension that comes from balancing home and work-life, but does so in a feminist, progressive way that shifts the burden away from women, and rejects the notion of “having it all” entirely.

Elisabeth struggles throughout the series to balance having a fulfilling career and a fulfilling home life, and this struggle often arises from missing out on moments in her children’s lives due to her work as the Secretary of State. For example, midway through season one, Elisabeth is conflicted because she misses her daughter Allison’s sleepover, and questions whether or not she is being a “good” mother. In this moment, the show not only gives voice to Elisabeth’s emotions but also places them in a larger cultural context. When Elisabeth is upset about missing the sleepover, Henry tells her:

You're a mom who had to stay late at work. It doesn't ruin the kids. It just shows them that sometimes you have to do stuff that's hard. It's just life, babe. Normal life. You're a mom that got stuck at work. (Just Another Day)

By positioning Elisabeth’s struggle as one that many mothers face, Henry does not depoliticize the issue –the failure of many postfeminist programs.

Dow (1992) explores this failure to depoliticize issues when examining Dr. Michaela Quinn's identity as a mother on the show *Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman* and argues that the way that Dr. Mike is able to negotiate mother and doctor is a utopian fantasy. Dow (1992) writes, "Dr. Mike's integration of her personal and professional lives is facilitated by similarly utopian elements. She is a single mother, but one with a community wide support system and a flexible schedule" (p. 190). In the case of Dr Quinn, Dow notes that to "have it all" Dr. Quinn had to exist in a utopian society, and by doing so the show reinforced and affirmed the cultural notion that women should, and need, to have it all. As more and more shows have shown "having it all" as the norm for working women, television has entered a space of postfeminism where feminism is rejected, as women do not face issues of discrimination due to their gender.

Yet *Madam Secretary* directly rejects the notion that it is easy to have it all, or that "having it all" even is the end goal in the first place. Instead, the show positions Elisabeth as a woman who is open about the conflict that arises when having a time consuming job and a family. In one episode, when faced with some guff from her kids, Elisabeth states, "I had a very difficult day at work, and I am doing my best not to take it out on anyone" (The Doability Doctrine). Elisabeth acknowledges that balancing both work and home-life can be difficult, and trying to be fully present in the private sphere of the home is difficult, as thoughts from the public sphere of work are present. Another illustration of this tension occurs in season two where Allison accuses Elisabeth of knowing nothing about her, and having no interest in knowing about her life. Allison begins to tell her Mom about how she is writing a lifestyle column for her school newspaper and how she wants to go shopping with Elisabeth. Mid-conversation, Elisabeth takes a phone call from work, and Allison is extremely frustrated that her Mom does not have the time to listen to her. As the show continues, it becomes clear to Elisabeth that Allison feels

slighted in the struggle of balancing work and home-life. Elisabeth approaches Allison and remarks, “I’m sorry if I ever made you feel invisible or unimportant or unheard or anything other than cherished. Because that is what you are” (The Long Shot). This exchange, and others like it that occur throughout the series, demonstrate that when negotiating work-life balance, children often voice concerns over the balance as well. The show demonstrates how Elisabeth has to adapt in order for her to be involved in both work and home-life in the ways she would like to be. For example, although she wanted to be rather involved in teaching her daughter Allison to drive, she has to miss out on the lesson because of her job. At the end of the same episode, however, Elisabeth has the chance to drive with her daughter briefly to get frozen yogurt. Elisabeth does not have the time to spare to take hours off to teach her daughter to drive, but she can get moments with her. The show demonstrates that the tension between work and home-life is constant, so even though Elisabeth gets moments with her children, audiences know that she will face issues in the future. The work-life balance is not neatly contained in an hour-long program.

Importantly, the show does not demonize McCord for being a working mother. Unlike other programs, the work-life tradeoff is not one that unfairly burdens women or makes their life less meaningful and difficult. Past programs have depicted the tradeoff between work-life and home-life as damaging for women’s personal lives. For example, when writing about *Murphy Brown*, Dow (1990) notes, “her public success is counterbalanced by difficult family and romantic relationships and, in general, loneliness” (p. 271). For Elisabeth McCord, the show never positions her as having to choose between public and private success. Having a demanding career brings stress to home life, but it does not destroy relationships. For example, in one exchange when Elisabeth gets home late from work, Henry and Elisabeth have the following conversation:

Elisabeth: Tell me about the kids.

Henry: (falsetto): They're great.

Elisabeth: Seriously? The high voice? What's wrong?

Henry: I didn't want to pile on your problems. Josh broke up with Allison.

(The Operative)

In this exchange, Henry acknowledges that balancing work and home-life may be overwhelming, but he also understands that Elisabeth does not want to be ignorant to what is happening in the private sphere of their home. The show does not frame work-life balance as easy, or “having it all” as an attainable goal, but instead frames work-life balance as a constant negotiation, with both partners involved. Henry often talks to Elisabeth about how complicated the balance can be for both of them. For example, in one episode Jason, Allison and Stevie are all vocal about how they are tired of their mother’s job, and the stresses that it adds to their life. Elisabeth is upset and frustrated that her children feel this way, and voices this frustration to Henry. Henry acknowledges her frustration but replies with “You know what? This week, they hate us. Next week, if we could get box seats to a Nationals game, they'd be over the moon” (There By The Grace of God). The children often become upset over the complications that work-life balance present, and Henry and Elisabeth have to work through their children’s frustrations.

This theme of balancing work-life and home-life does not occur in isolated episodes, but instead, carries across both seasons of the program. For example, in the season two premiere, due to complications on Air Force One, Elisabeth has to step into the role of President, as President Dalton is unable to do so. In addition to this added challenge at work, she finds out that morning that her daughter Stevie is romantically involved with the President’s son, Harrison. In the midst of having to step into the role of President, she also feels enormous responsibility from her role

as parent. Instead of choosing to ignore one or the other, Elisabeth relies on Henry to address the issue. Elisabeth states to Henry, “It’s got to be today. You got to be cool with her. We can’t get into a big family argument” (The Show Must Go On). Elisabeth and Henry work to balance their work and home-life by delegating tasks, and recognizing the strain that work puts on their family at that moment.

*Madam Secretary* not only allows Elisabeth to be open about her struggles in balancing her two worlds, but it also shows Henry struggling himself. The show moves past simply showing work-life balance only as an issue for working mothers, but also shows Henry stressed with balancing his public and private life. Through showing Henry also struggle with “having it all,” the show shifts blame away from individual women and instead, politicizes the issue. For example, due to his interpersonal history with the man, Henry is asked by the NSA to talk to a potential Russian terrorist in hopes to stop illegal activities from occurring. As Henry meets with his NSA handler, his daughter Stevie sees them and is convinced that Henry is cheating on Elisabeth. Given the secretive nature of the work, Henry cannot reveal to Stevie the true reason why he is meeting with his handler, causing conflict between him and his daughter. Further, although Henry eventually divulges to Elisabeth that he is working for the NSA again, he is forced to lie to her about his involvement for several episodes. For Henry, his work dictates what he can tell his partner, and this causes tension between Henry and Elisabeth. Yet the show does reveal that in the mist of challenging work demands, Henry is able to turn to Elisabeth for support. When he can share with no one else that he is working for the NSA, he does in fact inform Elisabeth. When writing about this moment on an episode recap on CBS.com, the network explains, “The Secretary can’t reveal this truth [that Henry works for the NSA] to Stevie, but she can assure her eldest daughter that everything is fine with their family. Operating in the

public eye can be a struggle, but so far, they're handling it as a team" (2014, para. 11). It is through teamwork that Henry and Elisabeth are able to negotiate the difficult terrain of work-life balance.

Henry is actively involved in parenting all three children, but his work creates unique challenges for these relationships. His son Jason self identifies as an anarchist, and due to his passionate beliefs, he often has conflict with his father. For example, in an episode where Jason states he does not want to attend college, Henry teases Jason, implying that he and Elisabeth will spend Jason's college fund on a vacation. Jason responds to Henry's teasing by stating, "You know what? I don't have to take advice from you, Professor. First, you were a puppet for big business, and now you're working for the military-industrial complex. How's that for a twofer?" (Invasive Species). The conflict is centered on Henry's job, as his work impacts how his children see him at home. Later on in the episode, Henry talks to Jason about their conflict and they work through it, but Henry struggles with Jason's anger towards him throughout the episode.

Henry's work also complicates his relationship with Allison. Henry and Allison join Elisabeth on her trip to Cuba to reopen the U.S. embassy, and Allison and Henry spend alone time together. Throughout the episode Allison comments on how Henry seemed different and disengaged from her life. Elisabeth tells Allison that the reason why her father seems "off" is because one of his students committed suicide. The show demonstrates that the emotional labor from work impacted Henry at home, and his interaction with his children.

Even the President struggles with this balance, when in the midst of discussing military strategy with Russia, the President stops to worry about how to help his son Harrison with his drug addiction. He remarks to Elisabeth, "Now that he's 21, we can't just send him to his room every time he makes a bad choice. We have to hope that we raised him well enough that..."

eventually he'll make the right one" (The Doability Doctrine). Whether it is Elisabeth, Henry, or the President, the show makes clear that separating one's public and private lives is nearly impossible. In postfeminist programming, such struggles with balancing work and home-life would be the result of one's own personal failings, and more specifically a woman's personal failing, not systems that make the balance difficult or cultural narratives that insist "having it all" is the goal.

*Madam Secretary* rejects the notion that work-life balance is easy and that failures in having a perfect balance are individual ones. It even rejects the idea that women are the only ones who have to confront the difficulty with "having it all." Historically, the question of "having it all" has only been a burden of women, not men. Rebecca Trasiter (2012) writes about the sexism inherent in the question of "having it all" and argues:

We don't lay the same booby traps for men. We don't constantly quiz and evaluate and poke and prod and take their emotional temperature, asking if they feel fulfilled and happy, if they have everything they want, if their every youthful aspiration has been met sufficiently, if they feel that they're measuring up at the office, in the kitchen, in bed.

(para. 8)

Elisabeth is not the only character to face tension when attempting to balance the two worlds, as Henry and the President face challenges as well. Henry even reminds Elisabeth that the challenges she faces are challenges all working moms face, and in doing so positions her problems as part of a larger system, not just as her own weaknesses. In doing so, the show presents a much more progressive and political notion of work-life balance.

When operating in the postfeminist realm, fictional female characters are often unable to see their struggles as political, and they fail to recognize the creed of second wave feminists in that the personal is political. Commenting on the hit television show *Friends*, Rockler (2006) argues: “Friends does more than just fail to contextualize the personal as political; it contributes to discourses that deem the political to be pathetic” (p. 262). *Friends* fails to recognize sexual harassment as a systemic issue, and instead the show makes light of it. When characters face societal obstacles because they are pregnant or because they are mothers, it is simply a character flaw. Rockler concludes, “On its most basic level, the rhetoric of depoliticization in *Friends* contributes to the postfeminist mythology that women's economic conditions are fair, including economic issues surrounding motherhood” (p. 260). As a result, previous programs have privileged either the public or the private life for women, and have often failed to recognize the social realities women face. This problem often occurs in the material world of politics as well, especially in the media portrayal of political women. McCarver (2011) writes in her study on media narratives about Former Governor Sarah Palin:

Palin’s choices reinforce the myth that if a parent—man or woman—is just hardworking enough and has the right partner, she or he can achieve the highest levels of career success and have not one or two, but four or five children. Who needs parental leave? Who needs affordable healthcare? Who needs employer support for breastfeeding? The myth tells us that these are individual issues and that any individual that can’t work them out on her (or his) own is a lazy whiner. (p. 32)

*Madam Secretary* does not punish Elisabeth McCord for attempting to balance work and home-life, and instead the show presents the reality of Elisabeth McCord and in a way that echoes the

reality of millions of other working parents. Attacks on Elisabeth's role as mother never debilitate her, which goes against what Dow (1997) describes as:

a powerful tendency that I see in popular culture and in feminist work of recent years to use motherhood as the lens through which women's lives are viewed and posit threats to identity as a mother as the most salient ones a woman faces. (p.189)

Elisabeth recognizes the struggles she has in parenting, but does not let those struggles define her. Although Elisabeth is often shown having tension due to her conflicts in parenting, she faces political threats as well, and the tension occurring due to her parenting does not deter her from doing her job. As Tim Daley the actor who plays Henry McCord describes the show, "No one can have it all, but you can have bits of all of it, and you can work through the challenges of having all those pieces of that thing" (Wiliford, 2014). Throughout the show, Elisabeth has "pieces" of it all. For example, she is able to attend her daughter's soccer game but she has to bring security detail to the game, and ultimately, uses the game as a cover to conduct state business. *Madam Secretary* reveals that often individuals just have the "pieces" of both worlds, or rather, the show demonstrates a blending of the public and private instead of a distinction between the two.

*Madam Secretary* acknowledges that work-life balance not only poses challenges for parenting, but can also be difficult for maintaining a strong partnership. In one exchange, Elisabeth and Henry discuss the impact of work on their relationship:

Elisabeth: We used to have sex more often.

Henry: We had sex this weekend.

Elisabeth: But we used to have weeknight sex.

Elisabeth: Is it my masculine energy? I've got too much of it? Because I know some men, they're turned off by women in positions of power. (Pilot)

Henry reassures Elisabeth that he is not “turned off” by her masculine energy, and the issue is settled. *Madam Secretary* undercuts the cultural narrative that women in positions of power face relational conflict in their private lives as a result of their work. From the pilot episode of the show, it is clear that the McCords are focused on having a strong relationship and strong careers, and a “choice” between the two is never mentioned. This theme is ever present in the series. In another episode, Elisabeth struggles with balancing being a wife and mother with her time-consuming job and has this conversation with Henry:

Elisabeth: Work is tough. And I have to be able to turn it off before I come back here.

Henry: You were very present with the kids before.

Elisabeth: And now I want to be present with you. (The Operative)

Elisabeth prioritizes her relationship with Henry, and combats work demands with the option of “turning it off.”

Despite the conflict that arises, *Madam Secretary* never presents Elisabeth as having to make an ultimate choice between work and family, unlike postfeminist programs of the past. For Elisabeth, there are moments where she has to choose work over family, but they are never final decisions. Writing about the show *Ally McBeal*, Busch (2009) argues, “The series thus fails to address women’s concern for balancing career and family and ultimately teaches that women’s competing desires cannot be naturally satisfied in this post-feminist world” (p. 97). Arguably, the idea that individuals hold sole responsibility to balance career and family is a bad model in general, and the show could do more to nod to the lack of structural support that is given to working parents. However, the show does eliminate previous traps of showing this balance as

east. By framing the struggle as just that, a struggle and never forcing Elisabeth or Henry to choose between work and home-life, the show reframes work life balance as a political issue, and rejects the notion that “having it all” is even possible.

“Having it all” often preaches that work should not challenge interpersonal relationships, and as Kornfield (2014) argues, a component of “having it all” is having a stable, passionate heterosexual romance. Although the McCords have a strong partnership, *Madam Secretary* rejects the notion of having “perfect” interpersonal relationships and illustrates that complex work lives will impact home-life. The shift in the portrayal of work-life balance allows the show to serve as an empowering, feminist text by rejecting this pervasive, cultural narrative.

### **Challenging Traditional Spheres**

Traditionally, the public and private divide has been heightened as specific locations and genders are assigned to specific spaces. As Arneil (2001) explains, the public space has been conceptualized as more masculine, and the home or private space, has been conceptualized as feminine. Along with this logic, work occurs in the public sphere, with familial duties occurring in the private sphere of the home. Scholars have noted how often spaces become gendered. For example, Meah (2014) notes that the kitchen is viewed as a domestic, private space, and as Tragos (2009) argues, the garage functions as a masculine space, and explains, “Men seek out the garage because it is indisputably and unambiguously a man’s space” (p. 559). Such private spaces are not only gendered, but are sites that have been assigned private, familial roles.

However, this traditional dichotomy is disputed on *Madam Secretary*, as the show challenges the locations in which culture has dictated that work occurs. Throughout the series, the lines between public and private life are blurred, as Elisabeth often engages in State business at home. It is at her home that her friend George alerts her that Secretary Marsh’s plane crash

was not an accident. Throughout the series, Elisabeth takes calls about matters of national security while she is in the kitchen eating breakfast with her family. State Department business occurs when her former debate partner, who is now a political leader, comes to her house for dinner, and he and Elisabeth discuss matters of international security. The McCord home does not just become a site of work for Elisabeth, but for Henry as well. The Russian Foreign Minister's office calls the McCord home phone to speak with Henry about meeting with the Russian Foreign Minister. When the Foreign Minister's life is at risk and tensions increase in Russia, Henry invites the Foreign Minister's daughter, Olga, to come stay at the McCord household. Countless times throughout the series, *Madam Secretary* reframes a space that is traditionally regarded as part of the private sphere, as a space where work from the public sphere occurs.

In doing so, the show manages to blur the public and private divide, and offers a much more realistic view of home life of political women than past political dramas. *Madam Secretary* addresses this criticism; by showing work from public life occurs in the private home. *Madam Secretary* demonstrates that the blur between the spheres impacts not only the space that is traditionally regarded as private, but it also impacts traditionally public spaces as well. Elisabeth's family often frequents her office at work. Henry visits Elisabeth there, and her office is the space where he tells her that her friend George has died. Both of Elisabeth's daughters visit work, and discuss issues in their private lives in her office.

This tension between home and work life continues later in the series, when nude photos of Stevie with the President's son are leaked and may potentially be published. Elisabeth and Henry are both furious about the incident and about how Stevie may be treated by the public. Elisabeth laments:

I work for the president of the United States, who's running for re-election. She can't just pretend she's not aware of that anymore. And, I mean, how many dumb moves are we gonna give her? How far does it have to go for her to realize what's at stake? And not just for her but for all of us. (Waiting for Taleju)

Elisabeth is upset and angry, but in a moment that for many parents would be confined to their home sphere, Elisabeth also has to acknowledge her work-life. The show demonstrates that Elisabeth is never able to choose between being a mother and being the Secretary but rather, is always both. *Madam Secretary* does not show the positions occupying separate spaces- figuratively or literally.

Following the news of Stevie and Harrison's relationship, Elisabeth and Henry meet with the President and First Lady to discuss their children dating. Elisabeth has to deal with the fact that her daughter's private action could impact her work-life but the show does not have Elisabeth as the only one having to deal with this tension, but establishes that Henry and even the President face this challenge as well. For Henry, the day that the information about Stevie and Harrison is released, he is appearing on "Book TV" on CSPAN to promote his latest book, and a caller calls in to ask him a question about his daughter Stevie, after one of the nude pictures is leaked to the internet. The caller asks:

Uh, I've been listening to you talk about the moral codes of Christianity and Islam. And I think it's so interesting that you hold yourself up as an expert on morality when all I'm finding online about you is a photo of your daughter rolling around in bed with the president's son. (Waiting for Taleju).

This personal situation of dealing with his daughter is now forced in public life because of his profession, and the conversation regarding this private issue becomes a public one on cable

television. Just as Elisabeth struggles with this tension earlier in the episode, the show portrays Henry as struggling as well. In response to the caller's question, Henry provides a long-winded explanation about morality and ethics, and loses his temper with the caller. Henry struggles with balancing his role as a father and a role as a public academic, just as Elisabeth struggles with balancing her roles as mother and Secretary of State.

This is important, as the series presents a way to bridge the private and public spheres. Gring-Premble (1998) notes that traditionally the public and private sphere division was entrenched in power and privilege, and those outside of the public sphere had to create transitional spaces where their voices could be heard. In her case study, Gring-Premble studies the letters between suffragists Lucy Stone and Antoniette Brown Blackwell. However, in *Madam Secretary* the traditional division of the spheres is rejected, and Elisabeth does not create entirely new transitional spaces either. Instead, the show bridges the gap between the two spheres by blending the two, offering a powerful example for other workingwomen.

### **The Personal Informs the Political**

*Madam Secretary* not only portrays work-life balance in a much more complex and realistic way than past programs, but also portrays a different, feminist style of leadership. Throughout the series, Elisabeth McCord is shown relying on her interpersonal relationships not just for support and friendship, but also for valuable political insight, and Henry McCord is shown doing the same. The show highlights the fact she is a mother, friend and wife as an important part of her subject position, and the importance of this is demonstrated through how these relationships impact her policy. The program portrays both Elisabeth and Henry as maternal thinkers, and ultimately demonstrates a new form of foreign policy than past programs. Téa Leoni commented on Elisabeth McCord's politics noting, "I want it to be believable that this

woman can care very deeply and yet can be one of the greatest diplomats of our time” (Zerib & Bennett, 2015, para. 12). The embrace of care on *Madam Secretary* is radically different in the landscape of fictional political television.

Elisabeth is shown throughout the series as relying on her interpersonal relationships for political insight. For example, Stevie asks her mother what is going to be done about the conflict in the fictional country of the Republic of West Africa, as she is concerned for what is occurring and wants her mother to act. When her mother replies that the President has made clear that action should not be taken, Stevie encourages her mother not to give up, and that action can and should be taken in West Africa. Prior to this conversation, Elisabeth was resigned that no action could be taken in the conflict, but directly after this conversation with her daughter, Elisabeth changes her mind, and finds a new way to become involved. Instead of simply listening to policy buffs in this situation, Elisabeth is informed by her daughter’s experiences and the show does not portray this as irrational or misguided, but instead as a smart political decision.

This is not the only instance in which Elisabeth’s children inform her political choices. In an episode in which the Senate is working to defund the microloans program - a program created by and supported by the State Department - Stevie speaks out to her mother. She asks:

Seriously, though, I mean, how-how can they cut the Microloan program? Politicians are always yelling about how they need to get the developing world off their payroll. And yet they're not willing to give people a leg up that they need when they're starting their own businesses? It's like, it's not just people, too. I mean, it's women, it's disgusting. (Whisper of the Ax)

Later on in the episode, Elisabeth works passionately to defend the microloans program using similar language as Stevie. Thus the show positions Stevie’s insight as inspiring Elisabeth to

political action. The reason why Elisabeth has this information is because she is a mother, and by demonstrating this, *Madam Secretary* positions maternal thinking and experiences as not a detriment but an asset.

The show consistently portrays family life as interwoven with professional decisions. In season two, the President's plane goes missing and Elisabeth has to step into the role of President. Earlier in the episode, her son Jason shared that he wrote a paper about how a journalist who was jailed for not revealing her sources was inspiring to him, and how he believes she is being unfairly jailed. As a result, during her tenure as President, Elisabeth signs the paperwork to release the journalist from prison, and this action is a direct result of Jason bringing the issue to her attention.

In addition to listening to her children to inform her work decisions, Elisabeth often relies on Henry's counsel. His expertise on religion is often crucial in her work. She asks him for help when dealing with a religious extremist cult, she seeks his advice when talking to a Buddhist radical, and she turns to Henry to talk through the ethics of situations. All of this counsel could be received from an advisor in the State department, but Elisabeth chooses to rely on her husband for this information. The show demonstrates that home-life can inform work-life, and often-in ways that are more productive than attempting to separate the two. In the midst of investigating the death of former Secretary Marsh, Elisabeth chooses to rely on her husband's counsel, and that is what motivates her actions in the investigation. When a congressional committee investigates Elisabeth for disclosing this information to her husband, Elisabeth makes the case for taking the counsel of her husband stating, "If Vincent Marsh was murdered, it was probably an inside job. I could only work with someone I trusted, and that meant my husband, a man I have ruthlessly vetted for over 25 years" (There But For The Grace of God). Elisabeth

defends her choice to rely on her husband's advice not as an emotional decision, but as a practical, strategic choice.

Elisabeth also is informed by insight from her brother when she makes policy decisions. In one episode, a member of ISIS kills an American in Syria, and in response all aid workers are evacuated from the country - including Elisabeth's brother. Her brother returns to visit Elisabeth in Washington D.C., and he questions Elisabeth about how the Dalton administration is handling ISIS and critiquing their overall policy in the Middle East. Elisabeth is angered by his criticism, arguing that because she actually creates policy, her brother cannot understand the complex workings of foreign policy and military strategy. Her brother replies to this by stating, "You can't imagine from your high perch inside the Beltway, the things I see on the ground" (Catch and Release). Arguing with her brother causes Elisabeth to reflect, and she begins to look at different perspectives to catch the ISIS operative that killed the American. It is directly from information that her brother gives her that Elisabeth makes policy choices and is able to find the ISIS operative, and by doing so the show once again demonstrates that interpersonal relationships should be viewed as a legitimate source of information and inspiration in politics.

In addition to relying on familial relationships to inform her choices, Elisabeth also relies on her friends for political guidance. Perhaps the most pervasive plot in the first season of the show is Elisabeth uncovering what really happened to former Secretary Marsh. This information not only has personal significance to Elisabeth, but the plot behind Secretary Marsh's death has enormous policy implications for the Dalton administration as a whole. For such a massive undertaking, instead of relying on her aides to help her or immediately seeking the help of President Dalton or the Director of the CIA Munsey, Elisabeth instead turns to her friends. In an impassioned plea to her friends in which Elisabeth asks for help, her friends Juliet and Isabelle

ask, “Why didn't you go straight to Munsey?” to which Elisabeth replies, “Because George said Marsh's plane crash was arranged by someone inside the company. For all I know, it could be him. You're the only ones I can trust” (Need To Know). The show positions her friends as valid sources of political information, and beyond that, more valid sources of political guidance than those in actual office.

*Madam Secretary* separates itself from a traditional script of distancing interpersonal relationships from government policy, as the show works to integrate both Elisabeth and Henry's public and private lives. The constant choice to show Elisabeth being informed by her interpersonal relationships demonstrates how the show positions Elisabeth as a maternal thinker. As Ruddick (1989) notes, “Maternal thinking is one kind of disciplined reflection among many, each with identifying questions, methods, and aims” (p. 24). Often maternal thinking has been assumed to only belong to mothers, and only belong in the home. However, Ruddick explains maternal thinking can belong to anyone, and not only functions in the home but functions in the public, and often political spheres as well. Maternal thinking works “to protect, nurture, and train” (p. 23), yet often these objectives are not given political weight and often assumed to be the biological characteristics of motherhood. Thus, when these ideas are celebrated in politics it presents a leadership style that is feminist and unprecedented.

Pairing politics with motherhood, *Madam Secretary* presents the public with a character who works to protect, nurture and train not only her children, but also the world. Elisabeth often utilizes maternal thinking in her decisions throughout the series. For example, when Elisabeth and Henry are fighting in a flashback scene about Elisabeth's work in Afghanistan prior to becoming Secretary of State, Henry claims that her work in foreign affairs will take away from her relationship with their family. Henry believes she should not take the job in Afghanistan

because it will hurt their marriage and children, to which Elisabeth replies that she is taking the job because of her family. She explains, “And I am talking about a higher purpose which serves them” (There But For The Grace Of God), noting how her work actually protects her children. The program establishes in this flashback that the reason Elisabeth engages in her work with the CIA and the State Department is for her family. For Elisabeth, her role as a mother and a wife informs her political beliefs and motivates her to create a stronger, safer world.

The show demonstrates that relationships often relegated to the private sphere, such as her relationships with children, friends, and partners, can be integral in the public sphere as well. For Secretary McCord, her work-life does not only impact her home-life, but her home-life impacts her work at the State department. In doing so, the show legitimizes personal experiences as political insight in ways not often seen on television. For example, in the Pilot episode, Elisabeth is tasked with finding a way to save two American teenagers that were taken prisoner in Syria. As part of the process, Elisabeth talks to the parents of the teenagers and urges the importance of not talking to the media. The parents are unsure of the course of action and to reassure them Elisabeth tells the couple:

Oh, God I have two teenagers. They're smart, self-confident and articulate, as we've raised them to be. My son is a self-proclaimed anarchist. I could see him doing something like this. And if it were my son where Tyler and Ethan are today? This is how I would handle it. (Pilot)

By using her experience as a mother to ensure the political outcome that she desires, the show demonstrates that maternal experience and maternal thinking are valuable policy strategies. Convincing the parents of these teenagers not to speak to the media is a crucial part of her job, and in that moment Elisabeth chooses to talk about nurturing and protection instead of traditional

military language. Scheper-Hughe (1996) contends that Ruddick identifies “holding on, holding up, holding close, holding dear -- as an essential element of maternal thinking” (para. 9), and the show provides countless examples of Elisabeth and Henry “holding close” in terms of their foreign policy.

Maternal thinking is not exclusive to women, as Hayden (2003) notes, “we all—women and men of various ethnicities, races, religious beliefs, sexual orientations and professional identities—have the ability and the responsibility to participate in maternal practices” (p. 210). The show exemplifies this, as throughout the series Henry utilizes maternal thinking. For example, in one episode Henry’s friend and former professor comes to visit him to ask Henry and Elisabeth to help in a humanitarian crisis in the fictional country of the Republic of West Africa. The show highlights Henry being informed by his interpersonal relationship with Laurent, and Henry advocates to Elisabeth to take action. His professor argues that the McCords must help because his family is in danger, and that people’s lives are at risk. Henry “holds close” his friend, Laurent, and Laurent’s family, and convinces Elisabeth to take action.

This is not the only instance of Henry utilizing maternal thinking. He also uses it with his work with Dmitri and the NSA. This relationship is professional for Henry, but as the series continues Henry begins to see Dmitri as a friend, and also feels indebted to protect him. The show portrays Henry utilizing maternal thinking with Dmitri, as he is motivated by nurture, protection and training. The relationship Henry has with Dmitri begins with training, as Henry attempts to help Dmitri garner information, and helps to teach him how to be safe in that situation. As the situation becomes more dangerous, however, Dmitri becomes fearful for his life. Henry works to nurture and protect Dmitri. He comforts him and tells him that he will protect Dmitri at all costs, and his actions demonstrate this. After Dmitri is asked to go to Russia, his

safety is compromised because if anyone finds out that he is a spy he will be tortured by the Russian state. Knowing this, Henry demands to go with Elisabeth to negotiations with Russia so that he can protect Dmitri. Henry goes with NSA operatives to try to rescue Dmitri, and he becomes enraged when they are unable to save Dmitri from being taken by the Russians. For Henry, his professional life and interpersonal life became blurred, because Dmitri had become much more than a professional duty, but someone that Henry cared about.

Ultimately, by showing both Elisabeth and Henry as utilizing their interpersonal relationships and maternal thinking to inform their policy decisions, *Madam Secretary* demonstrates that such political choices are not irrational, but smart policy choices. Past programs have shown women pairing motherhood and politics as irrational and simply poor political choices. Adams (2011) notes that in *Commander in Chief*, when Allen enacts her role as mother, she acts irrationally, leaving a national security briefing to interrupt a press conference. Adams (2011) writes that Allen “conjures images of a mama bear protecting her cubs” (p. 231), and demonstrates that when political women exercise their role as mother, it hurts their politics. Such depictions are present in the world of material politics as well. Female politicians including Sarah Palin, Michelle Bachmann, and Nicki Haley have all described themselves as “mama grizzlies.” When writing on the phenomenon of the “mama grizzly” in politics, Miller (2010) notes, “in the wild, real mama grizzlies are known to be aggressive, irrational, and mean. The issues facing the country are complex, and bears are not” (para. 17). In both fictional and material politics, women have been framed as irrational and aggressive for embracing motherhood in the political sphere.

On *Madam Secretary*, countless examples exist of both characters not only using maternal thinking, but arriving at their desired political outcomes for using such strategies.

Furthermore, because the show does not simply show Elisabeth utilizing maternal thinking but shows Henry utilizing maternal thinking as well, the show opens the door to conversations about how maternal thinking is not simply a policy enacted by mothers, but a way of thinking that can be utilized by all people. By highlighting how powerful maternal thinking can be in political environments, for both men and women, the show presents a radically feminist notion of foreign policy.

## Chapter Five:

### CONCLUSIONS

Analyzing *Madam Secretary* offers new possibilities for understanding work-life balance, and public/private divide. By doing so, the show presents a new and much welcomed vision of female leadership to television audiences. In the midst of a cultural moment, both in entertainment and material politics, where the public is being presented with more representations of female leadership than ever before, it is necessary to analyze texts like *Madam Secretary*. This chapter will explore my conclusions about how the show portrays work-life balance and the construction of female leadership. I will then explore the comparisons made between Elisabeth McCord and Hillary Clinton. Next, I will present ideas for future research and will conclude this chapter by answering my research questions.

In this thesis, I examined how the show *Madam Secretary* addresses work-life balance by focusing specifically on Elisabeth McCord, the title character. Elisabeth McCord struggles at times to balance her work-life and home-life, but is able to find solutions when she blends the two. By blurring the lines between public and private life, Elisabeth presents an empowering example to viewers of how to negotiate the tension between work-life and home-life. Additionally, as the series presents Henry struggling with this balance as well, the show positions work-life balance not as a personal struggle, like other postfeminist programs, but shifts blame away from women. *Madam Secretary* combats the cultural notion that women should strive to “have it all” and instead presents the model of “having pieces of it all.” Further, the show portrays both Elisabeth and Henry utilizing maternal thinking in policy decisions, presenting a

positive maternal vision of leadership. The show still manages to portray work-life balance as complicated, and in doing so the show presents an empowering, positive representation of female leadership and work-life balance.

### **The “Real” Politics in *Madam Secretary***

From the start of the show, critics have been quick to comment on the politics of *Madam Secretary*, and the comparisons between the characters on the show and real life politicians. The media coverage of the show has centered on Elisabeth’s likeness to Hillary Clinton, and such comparisons matter, as they demonstrate how audiences view fictional female politicians, and potential biases audiences have before ever watching the show. Since the show was announced, Elisabeth McCord was compared to Hillary Clinton, as she is a female, blonde, Secretary of State.

Jane Borden (2014) notes:

Of course, McCord is her own character, based less on Clinton than on the network’s need for a likable badass who’s never wrong and never wears pantsuits. Still, when she faces the exact same trials as Clinton, comparisons are inevitable. The show, and by extension CBS and its CEO Leslie Moonves, have already attracted Clinton detractors and conspiracy theorists who see the production as one big campaign ad for Hillary 2016. (para. 20)

Kevin Drum (2014) went as far as to claim “it’s pretty hard not to see this as a fairly transparent attempt to make Hillary look like presidential timber” (para. 2), yet the producers of the show have continuously argued that although they may have been inspired by Hillary Clinton, Elisabeth McCord is not Hillary.

Tim Daly even noted in an interview with *Politico*, “We’re not making a documentary about Hillary Clinton” (McCalmont, 2014, para. 9). Although there are stark differences between

McCord and Clinton it is troubling that this comparison has been so pronounced, and demonstrates two potential problems. Initially, the media may only have one script for dealing with a female politician: Hillary Clinton. As a result, any prominent female character will always be compared to Hillary Clinton as the “baseline” for a female politician. Elisabeth McCord is not the only fictional politician compared to Hillary Clinton, as the media made similar comparisons with Alicia Florick on *The Good Wife*, (Epstein, 2015) the show *Political Animals*, *Veep*, *House of Cards*, *Scandal*, and even *The West Wing* (Fuller, 2014). Perhaps *Washington Post* writer Jamie Fuller puts it best when she wrote, “Every TV show is about — and has always been about — Hillary Clinton” (2014). There are no clear answers for why such portrayals are taking place, but perhaps the issue is that because Clinton is the baseline female politician, the public is only viewing fictional female politicians through the lens of Hillary Clinton. The danger lies in not getting a nuanced representation of female politicians. Part of this is the burden of a political drama that attempts to reflect reality, but this burden is further complicated when the identity of the key politician is an anomaly in the material world.

With the decade separating *Commander in Chief* and *Madam Secretary*, there is a drastic change between the portrayals of the female characters on the shows. Although both shows feature women exhibiting stereotypical feminine values, and attempting to balance motherhood, *Madam Secretary* presents a much more complex and progressive depiction of females in power. With Elisabeth McCord, society has seen previous female Secretaries of State with Madeline Albright, Condoleezza Rice and Hillary Clinton herself. What is unique about McCord is that there never has been a female Secretary of State with young children. Show producer Barbara Hall note when commenting on Elisabeth’s character:

One of the things that I had to contextualize was the [former] female secretary of states either had no children or grown children. So what does that look like? How does that work? So I studied her life a bit. (McCalmont, 2014, para. 14)

Elisabeth McCord presents a new kind of female political leader, which is not seen in the material world. Until more women with young children are elected into office, fictional political women like Elisabeth McCord is what is available to shape opinions about young mothers in political office.

Political dramas inform the public about what is possible in politics and how politics work (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2002), and *Madam Secretary* is doing that when it comes to mothers inhabiting political office. If one accepts Dow's assertion that the images the media present us matter, it is encouraging to see a shift from the misguided representation of women in politics has been presented to the public for so many years. The implications of this go beyond a hit show on CBS, and infiltrate our material political realities. The United States has never had a female president, women make up less than twenty percent of congress (Women in the U.S., 2015), and account for only six United States governors (Current Numbers, 2015) and little has changed since *Commander in Chief* aired in 2005. The portrayals of fictional female politicians must change in order for these numbers to change, and it is reassuring to see that *Madam Secretary* does not fall victim to the problems of previous programs like *Commander in Chief*. Portrayals of fictional political women that continue oppressive views of women do little to show society a world in which a woman can break through the glass ceiling, a world in which we are not just entertained by fictional political women, but we are led by real ones.

As Dow (1996) reminds us, "Feminism is a politics with material consequences that entails hard choices, hard work, and a commitment to collective action. Images can and have

contributed to that struggle, but they cannot substitute for it” (pp. 214-215). The cultural moment of fictional political women is exciting, and perhaps is guiding society towards a future when a female politician is no longer newsworthy. The literature suggests that television shapes viewers political views, but it also can have real world influences on viewers’ politics. Through watching *Madam Secretary*, audiences learn about working mothers, parents, and women in political power, and such education works to rebuff this postfeminist world we often inhabit. With the disruption of traditional gender tropes about female leadership and work-life balance, *Madam Secretary* is a much-welcomed change that hopefully can spark material change as well.

As mediated texts are the ways in which society constructs their notions of gender *Madam Secretary* appears to be a progressive text for feminists hoping for better portrayals of political women on television (Sloop, 2004). If women can inhabit political office while struggling with balancing the demands at home, a much more realistic portrayal of female politicians lives in the real world is presented. By showing maternal thinking as a legitimate foreign policy strategy, the show challenges previous depictions of female leadership in ways that make critics hopeful for continued progressive depictions in the future.

### **Directions For Future Research**

Consumers and critics need to be cautious of assuming that representation equates progress, and although *Madam Secretary* presents an overwhelming positive representation of female leadership, other programs from this cultural moment may not present such empowering representations. At the height of a cultural moment where there are so many shows portraying women in political roles, future research needs to be done to see how these women are represented and what constraints their characters deal with. Beyond political dramas focused on national security, such as *Madam Secretary*, work should be done on comedic works, such as

*Veep* and *Parks and Recreation*, to see if other genres function within a different set of constraints that are less restrictive in terms of gender hierarchies, or present a new model of female leadership. Additionally, future scholars should continue to study maternal thinking in a mediated context, particularly as this cultural moment features so many powerful women with political agency. Studies should look into homeland security dramas, such as *Homeland*, *24*, and *The Americans*. Additionally, research should be done on how maternal thinking functions in law enforcement contexts such as *Law and Order* and *CSI*. Additionally, this project does not address the class and socioeconomic issues that factor into work-life balance. The McCord family is never seen struggling for money, and this element of work-life balance is not present in the show. However, future scholars should study work-life balance on television where class is a factor, and criticism should occur of programs, like *Madam Secretary*, that erase class from the picture. Additionally, managing the balance of career and family is predicated upon the notion that the McCord family is a traditional, nuclear family structure. Even the usage of maternal thinking by scholars is reliant on this traditional family structure. As Code (1990) argues, “only a stereotyped form of middle – class mothering, in a two-parent, heterosexual, and affluent family, really fulfills the requirements of maternal thinking” (p. 94). Maternal thinking is a useful theory to engage in rhetorical work, but future scholars must be wary of the limitations of the theory. In terms of maternal thinking functioning in *Madam Secretary*, the empowering example of maternal thinking may not be present in other texts that do not have traditional, nuclear family structures.

From a theoretical standpoint, more work should be done on seemingly feminist programs, to see the ways in which postfeminist representations are evolving. As media changes, scholars must do work so that understandings of feminism and postfeminism can evolve as well.

As maternal thinking was created in the late 1980s, work should be done to update the theory to align with 21<sup>st</sup> century society. The theory should be updated to account for the biological, sexual, and familial differences that we are seeing more and more of in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in order for usage of the theory to evolve.

### **Conclusion**

I return to my research questions to conclude this thesis. First:

RQ 1: How does Elizabeth McCord negotiate her private and public life in *Madam Secretary*?

By closely analyzing “Madam Secretary,” it becomes apparent that Elisabeth McCord negotiates her private and public life by ultimately blending the two spheres. Through having Henry as a strong, feminist partner, he works to support Elisabeth and helps her to negotiate her private and public life, as he is dealing with the negotiation himself. Elisabeth is shown struggling with the negotiation between her private and public life, and although throughout the series there are moments where she has to focus on one sphere of her life instead of the other, the negotiation is portrayed as a constant negotiation. Ultimately, it is the blending of her home-life and work-life that allows Elisabeth to be successful.

The practicality of blending private and public life leads to the second research question,

RQ2: How does the show *Madam Secretary* uphold and defy traditional notions of leadership?

Through blending her private life with her public political life, Elisabeth presents a new model of leadership, one that is deeply rooted in maternal thinking. Privileging maternal thinking as a legitimate approach to foreign policy defies previous notions of leadership. Past representations of political mothers have relied on the “mama grizzly” trope, and motherhood in politics has

been seen as an illegitimate form of leadership. *Madam Secretary* presents a new and much welcomed model of leadership that infuses interpersonal and family life into politics, and in a way that allows the characters to make informed, not rash, political decisions. Further, Elisabeth is not the only character to exhibit such integration, as Henry uses maternal thinking as well. In doing so, *Madam Secretary* brings maternal thinking to the forefront of politics and by showing both male and female characters utilizing this approach it amplifies the show's endorsement of such leadership.

*Madam Secretary* provides exciting new portrayals of fictional political men and women, in a time where such progressive portrayals are greatly needed. By challenging the myth of "having it all," blending the public and private spheres, and infusing maternal thinking into policies decisions the show provides empowering examples for working parents, and an important image of leadership to the wider public. As scholarship continues on future political dramas, perhaps the themes present in *Madam Secretary* will continue to be seen on television.

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