

The Diplomat: Gender and Security in Popular Culture

Written by Louise Pears

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LOUISE PEARS, MAR 27 2025

In *The Diplomat*, we follow the journey of Kate Wyler, American Ambassador to the United Kingdom, as she struggles to work out who is responsible for a 'false flag attack' on a UK warship, adapts to her new role, and grapples with the suggestions she could be the next American Vice President. Drawing on the wider sub/inter discipline of popular culture and world politics, the starting point of this article is that popular culture is political, and television shows are one space where security practices are made meaningful, legitimized, and re-presented to audiences. *The Diplomat* is somewhere audiences interpret their relationship to the UK and USA in a time after the war on terror, forging often unspoken ideas about gender, nationality and security.

As I have argued elsewhere, "who our heroes and enemies are tells us about the wider cultural and political context from which they emerge, and they are therefore intertwined with constructions of threat, in/security and defence." Is this therefore a feminist show casting doubt on accepted violent practice of international diplomacy and statecraft, or a gripping tale of realist IR with a side order of natty one-liners and a lot of time talking about hairstyles? Unpacking how *The Diplomat* represents a female ambassador in the post-war on terror, post-Iraq and Afghanistan moment is worthy of scholarly attention. It allows us to explore how we negotiate our security and national identities in the post-withdrawal era.

The concept of "home" in a story can symbolize or represent the homeland. Essentially, the home in the narrative can serve as a metaphor for the broader idea of the nation state. In *The Diplomat*, both Kate's home and the British homeland have been shaken by American violence. That being said, *The Diplomat* fits within a wider turn in security TV shows to offer a more complicated and seemingly ambivalent account of the US's place as global hegemon and the actions of the war on terror. It also puts forward a female protagonist as a capable international actor. However, in this piece I suggest that these seemingly critical gestures often reinscribe ideas about masculinity and femininity in world politics and rearticulate the importance to act ruthlessly in a fundamentally anarchical global order.

Kate Wyler is positioned as a caring and careful international actor. In negotiations with the White House chief of staff, she says of American Iranian relations: "It is a flimsy web of relationships. But sometimes it holds. Do not tear it. Do not be an infinitely ravenous American." One of the rifts between her and her husband is around his authorisation of the covert use of force in Lebanon. Her sensitivity is underscored when a member of her team dies in a car bomb and she struggles to move on.

And yet, across the two seasons Kate is increasingly disciplined into the role, her seeming naivety and squeamishness for violence exposed as at best idealistic and at worst naïve. She begins as a critical voice against violence but becomes (albeit uncomfortably) part of the institution that justifies and orders these actions. She says of the Vice President – accused of being behind the attack on the UK warship that killed 43 Navy personnel – "I get it" and then later "she shouldn't lose her job for making a decision that had to be made."

In this narrative arc then we see two things happen that I suggest can be read as reaffirming America as the good guy, but in a much more nuanced way than the gung-ho depiction in Bush Jr's war on terror and the popular cultural articulation of that position (think *24*, *Collateral Damage*). The first is the general acceptance that violence is, whilst undesirable, necessary to achieve geopolitical advantage. The second is the representation of Kate as the idealised American security actor. Rather than the masculinized logic of protection central to the war on terror, we now see a

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mothering logic of protection. Security, vigilance, and strength are still important, but they are re-articulated through a female face, emphasizing humanitarian, caring, and relational experiences of international politics. In Kate's own words: "My staff are like my children. I have to protect them." In this tense and complex relationship, Kate confirms that she is still on the side of America who she claims are "in the aggregate ... doing good."

This fits with a wider move to have female leads in security stories that has been argued to rearticulate American or British foreign policy and counter-terror activities. A move Eisenstein famously critiqued as "the war on terror with a white female face", or which I have written about in relation to *Homeland* as both distancing the audience from the often-problematized violences of the war on terror, yet also reproducing the essential nature of counter-terror operations.

And while Kate is taught to take a more masculinised realist political position, she is also cajoled into adopting a more feminine and kempt political persona. The series highlights that there has only been one female ambassador from the US to the UK. Seeing a strong female protagonist in a space where women have been both figuratively and literally excluded seems like a positive step. So too it depicts the particular additional requirements put upon Kate to wear the right clothes and look the right way. This is not only an inclusion of women, but a recognition of the way gender stereotypes matter to the conduct of political actors.

Equally, this depiction of Kate revisits a trope of the tender tomboy wherein female characters exhibit traits and behaviours traditionally associated with boys, such as being adventurous, independent, and rejecting conventional feminine roles and activities. This trope typically involves these characteristics being contrasted against the pretty and overtly feminine villain. The ambassador is seen as actively rejecting her feminine characteristics – she doesn't want to brush her hair, is uncomfortable in dresses and only at the end of season 2 does she acquiesce to her power hairstyle of a low and tidy bun. Her reluctance to be feminine is presented as a personality trait rather than a formed response to being taken seriously in an industry dominated by men. In both personal and professional spheres, she is disciplined to conform to respectable and accepted norms of gendered behaviour – feminine in composure, but masculine in conduct, grace and guts.

In sum, *The Diplomat* offers a nuanced portrayal of gender and security in popular culture, exposing traditional narratives while simultaneously reinforcing certain stereotypes. Kate Wyler's journey from a critical voice against violence to a reluctant participant in the very system she questions allows the audience to work through their own relationship to American sanctioned violence. The series underscores the persistent need for strength and vigilance in a chaotic global order, but through a more humanitarian and relational lens that rearticulates rather than reworks our understanding of America as the good guy. By positioning a female protagonist in a traditionally male-dominated field, *The Diplomat* seems to critique yet often reaffirms the gendered dynamics of international security. And this is all underpinned by a plot that involves the Russians ... but that is for another time.

About the author:

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