Nixon, Trump and *Washington Behind Closed Doors*: Fictionalizing Watergate and the Prescience of the Historical Miniseries

Karen McNally, London Metropolitan University

Abstract: The development of the miniseries as a TV genre during the 1970s became central to American television's dramatization of the nation's history through stories that combined fact and fiction to relate the past to contemporary US culture. Rarely considered, however, is the ways in which increasing slippages between the screen and real-world events might work to presage the culture and politics of the future, illuminating historical connections that move beyond a television drama's moment of production. This article explores the 1977 ABC miniseries *Washington Behind Closed Doors*, an adaptation of John Ehrlichman's novel *The Company* and its fictional tale of a Nixon-like president, drawing on the author's experiences as part of the Nixon administration. Emerging in the contexts of the historical miniseries and various screen depictions of Watergate, the show became part of a blurring of the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction in the re-telling of Richard Nixon's doomed tenure as president. At the same time, the article contends, the explicit fictionalization of the nation's recent political history in *Washington Behind Closed Doors* provides a space in which to read the show as a prescient imagining of the United States' political future later realized in the presidency of Donald Trump.

Keywords: Donald Trump, Richard Nixon, presidency, historical drama, 1970s miniseries, American television history

Ten days after the re-election of President Richard Nixon in November 1972, political journalist Hugh Sidey wrote in *Life* magazine: 'Nothing weighs heavier on a man in the White House than his concern for history […] No President has yet found a favourable place in the history books through rancor and revenge − and Nixon knows his history.' (Sidey 1972: 8) When ABC's miniseries *Washington Behind Closed Doors* premiered just under five years later in September 1977, its Nixonesque protagonist Richard Monckton played by Jason Robards watched the television news as he prepared to give his presidential victory speech. Noting the first reference his chief of staff Frank Flaherty (Robert Vaughn) makes to him as 'Mr President', the fictional commander-in-chief instructs him to memorialize the event for relaying to the press as one of his presidential 'footnotes to history', before furiously dispensing Flaherty to enlist a marching band to drown out the noise of the anti-war protesters outside (1:1). Despite the show's depiction of a fictional president, the character was wholly derived from the public image and documented reporting of the former leader of the free world, and the scene adeptly conveys Nixon's resolve to ensure his position in the nation's history and simultaneous predilection to politically self-wound. Despite Nixon's landslide second-term victory, Watergate was still a news story in print and on TV and would develop into the tale of a disgraced president as the American public became transfixed daily by the Watergate hearings and Nixon suffered the infamy of becoming the first US president to resign from office on 9 August 1974. Sidey's analysis in *Life* was therefore an astute motion to the impact of Nixon's psychology on the historical legacy he would in fact leave. Like presidents before him and after, Nixon would go on to establish a presidential library in his name, and he continues to be politically historicized and re-evaluated, most notably in foreign policy terms and through his brokerage of a new relationship with China. Nixon's two-term presidency, however, is indelibly imprinted with Watergate exposćs of political

corruption which alongside Nixon's complex identity have both driven the framing of his political name in history and produced a narrative drama that was made for screen dramatization.

From Oliver Stone's biopic *Nixon* (1995), to *All the President's Men* (Alan J. Pakula, 1976) and Robert Altman's *Secret Honor* (1985) that depicts a fictional Nixon in a stream of consciousness narrative of his downfall, Watergate and Nixon have served as historical subject matter for a variety of screen narratives, and continue to do so with limited series *The White House Plumbers* (HBO) and *Gaslit* (Starz) due for release in 2022. *Washington Behind Closed Doors* appeared alongside the development of the television miniseries on American network television during the 1970s, many examples of which drew on US cultural and political histories for biographical narratives or positioned fictional characters in the midst of historical events. This Watergate-inspired drama, however, disturbed these divisions in its purportedly fictionalized depiction of political corruption that was nevertheless framed explicitly around America's recognisable recent history and Nixon himself. This merging of forms points to the alternative ways in which the impact of fictional dramatizations of history might be considered. Moreover, while the narrative and characterisations of *Washington Behind Closed Doors* were undoubtedly derived from documented history, the reception context of Trump-era politics prompts the viewer to re-examine the show's foundation as both a re-telling of history and envisioning of America's political future. As Gary Edgerton suggests, both the production and reception of historical narratives are concerned with the construction of a 'useable past' through which these stories 'are used to clarify the present and discover the future' (Edgerton 2001: 4). Imagined historical contexts have largely veered, however, between alternative pasts such as the World War II Axis powers' victory depicted in the television adaptation of Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (Amazon Prime, 2015-2019) or of Philip Roth's fascist America under Charles Lindbergh in *The Plot Against*

America (HBO, 2020), and the projected futures of science-fiction or the dystopia of shows such as *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu, 2018-) with less ties to specific historical events. Possibilities remain, therefore, for alternative forms of prescience in the dramatization of historical narratives. Parallels have frequently been drawn between the illegal practices of the Watergate scandal and those of the Trump administration, famed *Washington Post* journalist Carl Bernstein describing the tapes of Trump's attempt to fraudulently claim election victory in Georgia after the 2020 election as 'far worse' than these earlier events (Aggarwal 2021). *Washington Behind Closed Doors* becomes, therefore, a show ripe for re-examination in its timeliness, not only in its evocation of history through a manifest clash of fictionalization and identifiable characters and events, but simultaneously in the space this form creates for the show's prophetic envisioning of a future playing and played out in contemporary US politics.

Subjectivity and Heroic Melodrama in *The Comey Rule*

The television adaptation of former FBI Director James Comey's Trump-era memoir illuminates the indistinct boundaries that exist between notions of fact and fictionalization in the historical miniseries. While dramas such as *The Loudest Voice* (Showtime, 2019), which detailed the sexual harassment and abuse inflicted by Roger Ailes and others at Fox News, framed narratives around the cultural and political mood leading up to and following the 2016 election, Showtime's miniseries *The Comey Rule* instead brought viewers into the White House through its focus on its protagonist's experience as FBI Director during the Trump presidency. The political drama of Washington's contemporary history adapted from Comey's *A Higher Loyalty: Truth, Lies, and Leadership* emerged among a number of books published about the Trump administration during its term. From journalists' exposés to insider accounts written by former members of the administration, the connecting thread of these publications was the revelatory narrative of chaotic governance centred around a

president who was at best atypical and at worst unqualified and erratic (Wolff 2018; Woodward 2019; Manigault Newman 2018; Wolff 2019). In his *New York Times* review of the final book in Michael Wolff's trilogy, *Landslide: The Final Days of the Trump White House* covering the period from the 2020 election to the inauguration of Joe Biden, Nicholas Lemann aligns the book with preceding accounts of the Trump presidency that draw on a narrative form combining a minimal attribution of sources with a 'third-person omniscient voice…[in which] … they are shown behaving honourably … and … their overall take on events animates the story.'(Lemann 2021; Wolff 2021; Woodward 2020; Bolton 2020) As authors and a cast of characters narrate tales of political chaos, subjective self-positioning in heroic terms becomes a central element of these dramatizations of Donald Trump's presidency.

As autobiographical memoir, Comey's published account of his involvement with the 2016 election and the Trump presidency is necessarily articulated from the author's perspective as narrator of events. Reviewers, however, remarked upon a central imperative adopted in *A Higher Loyalty* to show the author 'behaving honourably', despite Comey's attempts to distance his book from others on the topic of Trump (Comey 2018). In his *Washington Post* review, Carlos Lozada notes, for example, a tension between Comey's limited introspection around controversies including his October 2016 announcement of a reinvestigation into Hillary Clinton's emails and the book as 'the brand extension of James Comey: the upright citizen turned philosopher, the lawman as thought leader.' (Lozada 2018) Simultaneously, the ethical heroism through which the author self-depicts seems primed for the screen in its oppositional characterization of American heroism vs corrupt self-interest. Michicko Kakutani in his *New York Times* review describes Comey's casting of his infamous one-on-one dinner with Trump and the president's request for 'loyalty' as characters in a Hollywood western or gangster movie: 'They are as antipodean as the untethered, sybaritic

Al Capone and the square, diligent G-man Eliot Ness in Brian De Palma's 1987 movie "The Untouchables"; or the vengeful outlaw Frank Miller and Gary Cooper's stoic, duty-driven marshal Will Kane in Fred Zinnemann's 1952 classic "High Noon".'(Kakutani 2018)

James Comey's claim of an historical framework of objective truth-telling as a corrective to an 'alternative facts' political culture is disrupted by the explicit and subjective narrative and characterization through which his story is written and subsequently transferred to the screen. As the television dramatization of polarized images of ethical leadership and bullying criminality plays out, Comey's claim to objective facts collides more explicitly with the spaces that screen narrative leaves for layered characterization and audience awareness of generic tropes. Nevertheless, the miniseries was marketed as a show bringing additional facts to this historical narrative – 'Whatever side you're on, you only know half the story', declared the trailer – despite the subjective dramatization of that story and the repeated re-rendering of 'facts' through sources from Comey's memoire, to promotional interviews, and to Comey's documenting of telephone conversations and meetings with President Trump in bureau memoranda. Both episodes of *The Comey Rule* aired on Showtime in September 2020 with writing credits for both Comey and director Billy Ray. Opposite Brendan Gleeson as Donald Trump, Jeff Daniels in the role of Comey carried with him a political screen image circling around liberalism and moderate conservativism gained through roles as a TV news anchor in Aaron Sorkin's *The Newsroom* (HBO, 2014) and as real-life FBI agent John O'Neill in the 9/11 themed miniseries *The Looming Tower* (Hulu, 2018). Comey's reassertion in a *Washington Post Live* interview of his and Ray's motivation to 'tell the truth' is again unsettled by Comey's description of his meeting with Trump not as objective fact but explicitly as though a scene in a drama in which he (not Daniels) stars as the hero of his story:

> My mind was *racing* (emphasis from Comey). I wasn't moving. A whole lotta times I'm trying not to blink, and my mind was just racing. How do I protect the FBI? What

> do I say next? What if I say the wrong thing? What's the right word to deliver here? I don't want a war with the president of the United States, but I'm trying to maintain a distance that the American people have wanted since Watergate. How do I do that now? ('The Comey Rule': A Conversation with 2020)

Comey's melodramatic staging of his own experience – rather than of the scene as it plays out on screen – is, furthermore, drawn through an historical lens connecting contemporary events to those of Watergate, layering further the blurred lines created between the factual and fictional worlds that position his narrated story with direct links to documented US political history.

These distortions of objective truth created around Comey's narrative play out in the television show and were picked up by critics such as *Variety*'s Daniel Daddario who identified two fatal flaws through which the miniseries failed. Both centred around Comey himself, whose self-carved role in the media as 'Comey-in-Chief' ensured his story had been repeatedly told and that the show lacked any new 'facts' for the audience, and whose characterization revealed a clear imperative to depict Comey in heroic terms so that 'What might have been a human tragedy about a man whose belief in the purity of institutions led to those same institutions' coming apart under a tyrant is, instead, largely a fable about a hero.' (Daddario 2020) Daniels' Comey therefore resists the entreaty of wife Patrice (played by Jennifer Ehle) – 'For once in your life, don't do your duty' – to not announce his reopening of the investigation into Hillary Clinton's emails. Instead, the audience watches him extolling the value of ethics to staff at the Justice Department as he heralds 'the primacy of truth and justice' to the accompaniment of soaring music (1:2). The melodramatic style of this scene is mirrored in the Sirk-like imagery of Comey's return home to trees in blossom and a tearful wife at the window as results are declared on election night (1:2), and his slow-motion entrance into the Oval Office for dinner with the president (1:3), as well as the repeated image of Gleeson's Trump shot from behind and emerging through the curtains of the Miss Universe stage in screen-villain mode. While the narrative establishes documented facts in

relation to Comey's involvement in the 2020 election, the show's heroic positioning of its protagonist and its melodramatic stylization persistently intervene in its purported attempt to document contemporary history through its dramatized narrative.

Documenting and Dramatizing Watergate

James Comey's self-positioning in relation to Watergate was one of many references coming from journalists, commentators and political figures to 1970s Washington that pointed to parallels in the ethical breakdown and allegations of corruption and illegality surrounding Presidents Richard Nixon and Donald Trump. As a fictional dramatization of the presidency of a Richard Nixon-like figure, however, ABC's 1977 miniseries *Washington Behind Closed Doors* required no claims to factual authenticity in its depiction of a rogue time in American politics, despite drawing on the events of Watergate for both its narrative and its characterization of Nixon. The show's explicit overlap of fact and fiction instead creates a framework in which – in contrast to *The Comey Rule* – the revelation of new 'facts' is suggested and those already circulating are questioned. Simultaneously, the melodrama and excess sanctioned through fictional narrative become the show's own projection of an imagined future, drawing a line that connects America's past in Watergate to its worrisome future manifest in the Trump presidency.

The context in which *Washington Behind Closed Doors* emerged was, moreover, one in which any boundaries between fact and fiction had repeatedly been blurred as the Watergate narrative was told and re-told in a variety of formats. When the six-part miniseries aired in September 1977, two memoirs written by key players in the events of Watergate that would later also be adapted for the screen had already been published. Charles Colson's *Born Again* detailed the Special Counsel's service under Nixon, his imprisonment on obstruction of justice charges and his subsequent conversion to Christianity (Colson 1976). Adapted as a

television movie (Irving Rapper, 1978), both book and film focused on the rehabilitation of Colson's image as the founder of the Christian ministry Prison Fellowship rather than on documenting Colson's central role in Nixon's administration that included his creation of the infamous 'enemies list'. White House Counsel John Dean's *Blind Ambition*: *The White House Years* was a more cognisant account of his role as enabler and subsequent whistle-blower in Watergate's various illegal activities (Dean 1976). In the CBS miniseries that would follow in May 1979, Dean's role was played by Martin Sheen whose screen performances by this point included the role of Attorney General Robert Kennedy in the television movie about the Cuban missile crisis, *The Missiles of October* (Anthony Page, 1974), and who would also go on to star as President John F. Kennedy in the miniseries *Kennedy* (1983). Sheen's association with the Kennedy name – as well as his own candid public political engagement – invests the representation of Dean in retrospect with the kind of liberal mythology surrounding Daniels' performance as James Comey.

Watergate had played out as a narrative for the American public since early reports appeared in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* about the burglary at the offices of the Democratic National Committee. The administration's various denials of wrongdoing only increased public consciousness, including the famous attack from Nixon's press secretary Ronald Ziegler in October 1972 when he accused Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of 'shabby journalism' and 'a blatant effort at character assassination', something for which he would some months later apologize ('Ziegler Apologizes' 1973). Moreover, the hearings of the Senate Select Committee on Presidential Activities were televised to a transfixed American public when they opened in May 1973 on each of the major networks and on radio. When *Variety* described the Watergate hearings as 'the hottest daytime soap opera' packed with bombshells – including John Dean's famous recounting of a conversation in which he asserted there was a "'cancer' growing on the presidency' (Johnson 2017) – it drew attention

to the political drama built into the screen representation of the Watergate narrative, as well as to an audience well versed in the melodramatic dramatization of real-life events. In June Robert MacNeil, who was covering the live hearings for PBS with co-anchor Jim Lehrer, described the narrative playing out as a drama of Shakespearean proportions: 'It reminds one of the final scenes of one of those Shakespearean histories. The forces hostile to the king are rising on all sides. Messenger after messenger rushes in with bad news. But the decisive battle is still some scenes away and we don't yet know if this is a tragedy we are witnessing.' ('Watergate and Public Broadcasting') Indeed, television host Dick Cavett in his eponymous talk show (ABC, 1969-1975) captured this drama for a mainstream late-night audience often tuning in for interviews with movie stars when he broadcast one show from the hearing room itself and repeatedly returned to the topic through studio interviews with significant guests including Woodward and Bernstein, Jeb Magruder of the Committee to Re-elect the President and Nixon's Attorney General Richard Kleindienst.

Setting the tone further for *Washington Behind Closed Doors* were Alan J. Pakula's *All the President's Men* and broadcaster David Frost's live televised interviews with former President Nixon. Woodward and Bernstein's account of their hunt for the facts surrounding the illegal activities conducted at the behest of Nixon and the subsequent cover-up were published two years prior to the subsequent release of the film, and as a bestseller established the narrative appeal of the Watergate story. The 1976 Hollywood drama starring Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman drew closely on the journalists' book. However, while the screenplay by Oscar-winning screenwriter William Goldman centred on Woodward and Bernstein's pursuit of the story, described on the film's poster as 'The most devastating detective story of this century', it depicted a neo-noir netherworld of political intrigue and corruption, mirroring what had been on display in the televised hearings.

Just as notably, David Frost's famous series of interviews with Nixon following the president's resignation from office became the stuff of high drama. Broadcast in four parts in May 1977 (and on radio), with a follow-up episode in September that included additional material, the interview appeared on television screens only four months prior to *Washington Behind Closed Doors* and subsequently alongside the miniseries' penultimate episode. With a Nielsen rating indicating an audience of approximately 45 million for the first episode that focused specifically on Watergate, the interview became the most-watched television news programme of all time. *Time* magazine reported that Nixon's payday of $600,000 and a percentage of worldwide distribution profits was likely the former president's incentive to appear, alongside 'his hope that he can change the people's perception of him, perhaps even resume a responsible role in public life'. The suggestion of performance or 'pay for play' inherent in the financially lucrative interview of 'America's antihero' that contrasted sharply with the appearances of the other Watergate conspirators at the Senate hearings only enhanced the sense of the event as a fictionalized melodrama referred to by *Time* as a 'four-part TV series' centred around 'Shakespeare's Richard II' ('The Nation').

Time was also not alone in detailing the drama of Frost's battles to gain Nixon's agreement to the interview, secure financing to produce the event and buy air time for syndication of the event after the major networks smarted at being outbid and refused to broadcast interviews not led by their own anchors, even as their news shows ran with the interviews front and centre. This broadcasting backstory constructed a meta-narrative that would later form the basis of playwright Peter Morgan's 2006 West End and 2007 Broadway drama *Frost/Nixon* and director Ron Howard's 2008 film adaptation. One *Washington Post* columnist balked at Frost's forthcoming book on this behind-the-scenes drama as one in a series including books by Nixon and White House Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman that were being hyped by their publishers as both factual exposés and thrilling dramas (Frost 1978;

Nixon 1978; Haldeman 1978): 'So what we have now is Frost giving us the inside story about Nixon, Haldeman telling what Nixon really did, and Nixon revealing what they all did. And all of it true, of course.' **(**'Nixon, Haldeman, Frost and…Hype' 1978) *New York Times* TV critic John J. O'Connor reluctantly acknowledged the television show's status as a 'media event', describing Barbara Walters' related interview of Frost as the completion of 'the required event cycle of the interviewer being interviewed' (O'Connor 1977). Moreover, commentary on the interviews repeatedly and explicitly dissolved any remaining borders between fiction and non-fiction on the small screen, with O'Connor likening the show to viewer favourite *Happy Days* (ABC, 1974-1984) and suggesting its audience rating 'meant Frost and Nixon had ascended into the company of The Fonz' (O'Connor 1977). Humourist Art Buchwald noted in his *Washington Post* column his friend's reference to the interviews as the 'Rich Man, Poor Man and now Richer Man' series, referencing ABC's blockbuster 1976 miniseries, and suggested revelations remaining on the tapes might amount to Frost's own cover-up (Buchwald 1977). The drama, meanwhile, was just as evident on the screen. With the establishment of a pre-broadcast narrative about the journalism scoop of recent times set to compel an admission of guilt, and heightened moments of melodrama that included Frost's revealing opener to one evening's viewing, 'Why didn't you burn the tapes?', the episodes played out as a dramatic political thriller with Nixon as hunted prey, and acted as a tone-setter for the fictionalization of Watergate's narrative of endemic corruption dramatized in *Washington Behind Closed Doors*.

Washington Behind Closed Doors and America's 1970s Historical Miniseries

The essential overlap of fact and fiction in the Watergate narrative was the framework into which *Washington Behind Closed Doors* stepped, while the show's fictional characters and plot challenged the legitimacy of a documented historical narrative invested with such leaky

borders, suggesting instead that it was through fiction that this political story might more reliably be told. In contrast with the autobiographical accounts of Watergate penned by other players, the miniseries was adapted from John Ehrlichman's novel *The Company* about a paranoid, out-of-control president and his corrupt administration. Ehrlichman had served under Nixon as White Counsel prior to John Dean's tenure and as Assistant to the President for Domestic Affairs. Following his imprisonment on conviction of various charges relating to Watergate, Ehrlichman's novel was published in 1976 by Simon & Schuster. Former Nixon speechwriter-turned *New York Times* columnist William Safire described the roman à clef as 'a gripping and powerful yarn', while highlighting a contrast between events in the book's narrative and the conclusion of a soon-to-be-released Senate Subcommittee Report that there was no evidence to suggest senatorial involvement in CIA assassination plots (Safire 1975). Both Safire and conservative commentator William F. Buckley, Jr. viewed the novel as an imbalanced critique of Nixon, with Buckley railing at its narrative as 'a malevolent, piratical, cynical invasion against historical integrity'. A scene on Air Force One in which its president Richard Monckton gleefully demonstrates his seat's ability to rise at the press of a button was but one example, Buckley argued, of the book's victimization of Nixon, 'giving Queeg-like theatrical force to his character as bully, paranoid, misanthrope, cretin' (Buckley 1976). His reference to the failed naval captain and object of mutiny in Herman Wouk's 1951 novel *The Caine Mutiny* and Edward Dmytryk's 1954 Hollywood film points to the recognizable fictional tropes of performed excess and melodrama in which the narrative was already cloaked and readied for the television miniseries. Ehrlichman would go on to write a second novel about Washington politics *The Whole Truth* published in 1979 soon after his release from prison and a memoir *Witness to Power: the Nixon Years* a few years later, described in the *New York Times* as 'unfair, bitchy, spiteful, gossipy, distorted,

self-serving – and eminently entertaining' (Ehrlichman 1979; Ehrlichman 1982; Sherrill 1982: 1).

Washington Behind Closed Doors was announced by Paramount Pictures in November 1976 soon after Ehrlichman began serving his 18-month prison sentence. Paramount President Michael Eisner described the planned eight hours of television as 'not the story of Watergate. It's the story of events that could have led to a breakdown of trust and confidence in Washington.' ('Ehrlichman's "Company"' 1976) Efforts to distance the show from its roots in contemporary political history were largely meaningless, however, when the miniseries portrayed the machinations of a psychologically insecure and paranoid president and an administration founded on fear and illegality. The eventual twelve and a half hours of prime time drama broadcast on ABC across six nights in September 1977 became a critical and audience success, with four episodes exceeding viewing figures for shows that the other networks had scheduled in an attempt to divert audiences, including the Emmys and Miss America pageant (Brown 1977). *Washington Post* critic Tom Shales lauded the surprisingly biting critique displayed in what was otherwise a mainstream network fictional drama, highlighting the show's challenge to both factual expositions and direct dramatizations of Watergate: '"Washington" has its slickness and superficiality, and it is presented as fiction and not documentary drama. But it may bring home the grim reality of political corruption with more immediacy than any previous treatment of Watergate, including news reports. Never before have TV viewers been offered such a concentrated and sustained prime-time dose of bad news about the American political system and the possibilities of abusing it.' (Shales 1977) John J. O'Connor, who a few months earlier had likened Frost's interview of Nixon to the audience-pleasing 1950s comedy *Happy Days* as a 'media event', praised the miniseries' use of Washington locations as well as convention and election-night footage alongside the kind of cinematic 'tautness' exhibited by *All the President's Men*. At the same

time, O'Connor was one of a number of male critics who viewed the miniseries' romantic plotlines as melodramatic 'distractions' from its political narrative. O'Connor suggested 'It's as if the effective soap opera of "Rich Man, Poor Man" had been mixed with the dumb exploitation of "Rich Man, Poor Man – Book II."'(O'Connor 1977) Writing in *Time* magazine, Frank Rich also compared *Washington Behind Closed Doors* to other recent historical miniseries but as a means of articulating instead what made the show so 'fiendishly entertaining'. Drawing parallels of form with 'the same pulpy style that characterized ABC's Rich Man, Poor Man and Roots', Rich argued for the effectiveness of the show's combination of melodrama and historical fact: 'Washington Behind Closed Doors is not afraid to be as lurid as its title – or to fudge history for melodramatic effect – only literal-minded historians and unreconstructed Nixon fans will find the show objectionable. For everyone else, Washington is a riveting throwback to the time when Watergate dominated the tube every night.' (Rich 1977)

The positioning of *Washington Behind Closed Doors* amongst other historical drama miniseries that proliferated through the decade, and Rich's acknowledgement of the success of the show's form for its illumination of contemporary US politics reasserts the significance of television's essential negotiation of fact and fiction in its varied recountings of the Watergate narrative, and points to the increased emphasis on the value of fiction, melodrama and history as a legitimate framework for such narratives seen at play in the miniseries. Indeed, ABC Entertainment President Martin Starger began his network's development of the miniseries by promoting the shows as 'Novels for Television' (Rymsza-Pawlowska 2014: 85), signalling a determination to infuse the genre with a core of cultural gravitas. Malgorzata J. Rymsza-Pawlowska locates the historical miniseries within television network developments during the 1970s that reflected a shift away from a forward-looking post-war culture and towards Americans' increasing interest in their nation's history. Fictional

television such as comedies *Happy Days* and *Laverne and Shirley* (ABC, 1976-1983) and dramas *Little House on the Prairie* (NBC, 1974-1983) and *The Waltons* (CBS, 1972-1981) were among the highest-rated shows on television with narratives that functioned to varying degrees around a realistic portrayal of an historical past. The setting of *The Waltons* in America's Depression era and *Little House on the Prairie*'s depiction of 1870s mid-West family life drew on the events and cultures of their eras as the shows sought to frame their fictional stories in a high level of authenticity. In the production of nine seasons of *Little House* this was in part achieved through its use of Laura Ingalls Wilder's autobiographical source novels as well as through exhaustive period research, both of which the show promoted as key to its insistence on visual and narrative realism, signalling for viewers 'television's growing reputation as a conduit to the past' (Rymsza-Pawlowska 2014: 83).

Simultaneously, historical dramas aimed to encourage connections between their representation of history and the contemporary American experience, raising issues such as racial inequality and the trauma of war veterans that resonated emotionally with viewers. Through what Rymsza-Pawlowska terms 'affective identification' (Rymsza-Pawlowska 2014: 83) with characters and narratives that related the past to the present, the shows began 'moving audience understanding of historical information from material to emotional terms' (Rymsza-Pawlowska 2014: 84). The multi-award-winning *Roots* (ABC, 1977) became a prime example of the genre's use of these strategies to present an authentic version of American history with which audiences might engage emotionally and whose narrative contained explicitly identifiable parallels with contemporary events (Rymsza-Pawlowska 2014: 87-89). The fictionalized dramatization of contemporary politics in *Washington Behind Closed Doors* that nevertheless draws recognizably on the historical players and events of Watergate was therefore treading a path being firmly established around the miniseries as a genre. The show's melodramatic style, in turn, and its soap opera elements acted less as

intrusive distractions from its historical narrative than as essential strategies in the creation of an authentic and relevant depiction of America's contemporary political history.

Washington's Fictionalization of Watergate

Washington Behind Closed Doors straddled two types of miniseries developing through the 1970s. Dramas such as *The Adams Chronicles* (PBS, 1976), *Lincoln* (NBC, 1974-1976), *Eleanor and Franklin* (ABC, 1976), *King* (NBC, 1978) and *Ike* (ABC, 1979) centred on the professional and personal lives of public figures, while others including *Pearl* (1978), *Holocaust* (NBC, 1978) *Rich Man, Poor Man* (ABC, 1976) and *Book II* (1976-1977), *Roots* and *The Next Generations* (ABC, 1979) positioned fictional characters in the midst of historical events. Ehrlichman's source novel based on his experiences as Nixon's White House Counsel established a basis of authenticity for *Washington Behind Closed Doors* that resisted any labelling of the show as a purely fictional drama, even as the post-premiere episodes departed somewhat from the original narrative (Shales 1977). The close resemblance borne by the show's characters and events to the Watergate story and its players with which audiences were by this time very familiar resulted in a miniseries whose fictional form depicted and magnified the actuality of contemporary politics that the show revealed. While some critics balked at the show's claim to historical fact, therefore, others including Rich drew attention to its representation of key elements of the Watergate scandal such as the FBI's domestic surveillance activities, Nixon's enemies list, and the money-laundering and dirty tricks strategies of the president's re-election campaign. Rich was similarly certain that audiences would easily recognize amongst the narrative's central characters figures such as re-election committee treasurer Hugh Sloan and White House consultant Howard Hunt, as well as Presidents Nixon and Lyndon Johnson, from both news reports and *All the President's Men* (Rich 1977).

The two core strands of the narrative circulate around newly elected President Richard Monckton played by Jason Robards and Cliff Robertson's CIA Director William Martin. The character of Martin points loosely towards Richard Helms who was appointed CIA Director by Lyndon Johnson and served under Nixon until fired soon after the president entered his second term. Helms' testimony during the Watergate hearings meant that this normally hidden figure was openly identifiable to contemporary audiences. Ehrlichman and Robards' characterisation of Monckton as a thinly-veiled Nixon, moreover, is unmistakeable. Robards was already associated with the Watergate narrative through his Academy Award-winning performance as irascible *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee in *All the President's Men*. His portrayal of Senator Monckton who follows a single-term Southern Democrat into the presidency, presides over a corrupt Republican administration, and engages in paranoid rants about the privilege and charisma of his political opponents both past and present carries with it the historical, biographical and psychological markers of Nixon as a public figure. As president, Monckton's ironic paranoia regarding the privileged worlds that the wealthy and charismatic inhabit leads to a moratorium on recruitment from Ivy League colleges, and his angry contrasting of his unpopularity with the experience of the Kennedyesque former Democrat President Billy Curry, references the anti-war protests and unflattering mocking of Nixon in political cartoons that occurred during Vietnam and Watergate. As Monckton rants: 'Pretty Billy Curry. Nobody ever picketed him. Nobody ever made him look ugly in cartoons.'

Moreover, Monckton's railing against Curry and Johnson-like former president Esker Scott Anderson (played by Andy Griffith) and their combination of privilege and corruption becomes a means of excusing his own abuses of power: 'Started out rich and got richer. Never did a day's work in their life, neither of them. Fancy schools and fancy women…They were rich. They didn't need to steal…And yet they took everything they could get, didn't

they? Museums, libraries. They stole it all.' (1:5) Simultaneously, the narrative repeatedly depicts the character's corrupt practices that, in turn, mirror those of the Nixon administration. For example: Pentagon Papers − a newspaper reveals the concealment of a report detailing the bombing of a neutral country in South-East Asia; Nixon's 'enemies list' − White House funds are used to pay private investigators to stalk the reporters, actors, senators and local politicians whom Monckton views as adversaries, and the security agencies are enlisted to intercept mail, bug telephone calls and use burglary as strategies against the 'surreptitious enemy' (1:2 and 1:3); and Watergate – the re-election campaign includes 'dirty tricks' methods such as fake letter blasts supporting the president's policy on the South-East Asia war and black staffers planted in the opposition's campaign to scare white voters, and an international air transport operator is promised favourable adjustments to trade restrictions in exchange for large donations to the campaign (1:1, 1:5 and 1:6).

The show's parallel narrative of Robertson's CIA Director William Martin centres on his attempts to prevent the president from accessing a secret CIA 'Primula Report' that would reveal Martin had lied to a senate committee. The report's detailing of CIA, FBI and several administrations' planned and attempted assassinations of world leaders draws on the proceedings of the Church Committee in 1975 and revelations that also included the FBI's COINTELPRO programme of illegal activities against domestic targets deemed subversive such as Civil Rights and liberal and feminist organizations, and that were published in a six-volume report in 1976. William Safire's review of *The Company*, indeed, noted that the novel's publication was due one week before the release of the committee's findings (Safire 1975). When the narrative moves towards a deal between Martin and Monckton in which the Primula Report remains secret and the CIA director departs with an ambassadorship in Jamaica in exchange for the suppression of evidence of the president's direct involvement in his administration's illegal activities, the show points to an endemic structure of self-serving

corruption and law-breaking in US politics that appears both historical and contemporary (1:6).

Interwoven with this explicitly political framing of the narrative around America's political history are what critics considered to be the show's soap opera storylines even as they remain situated in the context of Washington politics. These elements of the narrative form around relationships, are driven by female characters, and open up spaces for the audience's emotional engagement with history through fictional characters. While *The Comey Rule*'s intermittently melodramatic tone in both domestic and professional moments arguably disturbs the show's intended function as televisual truth-teller, in *Washington Behind Closed Doors* these flows between generic forms raise to the surface a gendered story within the show's masculine political arena and that of real-world US politics. Through their personal and professional relationships with men who seek or exert power in Washington, female characters communicate the atmosphere of toxic masculinity that resides in the narrative's depiction of systemic gender inequality and become the route through which this is confronted. The show positions them as ancillary professionals, wives and lovers in this environment, reflecting the still limited roles occupied by women during Nixon's presidency despite the national context of feminism and the women's movement (Green 2013). Each of these identities becomes a site of exploitation: CIA Director Martin's estranged wife Linda (Lois Nettleton), with whom he later reconciles, becomes a pawn in the persistent power play between Martin and former president Anderson; Martin's relationship with Washington insider Sally Whalen (Stephanie Powers) is initiated when he uses her as bait in a strategic attempt to prevent Monckton's election (see Figure 1); and the cold ambition of rising aide Roger Castle (David Selby) is reflected in his repeatedly controlling mistreatment of girlfriend Jennie Jamison (Meg Foster), to whom he eventually proposes only to satisfy the administration's requisite image of 'family values'. Without irony, Anderson identifies to

Martin the circular connection between Monckton's paranoia, the administration's aggressive politics and a performed masculine excess: 'They see the whole country as their enemy. They must love enemies, they make so many of them. Enemies and crises. I guess it makes them feel like men.'

[Insert Figure 1: Sally Whalen (Stephanie Powers) serves as bait in the arena of male political power. Screenshot of *Washington Behind Closed Doors* (ABC, 1977)]

When female characters actively disturb this power dynamic, therefore, both personal and professional relationships become irretrievable, reaffirming the ways in which these plotlines traverse the borders between soap opera and historical narrative. When Sally Whalen petitions Martin for evidence of the financial misdeeds of an opponent running against a friend, her use of the illegal tactics of this masculine world with which Martin has previously legally endangered her suggests a realigned balance of power that is both personal and acts as a challenge to masculine dominance. Perhaps even more illustrative are the actions of administrative assistant Wanda Elliott (Lara Parker) who continuously resists gendered control in her personal life and urges colleague Jamison to abandon her unhealthy relationship with Castle. Her private assertion of freedom is translated into public power when she relates to the press her knowledge of endemic corruption at the re-election committee, pointing the narrative to the Watergate burglary at which the miniseries closes.

From Fictionalized Nixon to Realized Trump

The close parallels between *Washington Behind Closed Doors* and President Nixon and the Watergate era, with asides to the events and figures of previous administrations, provided a believable narrative for audiences well versed in this recent political history. The blurred

boundaries of fact and fiction evident in the varied media depictions of this real-life tale of political wrongdoing worked alongside the miniseries' strategies aimed at emotionally engaging viewers with the history on display, establishing a style for the show that merged versions of the developing genre. The show therefore drew on the audience's recognition of both historical context and televisual form for their understanding of and relationship with contemporary history. Alternative contexts of re-viewing screen narratives, however, prompt reconsidered readings. As Teresa Forde and I have argued in relation to Obama-era AMC drama *Mad Men* (2007-2015), 'the cultural legacy of the historical drama [is] bound up in its waves of relevance, from past, to present, and future' (McNally and Forde 2019: 251). With a reception context marked by the end of the George W. Bush presidency through that of the United States' first Black president and concluding one month before Trump's announcement of his presidential run, the show 'seems to reinforce a sense of closure, suggesting *Mad Men*'s commentary was on a present now passed, on the contrary the show appears almost prescient' (McNally and Forde 2019: 252), connecting the show's cultural critique of the past and the present to the regression of the Trump era. Revisiting *Washington Behind Closed Doors* in the context of Trump similarly draws attention to the show's predictive narrative that layers its tale with reverberations of history. The show's fictional historicizing of Watergate creates an historical trajectory that connects the past and present to a wholly conceivable future now realized through a melodramatic excess in which Nixon's Watergate anticipates Trump-era corruption described by John Dean as 'Nixon on stilts and steroids' (Kilander 2021).

This kind of projection is clear in the show's depiction of a male political culture bound up in toxic masculinity. From Trump's 'grab 'em by the pussy' assumed privilege over women's bodies and the Republican Party's assault on Roe v. Wade's reproductive rights legislation playing out in various states and in the Supreme Court, to the 2017 women's

marches and subsequent #MeToo and Time's Up movements, the signals of a political and broader culture in reverse in relation to women's equality in Trump's America are suggested by the parallel narrative of *Washington Behind Closed Doors*. Moreover, while both Ehrlichman's source novel and its television adaptation are centrally informed by Richard Nixon in the characterisation of protagonist Richard Monckton, the melodramatic depiction of this fictional president captures what would become the performed excess of the 45th inhabitant of the White House. Critiques of *The Comey Rule* and *Washington* as respectively 'largely a fable about a hero' (Daddario 2020) and a show with 'the stature of a tragic fable' (Shales 1977) suggest the narratives of heightened drama that connect the shows both to each other and to Trump's presidency. As Lyndsey Stonebridge wrote of the US border crisis in 2018: 'Trump knows about melodrama. He certainly understands that his political power relies on his willingness to play the villain.' (Stonebridge 2018) Buckley's comparison of Monckton to Captain Queeg is prompted by a scene in which the president breaks into crazed laughter on Air Force One as he belittles his predecessor with a demonstration of Anderson's elevating desk and chair en route to his funeral (1:3) (see Figures 2 and 3). Such manic crassness positioned alongside political extremism and corruption in the construction of a villainous character has even more fundamentally defined the Trump presidency, from his elbowing past the prime minster of Montenegro at the Brussels NATO summit in 2017, to his alleged leadership of a plan to overturn the 2020 election being investigated by the January 6 House Select Committee. Republican senators and representatives creating dramatic performances for television cameras, prospective voters and Donald Trump continue to extend this political culture beyond Trump himself.

[Insert Figure 2: President Richard Monckton (Jason Robards) gleefully demonstrates his predecessor's elevating desk on Air Force One. Screenshot of *Washington Behind Closed Doors* (ABC, 1977)]

[Insert Figure 3: The President's bizarre behaviour prompts uneasy reactions. Screenshot of *Washington Behind Closed Doors* (ABC, 1977)]

Nixon's paranoia-fuelled anti-elitism represented through President Monckton is mirrored in Donald Trump's self-representation as Washington outsider in a MAGA-inspiring battle against America's elites. Both Monckton and Trump present their presidencies as correctives to national decay. *Washington Behind Closed Doors*' president declares 'The American spirit has suffered a long, dark night' (2:2) while Trump would later make his infamous 'American carnage' inauguration speech. Rule-breaking and corruption emerge in both scenarios, with the silencing of dissent a necessary priority. *Washington* points to the loyalty displayed by members of Nixon's administration to serve their political ambitions with its depiction of the career desperation of Monckton's communications director Hank Ferris (Nicholas Pryor) who succumbs to his president's demand: 'Loyalty, Hank. That's the most important thing we have to have around here, absolute loyalty. That gets the job done…That's why we picked you.' (1: 2) James Comey's infamous dinner at the White House during which the president advised him 'I need loyalty; I expect loyalty', re-enacted in *The Comey Rule*, as well as various photo opportunities in which meeting participants took turns in expressing their admiration for Trump, all suggest prophetic parallels established in *Washington Behind Closed Doors*. The earlier show's dramatization of widespread corruption as the fictional incarnation of 1970s politics reliant on transactional loyalties, then, presents almost a narrative blueprint for the 'Nixon on stilts and steroids' that would later occur. The essential corollary *Washington* displays of authoritarianism and anti-

democratic practice that includes the desire to engineer a third term in office by amending the Constitution (1:5) – an idea also proposed by Trump (Solender 2020) – plays out on a grand scale in the 21st century through two impeachment trials, a quid pro quo solicitation of the Ukrainian president, an alleged conspiracy to overturn the 2020 election results, and an attempted insurrection (McEvoy 2021; Baker 2018).

These displays of ego and corruption are framed in the miniseries by pointers to the increasing significance of television and the media as tools to control the political narrative. Monckton conveys his understanding of a political media age when he shuts down a critical news show produced by the wife of a John Dean-style character (played by Tony Bill) (1:6), and simultaneously his lack of media charisma when his attempt to address young anti-war protestors in an uncomfortable photo opportunity stunt goes awry (1:3) (see Figure 4). The latter scene references Nixon's spontaneous visit to the Lincoln Memorial on May 9, 1970 to quell protests about the expansion of the Vietnam War into Cambodia. Monckton's recognition of the power afforded by a political media strategy yet inability to successfully control it acts as a prelude to the Trump era and 'a presidency consistently conducted with television in mind' (McNally 2022: 8). From real-estate mogul to star of *The Apprentice* (NBC, 2004-2017), the celebrity image developed by Trump was transferred to the presidency with the kind of media manipulation and 'pseudo-event' identified by Daniel Boorstin in *The Image* (1962) and exemplified by a Trump-team march to St John's Church for a bible-holding TV camera opportunity that was an attempt to distract from Black Lives Matter protests (Rogers 2020). The clash of imagery this produced, however, and Trump's increasing inability to control the media narrative throughout the COVID-19 pandemic evidenced in falling viewing figures for his television briefings, followed by a 'Save America' rally-turned-violent insurrection on live television, suggest the outcome of a

dependence on media strategies to which *Washington Behind Closed Doors* had several decades ago gestured.

[Insert Figure 4: The fictional president's failed media stunt mirrors those of Richard Nixon and Donald Trump. Screenshot of *Washington Behind Closed Doors* (ABC, 1977)]

Conclusion

Despite the frequent assertion that the political culture of Donald Trump's term in office represents an aberration, the events of this presidency have their precedents in US political history. Parallels are most easily drawn with the corruption and illegal practices of the Nixon administration revealed during the Watergate hearings that led to his resignation before the completion of his second term under the threat of an impending impeachment. Nixon's combination of paranoia and entitlement to power sees its apogee in the 21st century in a television celebrity's claim to the presidency, widespread corruption, two impeachment hearings and a violent insurrection that text messages to the January 6 Committee indicate was instigated under the leadership of the former president himself.

The central aim of historical screen dramas to dramatize a nation's history locates films and television shows in both the past and the present, creating a connecting narrative thread that reawakens a consideration and understanding of historical moments, events and figures as well as of their relevance to contemporary political, social and cultural contexts. The ways in which these dramas negotiate the combination of fact and fiction inherent in the genre and its consequent impact on representation and reception means that specific forms of television drama call for a variety of approaches in the consideration of their dramatization of US history. The television miniseries emerged as a major development in 1970s American television, heralding an era of innovation as it addressed national history, attracted a large

network audience, and stimulated conversations about America's past. As notions of objectivity, documentation, narrative drama and characterization tussled for supremacy in its form, audiences were encouraged to identify with both fictional and real-life characters' experiences of the past while contemplating the extent to which they might mirror the contemporary context in which they lived.

As a drama drawing on one of the most infamous periods in the United States' 20th century political history, *Washington Behind Closed Doors* represents a significant contribution to developments in television during the 1970s. Both an audience winner and critically acclaimed miniseries, the show demonstrated how the genre might successfully prompt Americans to identify and engage with the dramatization of their history. At the same time, the show's explicitly fictional version of political corruption highlights how the Watergate narrative was told and retold in forms that repeatedly blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction, suggesting *Washington Behind Closed Doors* had as much claim to the 'truth' of events as did the variety of media genres that explicitly asserted a documenting of facts. Moreover, the formal space opened up by this fictional dramatization of a tale of political malfeasance familiar to audiences through real-life events prompts a revisiting of its narrative in the context of Donald Trump. While historians – and the American public – may have considered Richard Nixon and Watergate as a bump in the road of US democracy, the imagined tale of criminal corruption and autocracy dramatized through the miniseries' characterization of Richard Monckton and his administration suggests the show's creation of a dystopian world of possibilities from which contemporary US politics has emerged. Indeed, *Washington Behind Closed Doors* – like Nixon – might ultimately represent less an historical narrative than a signal to America's future.

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Contributor Details

Dr Karen McNally is Reader in American Film, Television and Cultural History at London Metropolitan University. Her work centres on the representation of United States history, culture and politics in American film and television. Her edited volume *American Television during a Television Presidency* published with Wayne State University Press in 2022. She is

also the author of *The Stardom Film: Creating the Hollywood Fairy Tale* (Columbia University Press, 2020) and *When Frankie Went to Hollywood: Frank Sinatra and American Male Identity* (University of Illinois Press, 2008), editor of *Billy Wilder, Movie-Maker: Critical Essays on the Films* (McFarland, 2011) and co-editor of *The Legacy of Mad Men: Cultural History, Intermediality and American Television* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). Karen has also published a variety of book chapters and articles in publications including *Journal of American Studies* and *Film & History*.

Contact: London Metropolitan University, School of Computing and Digital Media, Tower Building, 166-220 Holloway Road, London N7 8DB

Email: k.mcnally@londonmet.ac.uk