

# The American Revolution and the Civil War on screen: Apple TV's *Franklin* and *Manhunt*

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America's first two revolutions, the American Revolution and the Civil War, offer serious dramatic possibilities for film and television. Their intrinsic interest arises from the fact that revolutions can destroy old, seemingly permanent social orders—even in America... *especially in America!* To borrow the phrase from Tom Paine, revolutions contain in themselves the "power to begin the world over again."

Despite the dramatic prospects for both, worthy historical treatments of the American Revolution have been far outnumbered by those of the Civil War, although those are mostly recent (for years, Hollywood studios avoided dramas about the Civil War, for fear of offending southern audiences or adopted a pro-Confederacy stance, as in *Gone With the Wind*, 1939).

*Lincoln* (2012), *Gettysburg* (1993), *Free State of Jones* (2016), *Glory* (1989) and John Huston's much earlier *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951) spring to mind, though the list could be considerably longer.

One struggles to think of a single film or television program on the American Revolution that measures up—the HBO television series *John Adams* (2008) being something of an exception. Some chances have yet to be even taken. The promising script for a Paine biopic by the late Trevor Griffiths, *These are the Times*, still awaits its director. (Roland Emmerich's dreadful *The Patriot* is the exception that proves the rule.)

Why the struggle to capture cinematically the American Revolution? There is, first, the more general problem of putting the past to film, which requires a historically informed imagination. Filmmakers, when they turn to history, tend to impose their present on the past—i.e., the prejudices, politics and moods of the generally privileged layers of which they are a part. Squinting at history's foggy panes, they see only the reflection of their own, narrow social reality. Many movies "about" history are therefore better viewed as muddled allegories about the present.

If historical imagination is the issue, perhaps filmmakers' special difficulty in imagining the era of the American Revolution owes to nationalist incredulity at the thought that the United States might never have existed. Yet no one in 1765, the year of the Stamp Act crisis, could have expected an anti-colonial rebellion and the birth of the first great, modern republic a decade later, much less its victory in the ensuing war against Great Britain, the world's greatest power.

The *dramatis personae* of the American Revolution faced outcomes unknowable to them—that is to say, more than one possibility was contained in their time, and therefore, the concrete, historical reality in which they operated could yet be changed by human, social action. This, what Trotsky called the subjective factor in history, looms largest precisely in revolutions, which by their very nature mark ruptures in history. As David North has written of the greatest of all revolutions, the Russian Revolution of 1917, "history must concern itself not simply with 'what happened,' but also—and this is far more important—why one or another thing happened or did not happen, and what might have happened."

*Franklin*, which appeared as a series on Apple TV in April and May, not

only resists the temptation to treat the victory of the American Revolution as a foregone conclusion, the entire program is based on the premise that the revolution might yet fail if it does not win the support of the French Court of Louis XVI, which must put aside its own natural hostility to the republican cause (France was the very center of the monarchical-aristocratic world, after all) in order to strike at its ancient rival, Great Britain.

The dramatic tension in this situation is established from the series' beginning. Benjamin Franklin (Michael Douglas) comes ashore in France in December 1776, with the war only a little more than a year old—and the American cause faltering badly. Washington's forces, a written narrative tells us, have recently suffered ignominious defeat on Long Island. Franklin, a scientist of world renown, is greeted by the French as a celebrity. He shrewdly plays to his popularity as well as to French conceptions of "wild America," donning his legendary fur cap to the delight of his aristocratic hosts.

Franklin is challenged to secure French diplomatic recognition and financial support—and to outmaneuver efforts to thwart him by the British, who have recruited a spy in his inner circle, the physician Edward Bancroft (Daniel Mays). Franklin was simultaneously monitored by French secret police. Historians have suggested—and the film leads us to believe—that Franklin was aware of all the espionage, but used it to diplomatic advantage, letting the French and the British puzzle over the meaning of the "intelligence" that Franklin let them have. (It was not established that Bancroft was a spy until the release by the British foreign ministry of archives in the 1880s.)

Franklin must also handle the tempestuous and decidedly undiplomatic John Adams—brilliantly played by British actor Eddie Marsan—sent by Congress to sideline the older man. And he must later deal with the frigid John Jay (Ed Stoppard), arrived in France to settle terms of peace after Washington's final victory at Yorktown. Adams and Jay yield to Franklin, who winds up taking the lead in negotiations with both the French and the British—skillfully playing off each other French fears of an Anglo-American rapprochement and separate peace, and British desperation to sideline the Franco-American alliance. Franklin's efforts pay off, with Britain acceding to all key American demands—independence, territory as far as the Mississippi River and fishing rights off the Newfoundland coast. It was an extraordinary achievement. Along with the better-known superlatives wreathing Franklin's legend, he was probably the greatest of American diplomats.

The diplomatic struggle is the main thread of the series, based on the book by popular historian Stacy Schiff, *A Grand Improwisation*. The other element is Franklin's life in France with his grandson, Temple Franklin (Noah Jupe), who has accompanied the older man as a secretary. A great deal of the dialogue is in French, delivered fluently by the quick-learning Temple, and haltingly and sometimes embarrassingly by Franklin. The cast includes a host of talented French actors, notably Thibault de Montalembert as Comte de Vergennes, Franklin's main interlocutor at the

court of Versailles.

Franklin's popularity wins him a place as an honored guest in France's nobility, as well as the ardor of two ladies—the composer Madame Anne-Louise Brillon (Ludivine Sagnier) who refers to Franklin as “*mon cher papa*,” and Madame Helvétius (Jeanne Balibar), who maintained France's most renowned salon. Franklin revels in the female attention, as well as the drink and food—appetites richly attested to by the historical record—though we are reminded here and there that he and Temple can never really join the nobility. Franklin was born of “the mean sort,” rising up from a runaway indentured servant to become one of the colonies' richest men, and finally a gentleman, the lowest social ranking of the British aristocracy. Though she adores Franklin, Madame Brillon will not consent to allow her daughter to marry the commoner, Temple.

Temple's struggles to secure entry into the nobility, and his simultaneous attraction and repulsion from French high society, absorb a good deal of the screen time, often rather tediously. Perhaps the series could have concluded in six episodes rather than eight. Nonetheless, the attention paid to Temple's personal life does have the effect of showing the irrationality and obsolescence of the *ancient regime*, against which the American Revolution, objectively speaking, is in life-and-death combat, even if it is in a wartime alliance of expediency with Versailles.

Here and there the series hints that the revolutionary waves from the other side of the Atlantic will yet crash over France, particularly in the early episodes, which features “the hero of two revolutions,” the Marquis de Lafayette (Théodore Pellerin) as he prepares to join Washington and the Continental Army, and the revolutionary polymath Pierre Beaumarchais (Assad Bouab), author of the plays *Le Barbier de Séville* and *Le Mariage de Figaro* (the bases of great operas by Rossini and Mozart). It is pity that the series did not treat the famous embrace between Franklin and Voltaire at the French Academy of Sciences in 1778, an event attested to by Adams and Condorcet, among others.

We have written elsewhere on the career of Benjamin Franklin, certainly among the greatest figures of his era. Franklin was convincingly played by the late Tom Wilkinson in *John Adams*. Douglas' Franklin is very different, but there is something at once realistic and timely in his performance. The actor captures the complexity of Franklin's persona, and something as well of the great man's inner revolutionary core. Franklin wound up on the far left of the American revolution, similar in his democratic politics to Paine and Jefferson and hero to the republic's young artisanal working class—and the *bête noire* of the conservative Adams. When Franklin died in 1790, the series tells us at the end, the by-now revolutionary government in France declared three days of national mourning.

Whereas *Franklin* successfully imagines an important aspect of the American Revolution, Apple TV's *Manhunt* mauls an equally important subject related to the Civil War, the effort to apprehend the culprits in the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in April 1865. Based on a book by James Swanson, a writer connected to the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute, *Manhunt* flashes back from the investigation, organized and led by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton (Tobias Menzies) to episodes with Lincoln (Hamish Linklater) still alive. The seventh and final episode, the series' strongest, focuses on the trial of the accused.

One does not wish to blame the actors—presumably the directing and the script bear the responsibility—but the characters are not at all historically believable. Stanton, the central character, was a figure of great historical importance as the chief organizer of the Union war effort. The series captures his sympathy for the slaves and his hatred of the slave-owing class. But the series foolishly chooses to imagine Stanton, a fascinating political figure, as a sort of gumshoe personally investigating clues and crime scenes. *Manhunt*'s Stanton is the stock character of the hardboiled, indefatigable cop or detective who always “gets his man.”

Lincoln is depicted as a sort of American Everyman just trying to have

some fun after a lot of work. “Come on! Take your wife out before she forgets your face!” the script has Lincoln say to Stanton before his assassination. “No? All right... Now I gotta spend the night with Mary's friends. You owe me one.” In another episode, Lincoln suggests that he and Stanton visit a beach in California for a vacation. An absurdly anachronistic proposal on several levels.

The actor and assassin John Wilkes Booth (Anthony Boyle) is presented as a brooding, psychological mess, mainly driven by oedipal resentment over the greater fame enjoyed by his father and brother in the family of noted actors. The series cooks up an imagined conversation at the bar in Ford's Theater, between Lincoln's unwitting bodyguard and Booth before the assassination. “You know, tomorrow, I'm gonna be more famous than anyone in my family,” Booth says. “I'm gonna be the most famous man in the whole world.”

*Manhunt* promotes a bizarre conspiracy theory as though it were fact. It posits that the plot to kill Lincoln was carried out, not out of revenge for emancipation of the slaves, but in retaliation for Lincoln ordering the assassination of Jefferson Davis! This, the series suggests, came because First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln (Lili Taylor) demanded that her husband find a way to quickly end the war. “But both of you, I ask you,” Mary Todd says to Lincoln and Stanton, “Speaking for all mothers, find a way to win and end this war.” Later Lincoln approaches Stanton. The following dialogue ensues:

Lincoln: *She's also right.. There's only so much sacrifice American families should have to bear...Can you estimate the shortest path to victory?... [L]et's just discuss it theoretically.*

Stanton: *Theoretically the quickest way to win would be to remove the chief strategist behind their tactics.*

Lincoln: *If Davis were removed, we could win because they would lose their mastermind.*

Stanton: *Yes.*

Lincoln: *What do the rules of engagement say about, uh, removing a sitting president?*

Stanton: *Um, capture is... is frowned upon, but it is within the playbook.*

Lincoln: *What about a more permanent removal by force?*

Later, the series has Stanton burning pages from Booth's diary because, we are led to believe, they would have implicated the White House.

The premise is absurd. War by assassination is the method of today's American ruling class. It was not the method of Lincoln, who grasped that the Civil War involved not the removal of this or that individual leader, but the defeat of the southern armies and, still more fundamentally, the destruction of slavery. In any case, it is not at all clear that Jefferson Davis' leadership aided the South—on more than one occasion he interfered in military decisions to the detriment of the southern cause. Davis was certainly no “mastermind.”

Needless to say, the “theory” that Lincoln ordered extralegal killings has not been taken seriously by leading Civil War historians. Reached by this author for a comment, Lincoln biographer Richard Carwardine wrote, “I am confident that Lincoln did not order Jefferson Davis' assassination. The claim is phony: ‘preposterous’ is *le mot juste!*”



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