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Hollywood has spoken

Fictional black presidents portrayed with more gravitas than women in White House

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The only time you see a black man or a woman play the president, Jon Stewart joked on Oscar night, is when an asteroid is about to hit the Statue of Liberty.

In fact, most of humanity had to be wiped out by self-aware humanoid robots before we got a female president with the kind of self-pos session and unimpeachable gravitas associated with two of pop culture's best known African-American presidents, Morgan Freeman in "Deep Impact" and Dennis Haysbert of "24."

Played by Mary McDonnell, Secretary of Education Laura Ros lin (43rd in line for the presidency -- she was off the planet when the Cylons launched their devastating attack on the alternate America in "Battlestar Galactica") proves to be a charismatic leader -- thoughtful and intelligent, but not afraid to use the air lock on her enemies.

Back in this galaxy, it's hard to find a fictional female chief executive who isn't wracked by doubt, grappling with balancing work and family, and constantly questioned about her backbone. Race seems to be incidental, however, when black men occupy the White House.

It's not entirely accidental that Hollywood has, in recent years, elected African-Americans, women and and at least one Latino to the highest office in the land at the same time that Americans could do the same in real life.

"The West Wing" writers have said they used Barack Obama as the model for Matt Santos (played by Jimmy Smits), who inherited the Oval Office from Martin Sheen in the show's final season. While "Commander in Chief" creator Rod Lurie says he didn't fashion President Mackenzie Allen, played by Geena Davis, on Hillary Clinton, that didn't stop many from seeing the ABC drama as campaign propaganda. (Lurie also directed "The Contender," the 2000 film that starred Joan Allen as a senator whose vice-presidential nomination is almost sacked by a college sex scandal.)

Some media and political ex perts say that such pop culture portrayals help put to rest qualms we may have about electing a woman or a minority. "There's no doubt that when we look at any politician, we see them in reference to our fiction -- how does this person fit in with our ideal of what a politician is," says Jason Mittell, an associate professor of American Studies and Film & Media Culture at Middlebury College.

Marie Wilson, the director of the New York-based White House Project, which works to advance female leaders, says she learned from cru sader Marian Wright Edelman that "we can't be what we can't see."

"When you have television or movie portrayals," she says, "you actually plant a different kind of reality in people's minds."

"Commander in Chief" and "24" didn't break the glass ceiling for women and minorities. In 1972's "The Man," James Earl Jones becomes the chief executive after the vice president is felled by a stroke, and the president and the speaker of the house are killed when a German palace ceiling falls on their heads. (Yet it

was not a comedy.)

The decade before, Polly Bergen courses to the presidency on the strength of the female vote in "Kisses for My President" but First Gentleman Fred MacMurray stewes over his social calendar and dons a floppy floral hat. She ultimately resigns because she becomes pregnant. (And this was played straight.)

In both cases, race and gender were the story. By 1998's "Deep Impact," in which Freeman tried to rescue humanity from a huge flaming comet, he told reporters: "I'm not playing the first black president. I'm playing a president who happens to be black."

When Geena Davis took the oath of office in "Commander in Chief," Mittell says, "there was a lot made of the fact that her competence was always being questioned, her toughness was being questioned."

In 1984, when Ellen Emerson White published the first of her four novels centering on the daughter of America's first female president, she didn't envision a female president in her lifetime ("I'm not sure I envision it now," says the Hillary Clinton supporter).

"I just didn't buy her for a minute," White says of Davis' portrayal. "I find it hard to believe someone could actually ascend to the Oval Office without being a little bit tough. You're not going to get a sweet, perfect person because they wouldn't win."

Judging from pop culture portrayals, Mittell says, "a female provokes more anxiety than a black president."

That's because we have a tradition of African-American actors and figures who project the kind of decisive leadership that we associate with being president, say Mittell and others. "24" is notable in electing not one, but two black presidents -- Haysbert as Dennis Palmer, and D.B. Woodside as his brother, Wayne.

"It's been a long time now that we've had black superstars like Morgan Freeman and Denzel Washington," says Elayne Rapping, an American Studies professor who specializes in pop culture at SUNY Buffalo. "They're used to them playing strong roles. ... When women are in positions of power, if they're successful, they tend to be seen as very unfeminine and kind of bitchy. If they aren't tough like that, they tend not to last very long."

That we haven't seen many women elected to office indicates that we're still uncomfortable with ambitious women, Mittell says. "One of the frequent complaints about Hillary Clinton is, 'I don't want to vote for her because she wants it.' There is a sense that a president needs to be altruistic, you're doing it because of your destiny. Women aren't allowed to want the presidency. ... There's a sad, sexist message in that."

But Jonathan Gray, an assistant professor of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University, says maybe portrayals of women in power revolve around gender issues simply because we're more comfortable talking about it -- certainly more comfortable than talking about race.

Clinton, he says, makes her gender part of her appeal. "She has to be careful about it -- she can only cry once per four months, but she can talk about being a woman. Obama has had to construct this incredible performance about walking around his blackness," Gray says.

Perhaps that's why Obama's speech last week about race relations in America made such big headlines.

"I think black leaders have to cope with the loaded stereotype of the person who plays the race card, and of the sort of angry black man," Gray says. "They have to walk around that. They have to be seen as not doing that, and to mention that would be unpresidential. That's why you never see Wayne or David Palmer making a big deal about it, it would be unpresidential."

Haysbert has said his portrayal of the charismatic, cool David Palmer helped Americans "open up their minds and their hearts to the notion" of a black president.

White says she hopes voters are a little more sophisticated than that. "It would be hilarious if a show as unusually right-wing as '24' was in fact a reason social progress was taking place," she says. "Equal representation can't hurt, but when you get in the voting booth, I like to think it still comes down to who will do the best job, all that boring government stuff."

It must be said that White, a "Battlestar Galactica" fan, has been known to wear a button that proclaims, "Don't blame me, I voted for Roslin."

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