



# Ordinary lives behind extraordinary occupations: on the uses of Rubicon for a social history of American intelligence

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**‘Ordinary lives behind extraordinary occupations: on the uses of *Rubicon* for a social history of American intelligence’**  
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**Abstract**

This article will evaluate the possible uses of fiction - specifically TV series - for a social history of American intelligence. Drawing on methodological debates within intelligence studies as well as contemporary philosophy, it argues that TV series allow viewers to hypothetically experience the everyday life of ordinary intelligence professionals by permitting in-depth descriptions of specific routines and practices. Such a claim will be illustrated using the example of *Rubicon* (AMC, 2010), an American TV series that was praised for its realism by professionals and scholars alike. By making visible the ordinary life of professionals (coffee and lunch breaks, daily briefs, interminable waits etc.), *Rubicon* successfully demystifies the everyday life of intelligence analysts without normalizing the extraordinary nature of the secret world (secrecy, mistrust, and extreme violence). In addition to challenging the clear-cut and often overly simplistic distinction between the factual and the fictional when it comes to secret intelligence, this contribution will also broaden our understanding of the hidden side of government by shedding light on cultural perceptions (including self-perceptions) of intelligence professionals.

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**Introduction**

What is it like to work in an intelligence agency? Notwithstanding the growing interest of academics in the secretive aspects of power, this question remains very difficult to answer. The reason for this is that intelligence scholarship has remained overwhelmingly focused on extraordinary men and circumstances, such as spy chiefs (Moran et al 2017), war, or intelligence failures (Dahl 2013), despite the continuing evolution of the discipline's sources and methods (Moran and Murphy 2013). The recent push towards less traditional topics such as identity or culture has only started to expand the field (Willmetts 2019). For instance, the friendship between Allen Dulles, the first civilian director of the CIA, and James Bond's author Ian Fleming is now well-documented, along with the many ways in which Fleming's inventions have influenced the history of the agency (Moran 2013). The historian Hugh Wilford has also highlighted the impact of 'imperial romance' and orientalist discourses on Kermit Roosevelt, a CIA officer who became a key actor of the 1953 coup against Iranian leader Mossadegh (Wilford 2016). Yet, as a result of this continuing emphasis on senior members of intelligence

services, very little is known about the everyday lives of ordinary practitioners, from analysts to operatives.

This article will attempt to bridge this gap by exploring new ways of making social history using popular culture and television series.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, it argues that TV series constitute valuable means to hypothetically experience and explore the everyday life of intelligence professionals, thanks to the specificities of their format that allows for in-depth descriptions of specific routines and practices. This means that TV series constitute a reservoir of hypotheses for viewers wishing to make sense of a day-to-day reality that is difficult if not impossible to access. At the same time, however, while viewers - and scholars - are aware of the fact that this experience is hypothetical, they remain nonetheless influenced by what they see on the screen. In fact, fiction and reality continually intertwine when it comes to intelligence. This can be explained by contemporary production methods of TV series, along with the opacity that characterizes the world of intelligence (Melley 2012). References to fictions appear regularly in ordinary conversations or policy debates concerning intelligence (Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2009), and they are constantly used by professionals as a point of entry into the logics of intelligence, and as a way of positioning themselves in the public mind (Hitz 2008). In sum, popular culture is one of the principal modes for professionals' subjectification, namely the way in which practitioners build a certain relationship with themselves as well as with others.

This exploration of the possible uses of television series for a social history of American intelligence will be supported by an in-depth analysis of *Rubicon* (AMC, 2010), a short-lived program that stands out from the enormous amount of spy fiction available to the public because of its good reception by critics and professionals alike, its cult credentials, and its lasting influence on the genre. *Rubicon*'s novelty lies in its writers' narrative and aesthetic gamble: to depict the day-to-day life of intelligence analysts, thus moving away from the usual action-packed spy thriller à la James Bond. Indeed, *Rubicon* makes visible several dimensions of intelligence that are rarely seen in spy films or series: the value and different meanings of analysis for decision-making and international security, the complex nature of the American intelligence community, along with its profoundly administrative nature. In doing so, *Rubicon* sheds light on the significance of ordinary men and women in the world of intelligence and international affairs, as well as revealing the numerous and imperceptible links between everyday practices and the larger power dynamics that are at play within the contemporary security environment. This focus on day-to-day practices does not mean, however, that *Rubicon* normalizes intelligence: to the contrary, the series successfully recalls, episode after episode, the extraordinary nature of the secret world in which secrecy, mistrust, and extreme violence are omnipresent. It is precisely the series' ability to depict this tension between ordinary - and seemingly benign - practices and the extraordinary nature of intelligence activities that makes it so interesting.

Besides, as a TV series that is often praised by American professionals and scholars for its realistic depiction of intelligence analysis (Andelman 2010/2011; Blistène 2020), *Rubicon* has also become something of a compulsory step towards a more comprehensive understanding of secret intelligence, an understanding that does not shy away from 'culture, ideas and *mentalité*' (Rezk 2016, 227). In addition to challenging the clear-cut and often overly simplistic distinction between the factual and the fictional when it comes to intelligence, this contribution also broadens our understanding of this different kind of 'imagined community' (Anderson

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<sup>1</sup> See the Introduction to this Special Issue. The present contribution is part of the ongoing attempt to develop new avenues for research in intelligence studies around the notion of the 'everyday' or the 'ordinary life' of intelligence professionals and to broaden the concept of 'evidence' beyond solely state archives. The TV series *Rubicon* is not interpreted as a documentary of *real* intelligence analysts' lives or practices, but as a valuable site of meaning production that allows non-professionals to hypothetically experience the ordinary life of intelligence analysts, and which enables professionals and non-professionals to refer to and connect with each other, through shared representations and emotions.

1983) that is the intelligence community by shedding light on cultural perceptions (including self-perceptions) of the hidden side of government.

This article is divided into five parts. The first section examines the various methodologies available to researchers willing to explore the day-to-day life of intelligence practitioners. The second section provides some production details of *Rubicon* and locates the series within the spy genre. The third section explores the different ways in which *Rubicon* depicts the ordinary life of American intelligence analysts, a life that may appear, at first sight, similar to any other office life. The fourth section looks at the series' complex depiction of intelligence analysis and its meanings and uses for decision-making and international security. Finally, the fifth section underlines the many ways in which analysts' ordinary lives remain extraordinary, through a careful consideration of three key elements: compartmentalization, mistrust and their impact on analysts' work environment; analysts' difficult personal lives; and the extreme violence of the undercover world.

### **Imagining the social history of intelligence**

Exploring alternative approaches to the study of secret intelligence is essential to broadening our understanding of the hidden side of government. One possible starting point considers that a social history of American intelligence should seek to replace the traditional focus on elites and high politics by a bottom-up perspective: only then would subjects or topics that are traditionally forgotten by scholars finally become visible. Yet, if such a prospect seems theoretically very promising, it also poses many challenges, one being the methodology. Indeed, considering the opacity of the secret world, what would be the best way to investigate the day-to-day life of intelligence practitioners?

One way of doing so would be to go to the archives, a method that has already proved very effective as intelligence agencies produce a vast amount of classified materials that may become available to researchers over time. Looking only at studies of American intelligence, impressive work has already been done on the F.B.I. or the C.I.A. using declassified documents (Jeffrey-Jones 1973; Andrew 1996; Johnson 1998; Aldrich 2003; Moran 2016).<sup>2</sup> But this method is not without its obstacles. Leaving aside the complex nature of states' archives - a question that refers to a recurring debate in historiography, but which arises in slightly different terms because of the specific nature of secret intelligence (Willmetts 2013) - the presence in the archives of interesting material regarding the daily-lives of intelligence practitioners is far from evident, as documents relevant for social historians (such as notebooks, letters, emails or even scribbles) might not have been preserved. In addition, archival work makes difficult, if not impossible, the study of more contemporary phenomenon. Intelligence scholars remain dependent on the timeframe and, in some cases, on the good will of intelligence agencies to disclose materials (Lester 2015). As Rahul Sagar has pointed out, temporality can also be used to maintain governmental control over possible abuses of secrecy (2013).

The limits of archival work leave scholars willing to explore the daily life of intelligence practitioners with a second option: interviews. Methodologically speaking, interviews are often seen as valuable tools to circumvent the scarcity of information that characterizes the intelligence world (Jenkins 2009; Herfroy-Mischler 2015). Because of its sensitive and strategic nature, intelligence is characterized by a strong insider/outsider divide (Dewerpe 1994), even more so than any other state bureaucracy. This means that the circulation and access of information is highly organized under various strict protocols, which aim at limiting unwanted leaks as well as protecting national security from the risk of foreign penetration. This insider/outsider divide is further reinforced internally according to different clearance systems

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<sup>2</sup> In this article, the emphasis is put on American intelligence scholarship. But one should not forget the work of various scholars on British intelligence services. See for instance Aldrich (2011) or Cormac (2018).

that vary within each intelligence agency. Moreover, interviews present the disadvantage of being centered around the same professional category, which increases the risk of a one-dimensional approach, notwithstanding a great variety of interviewees. This disadvantage may be seen as even more prominent because of the lack of information and great asymmetry that characterize the world of intelligence, rendering classic fact-checking activities almost impossible. Finally, the sometimes-difficult access to professionals, or their limited ability to share their experience given the sensibility of their work, represents another challenge for the researcher (Van Puyvelde 2018).

This article proposes to explore a third option: fiction. While spy fiction has always been a recurring subject of ordinary conversation on espionage or state secrets, it has remained, until recently, the ‘missing dimension’ (Andrew and Dilks 1984) of academic discourse on secret intelligence. But this oversight is now being challenged on several fronts. Critiques of spy films and TV series have recently flourished within the field of intelligence studies (Johnson 2008; Dujmovic 2008; Zegart 2010). Alternatively, intelligence historians have also highlighted the role culture has played within the CIA’s strategy against the Soviet Union as a part of the cultural Cold War (Saunders 1999; Wilford 2009). Following such a view, spy fiction is worth studying because of the various ways in which the world of intelligence and the one of entertainment have historically intertwined (Jenkins 2012), and because of the impact of representations of secret intelligence on public opinion, decision-makers and professionals alike (McCracken and Moran 2018).

Another group of scholars inspired by postmodernism and its enduring impact on cultural studies, literary theory and the philosophy of history have taken things further and sought to fully integrate culture in the study of secret intelligence. In line with recent methodological and epistemological developments in international relations, which underline the complex and highly mediated nature of ‘reality’, where social, political and cultural elements coexist and intertwine (Weldes 1999; Weber 2006; Der Derian 2009; Bleiker 2009), they have highlighted how the world of intelligence is as cultural as it is social and political. Their approach stipulates that it is impossible to separate the cultural aspects of intelligence (such as novels, movies or TV series) from the political or social ones, because of their fundamentally entangled nature (Der Derian 1992; Melley 2012, 2014; Willmetts 2016). Following this perspective, spy fiction should not be disregarded as mere entertainment. Instead, it should be elevated as an important line of enquiry as it is one of the most widely shared discourses on intelligence activities, and because of its ability to construct and mediate meanings or beliefs regarding intelligence or security. As Simon Willmetts recently pointed out, it is time to see culture as more than a simple reflection of intelligence and to acknowledge ‘the complex interplay that exists between statecraft and the highly mediated world that we all inhabit’ (2019, 811).

As such, spy fiction is considered a valuable point of entry into the everyday life of American intelligence professionals. Building on this body of work, this study draws on two additional inspirations outside of intelligence studies or international relations when using a TV show as a window into the everyday life of intelligence professionals. The first harks back to the 1970s historiographical debates, when scholarly interest in social history started to decline because of the rigidity and conservatism of the discipline. In a context of linguistic and narrative turns, social history’s strict materialist stance seemed increasingly impossible to hold, and a new generation of social historians soon attempted to open the door to alternative methodologies. In the reformist camp was the American historian Harry C. Payne, whose article ‘Novel as Social History’ constituted as much a radical as an intriguing contribution to the field (1978). In an attempt to bring the discipline back to life, Payne argued that novels should be regarded as alternative ways to investigate the past because of a certain resemblance between the historian’s work and the novelist’s. Instead of calling into question the ontological

difference between fact and fiction, a premise that lies at the heart of the narrative turn inspired by Hayden White and postmodernism, Payne considers novels to be ‘plausible hypotheses’ of the past (1978, 348). Simply put, this means that novels do not constitute valuable raw data for historians, as they never claim to tell the truth about the world. But novels (and fiction more generally) can nonetheless be very useful to unearth evidence by helping historians to formulate hypotheses about conditions and contexts that may be difficult to apprehend. Payne does not mean that novels could or should replace more classic approaches to history, but that fiction, given its heuristic power, may be a valuable starting point for researchers looking to enquire into larger investigations regarding the past. While one of the aims of this special issue is to reflect on possible sources and methods for reconstructing the daily lives of American intelligence professionals, it seems only natural to recast the more adventurous methodological proposals social historians proposed a few decades ago.

The second inspiration behind this exploration of the uses of TV series for a social history of intelligence is the work of the American philosopher Stanley Cavell, who provides us with one of the most powerful and innovative bodies of work on cinema through his writings on the ontology of films (1971) and specific genres (1981). Cavell’s central claim can be summarized as this: films are ordinary narrative practices, which allow us - viewers - to reconnect ourselves with our ordinary experience. Cinema’s ability to do so comes about through two of its specificities: its ‘realism’, which Cavell redefines following Erwin Panofsky’s (1959) and André Bazin’s (1967) writings on the matter, and the transition between ‘silent’ and ‘sound’ films. Thus movies are inherently powerful not because they constitute ‘representations’ of reality (a notion that the philosopher deliberately avoids), but because they allow spectators to experience another reality by *seeing* the world on a screen.

Cavell’s ideas were further developed by philosophers Sandra Laugier and Martin Shuster in their highly stimulating writings on contemporary TV series. According to Laugier, the aesthetic and philosophical interest of today’s TV series lies in the serial-episode principle, as well as in the special place they have in ordinary lives, sometimes for several years. This enmeshing of TV series with individual and collective forms of life, along with their ability to reconnect viewers with their moral and political experience, is precisely why they should be taken seriously (2012; 2019). Shuster, for his part, places the ontology of the small screen at the center of his essay *New Television* (2017). He underlines how TV series were first and foremost created for the small screen, or what some used to call ‘home cinema’, with all the peculiar social and political significance the home entails.

Building on those developments, spy TV series can be interpreted as valuable means to *experience* the day-to-day life of intelligence professionals thanks to the specificities of the medium. The serial-episode principle and the *longue durée* of series’ narrations allow in-depth description of professionals’ routines and practices in ways that are usually beyond the scope of other representational art. Where films prefer narrative efficiency, TV series can afford to linger on details. These specificities induce, in turn, a back-and-forth presence of series into spectators’ lives (depending on the viewing modalities), which explains the gradual attachment or detestation one can feel for certain characters, along with the impression of getting acquainted with a certain *milieu*, such as the one of intelligence, episode after episode, in all its specificity and complexity (Blistène 2019).

This experience, however, remains hypothetical in the sense that TV series are not regarded as documentaries of *actual* ordinary lives of intelligence professionals, no matter how (supposedly) authentic or well-researched they may be. Nor are they seen as simple mirrors of the reality of intelligence that just reflect intelligence professionals’ lives in a more or less realistic manner. Just like any creative enterprise, spy TV series do not claim to tell the truth about the world, as they willfully distance themselves with the realm of fact. In line with Payne’s defense of novels’ heuristic power, spy TV series do not constitute *raw data* for social

historians, or any researchers interested in intelligence. Instead, they should be apprehended as a helpful reservoir of ‘plausible hypotheses’ (very much like theoretical fictions or thought experiments) that may help viewers - and scholars - to envision, to explore and to imagine the day-to-day reality of intelligence professionals that remains, for the most part, difficult to apprehend. In short, spy TV series may be valuable starting points for researchers into a larger investigation regarding the past.

This is not to deny the immense progress that have been made regarding the complex relationship between ‘fiction’ and ‘reality’ in the realm of intelligence. Indeed, while viewers - and scholars - may be aware of the fact that this experience is fictional and hypothetical, they remain nonetheless influenced by what they *see* on screens. This peculiar power of fiction can be explained by the particularly ambivalent ontological and epistemic status of spy TV series. This ambivalence, which is also that of the spy genre, comes mainly from two main elements which concern both fictional artifacts and reality: the production process of contemporary spy TV series and the structural opacity of secret intelligence. Throughout the democratic world, there has been an increasing implication of intelligence professionals in the production process of scripted television series (Jenkins 2012; Khitrov 2020), through the hiring of external advisors or highly publicized collaborations between intelligence and industry professionals. This unusual collaboration allows creators to present their series as more authentic, thus satisfying the public’s demand for supposedly true accounts of intelligence activities. On the other hand, intelligence professionals are able to fictionally present themselves as more open and therefore compatible with the norm of transparency that governs democratic politics (Blistène 2020). To this must be added the increasing reactivity of the television industry to *real world events* thus affecting the perception of spy TV series as more than mere entertainment: they are neither ‘true’ nor ‘false’ but somewhere in between.<sup>3</sup>

Second, the scarcity of information that characterizes secret intelligence confers an additional power to spy TV series. By fictionally making visible what would remain otherwise invisible, spy TV series not only reveal the ‘missing dimension’ of democratic politics to the public (namely secrecy, mystery, necessity and extreme violence), they also construct and mediate meanings or beliefs regarding secret intelligence. Indeed, spy TV series constitute one of the most widely shared discourses on intelligence activities, a discourse that is shared by professionals and non-professionals alike. This power of fiction over perception and belief is also true of professionals’ day-to-day activities. As explored above, the serial format allows us to dwell on specific details that are especially of interest to social historians: methods, rituals, or the kind of interaction intelligence professionals have with their family. In fact, the difficult reconciliation between highly demanding jobs and personal lives that are often sacrificed constitutes one of the main narrative drives of spy TV series. A close analysis of *Rubicon*, especially of its complex depiction of the ordinary life of American intelligence analysts, supports this claim. If *Rubicon* reveals a daily life that may appear, at first, similar to any other office life, a more in-depth examination of the series suggests the extraordinary nature of analysts’ lives.

### ***Rubicon*, a not-so-ordinary spy TV show**

Released in 2010, *Rubicon* tells the story of Will Travers (interpreted by James Badge Dale), an extremely dedicated and talented intelligence analyst who works at the American Policy Institute (API), a fictional contractor of the US Intelligence Community (IC) based in New York City. The supposedly accidental death of his mentor propels Will at the head of a team in

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to the series I focus on in this article, some examples include *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-2020), *The Americans* (FX, 2013-2018), *Jack Ryan* (AmazonPrime, 2018-in production), *Fauda* (Yes Oh, 2015-in production) and the French TV series *The Bureau* (Canal+, 2015-2020).

charge of tracking down a suspected terrorist plotting against America named Kateb. As Will starts to investigate the dubious circumstances in which his mentor lost his life, he progressively uncovers a global conspiracy involving a small group of powerful men, including the head of API, master spy Truxton Spangler (Michael Cristofer), who manipulates world events for profit.

With one of the highest ratings of any premiere on AMC (more than 2 million spectators watched the pilot in 2010), *Rubicon*'s future looked very promising (Andreeva 2010). If most critics emphasized the unusually slow nature of the show, they also underlined its high quality. For instance Robert Lloyds, of the *Los Angeles Times*, praised the series' excellent cast, fine aesthetic and complex narrative. *Entertainment Weekly*'s Ken Tucker underlined *Rubicon*'s novelty in light of other AMC's workplace drama such as *Mad Men* (Tucker 2010). Tim Goodman, *San Francisco Gate*'s reviewer, did not conceal his enthusiasm for *Rubicon*: 'Espionage. Political lies. Covert ops (even in the homeland). Secrets handed down by government groups for generations, fear, lack of trust, a knowledge that the seams of society could rip at any time - what's not to like?' (Goodman 2010). Finally, *Variety*'s critic Brian Lowry expressed great interest for the show's atmosphere and cast, but he also rightfully anticipated that *Rubicon*, a fine example of 'big brain TV', was 'unlikely to be a huge hit but should develop cult credentials' (Lowry 2010).

Indeed audiences progressively decreased, and *Rubicon* turned out to be a bit of a damp squib: only half of its premiere audience watched the finale. Given the huge success of AMC's new TV hit *The Walking Dead*, a post-apocalyptic zombie series that gathered more than 4.5 million spectators for its premiere, it seemed almost impossible for *Rubicon* to have any future at all, and the show was eventually cancelled after one season due to poor viewing figures. The series' overall performance reflects this popular disinterestedness: the website *IMDb* credits *Rubicon* with an overall score of 7.9/10 based on a 10013 users' vote when other AMC TV series, such as *Breaking Bad*, gets a much higher score based on much bigger turnout (9.5/10 based on 1.3 million votes).

While *Rubicon* might have been considered a commercial failure at the time, it nonetheless left an indelible mark on viewers and critics because of its ability to be 'ahead of its time' concerning conspiracy theories, truth and the manipulation of intelligence for political and financial profit, a mark that was confirmed by the great enthusiasm that recently accompanied its renewed availability online (Ryan 2019; Adalian 2019). Moreover, *Rubicon* also considerably fashioned post-9/11 television by inspiring a new generation of spy series that would all attempt to break away from the typical action-packed counterterrorist TV shows *à la* 24. To name just a few examples, the American series *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-2020), one of the most seen and commented spy series of the 2010s, employed *Rubicon*'s showrunner as one of its main screenwriters from the beginning of the project, a decision that explains, at least in part, the complexity and the direction taken by the series (Yardley 2013). Moreover Éric Rochant, creator and showrunner of the French espionage hit *The Bureau*, distributed in over 110 countries and which came in second on the *New York Times* 2020 best international shows list, often cites *Rubicon* as one of his great inspirations, which he regards as the best spy TV series ever made (Vincentelli 2020; Poniewozik et al. 2020). Whether in the minds of spectators or creators, the shadow of the short-lived drama is, surprisingly, never far away.

*Rubicon*'s popular failure is generally attributed to the series' slowness and lack of action. Indeed, apart from a few scenes involving direct surveillance through tails in the streets of lower Manhattan, and another one in which Will survives a murder attempt by killing his executioner, nothing spectacular happens in *Rubicon*. If American and international audiences probably welcomed this change of pace following a decade of trigger-happy super spies chasing terrorists across the globe, it is not difficult to imagine them growing quite bored after a few episodes in which they are confronted with an extremely complex plot and multiple



subplots, and where the most epic scenes are nerdy analysts disagreeing over the political and ethical bases of their actions.

But *Rubicon*'s lack of action was certainly not an accident. The main inspiration for the series' creator Jason Horwitch were post-Watergate 'conspiracy thrillers' such as *The Parallax View* (Allan J. Pakula, 1974) and *Three Days of the Condor* (Sydney Pollack, 1975), whose storylines are just like the bureaucracies they depict: byzantine, complex and slow (Melley 2000). If Horwitch had initially set the series in a Washington D.C. think tank very much like the RAND Corporation, *Rubicon*'s showrunner Henry Bromell relocated the plot within a contractor of the American intelligence community as soon as he took over production after a disagreement between Horwitch and AMC (Murthi 2019). Such a change was mostly inspired, Bromell explained, by his will to 'put the brakes on the conspiracy story' initially imagined by Horwitch, so it doesn't 'lead you badly' (Van Der Werff 2010). Besides, as Bromell suggested, *Rubicon*'s invented conspiracy was an extreme interpretation of the broader political climate of the time in the United States characterized by the never-ending fight against terrorism almost a decade after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and deep skepticism regarding the American political system that was embodied, in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, by the rise of the Tea Party movement.

The focus on intelligence also allowed Bromell to maintain the slow pace of the series, but this certainly broke away from traditional depictions of espionage. Bromell, the son of a former CIA station chief who had spent most of his childhood abroad due to his father's occupation, later explained that his personal experience really helped him to conceive *Rubicon*'s peculiar ambiance, and possibly gave him access to *real* intelligence professionals (Meinzer 2010). The showrunner also explained that his main inspirations were 'a little bit John le Carré, Graham Greene, a little bit of the BBC, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*' (Van Der Werff 2010). The very slow way in which the main plot unfolds, added to the greyish workplace aesthetics of the show, does pay tribute to the British tradition of spy fiction. However, *Rubicon*'s treatment of secret intelligence appeared even more radical than the usual cat and mouse games between moles that dominated the genre during the Cold War. Instead, the series focuses on intelligence analysts who simply work behind their desks and reflect. This creative choice instantly located *Rubicon* at the periphery of post-9/11 spy fiction, dominated by hard-boiled operatives. But it also offered a unique window into a segment of intelligence that remains usually ignored by spy fiction: the very long thought-process of analysis, which can be defined as the transformation of raw data and information into verified intelligence (Johnson 2006; Lowenthal 2016). By doing so, *Rubicon* not only recalls the complexity of intelligence analysis - its meanings and value in the post-9/11 security environment - but it also sheds light on the numerous and for the most part imperceptible links between seemingly benign everyday practices and the larger power dynamics that are at play within the world of secret intelligence (Ben Jaffel 2019).

### **The ordinary life of intelligence analysts**

In *Rubicon*'s episode 1, the very first exchange between Will and his colleague Tanya McGaffin (Lauren Hodges), in which Travers helps her solve a *New York Times* crossword, immediately familiarizes the spectator with these unusual heroes armed with reason, pencils, paper-clips and files, and for whom breaking codes is not only a job, it is a way of being. This scene emphasizes several key elements of the series: it first reveals how exceptionally talented Will Travers is. From the very beginning, he is a genius code-breaker. Second, the first element that puts Travers on the tracks of a global conspiracy is precisely this crossword, or to be more precise, the similarity between four different major newspapers' crosswords. This hidden-in-plain-sight message echoes a recurrent thread of spy fiction, which suggests that political and

social reality are never as straightforward as they seem to be. To quote Luc Boltanski, it encourages us to question the 'reality of the reality' (2014, 14). Finally, the opening shots effectively set the unusual scenery of the series: a spiritless administrative facility located in lower Manhattan, a few blocks away from Brooklyn Bridge and Ground Zero.

Apart from a few scenes in the streets of New York, in Washington DC, and a very quick excursion into the field, the plot unfolds inside the API office. From the outside, the facility looks like any other banal office building. Except for the CCTV at the entrance, something that the building shares with many other secured facilities, API successfully blends in with its surroundings. In an amusing dialogue in episode 9, Travers reminds his coworker Miles, who carelessly smokes a cigarette in front of API's building, that he is not supposed 'to loiter around here', to which Miles replies 'people smoke outside of building Will, I'm helping it blend'. Inside, API has the appearance of just another administrative facility prior to the analog-digital conversion. The viewer is struck by the absence of screens or technological devices, with the exception of a few antique TV sets: computers have been relegated to the basement, where only one technician can access all databases in the world. Analysts' offices, which are distributed along an undecorated and soulless corridor, are surprisingly filled, packed with shelves sinking under the weight of books, billboards full of papers, notes, or even sketches, thereby resembling a University researchers' office. Apart from a few eureka moments, when Will realizes the very unusual combination of crosswords in the daily newspapers, or when he finally understands the scope of the conspiracy he is dealing with, nothing really happens.

Among the different locations within API that are progressively presented to viewers, two stand out. The first is a windowless yellow and particularly gloomy cafeteria, which is also the only location where all API's employees mingle regardless of rank. It is where the company's boss, spymaster Truxton Spangler (Michael Cristofer), eats his bowl of cornflakes alone for lunch daily while reading his newspaper, and it is also where Spangler calls for a staff meeting after API's failure to prevent Kateb's terrorist attack. The cafeteria is also where most of the small talk happens. In the first episode, a quick exchange between two members of Will's team, Miles Fiedler (Dallas Roberts) and Tanya McGaffin, provides some useful details on the main protagonist:

Tanya: So tell me something, why is Will Travers so mokey?

Miles: He's not mokey, he's just introspective.

Tanya: He walks around everyday looking like his favorite cat just died.

Miles: Try wife and child, try 9/11.

If Will Travers' decision to become an intelligence analyst seems to precede the attacks, the tragic loss of his daughter and wife in 2001 certainly explains his unwavering dedication to forewarning world affairs, a dedication that he shares with his co-workers, who rarely do not talk about work over lunch. As in any other company, the cafeteria is the ideal place to continue working by other means.

The second, and probably the most important, location in the series is the team's meeting room. The coffee thermos at the center of the very large table isn't sufficient to heat up the atmosphere of this gloomy room and its brownish walls covered with world maps, and whose windows overlook one of Manhattan's highways. It is normally where the morning briefing occurs when the team leader allocates new assignments - represented by very thick paper files - to each analyst before they return to their offices. The assignments vary: authentication of satellite photos from suspected Iranian missile silos, peeling of an infamous arms trafficker's bank statements suspected of selling missiles to Pakistan, decoding a Malaysian cypher... If assignments change depending on the threat of the day, it is not rare to

see analysts returning to the same file, as the amount of information transmitted by the various federal agencies API works with keeps coming in. As Will Travers explains in episode 12, API is ‘the safety’ of the intelligence community, or what is also called a ‘Team B’ (Chopin 2017). Its role is to confirm or infirm assessments made by federal agencies, either by going over intelligence reports transmitted by the community, or by using similar or different evidence than federal agencies. Sifting through all the evidence to develop alternative intelligence analysis requires patience, thoroughness, precision and tenacity.

### **Intelligence analysis and circularity**

In *Rubicon*, the recurrence of locations echoes the recurrence of situations and tasks. By depicting, episode after episode, the same rituals - coffee or lunch breaks, morning briefs - the series underlines the repeated and Sisyphean nature of analysis in particular, and intelligence in general. This repetition of daily tasks echoes the circularity that characterizes the ‘intelligence cycle’, the multiple-step process that intelligence agencies theoretically follow to transform raw information into valuable intelligence for decision-makers (Kent 1949; Herman 1997; Phythian 2013). If *Rubicon* focuses on a contractor of the American intelligence community (IC), federal agencies or policymakers are never far away. They remain the main consumers of their assessments and are constantly mentioned by protagonists, as well as depicted many times in the series. Thus *Rubicon* underlines intelligence’s primary function: to inform political, diplomatic or military decisions; or in the words of former Director of National Intelligence Clapper, to provide ‘a decision advantage’ (Johnson 2015). Interestingly enough, the focus on a private intelligence contractor also allows *Rubicon* to emphasize the complex ecosystem of American intelligence.

Yet, in reality as well as in fiction, daily routines are sometimes subverted by an urgent task. In *Rubicon*, this urgency is embodied by Kateb, a suspected lone wolf terrorist that API’s analysts are watching for months and who seemed to be preparing an attack on America. It is only after Will’s team realizes that Kateb is still alive that a sense of emergency seems to break their circular and rather boring day-to-day reality. As the threat embodied by Kateb takes progressively shape under the analysts’ and the spectators’ eyes, API’s analysts switch to crisis mode, from an individual to collective working mode. Together, they are shown going over an impressive pile of documents barely leaving the meeting room. The turning point is episode 12 when they finally realize that Kateb is in fact a homegrown terrorist, a young American born in New Jersey, and that he might be planning an attack on US soil. As a result, several federal agencies (CIA, NSA, FBI) are shown investing API’s facility. A vivid debate between Miles and an FBI agent over the best method to identify Kateb’s target before the attack underlines the persistence of repetition and circularity in the methods used by analysts, even in a time of crisis:

Miles: It doesn’t make any sense. You can’t start with the tactic, the target follows the tactic, it’s not the other way around.

FBI: The order is to assess the population clusters vulnerable to a single...

Miles: But Al-Qaida isn’t after body count. You assess whatever clusters you need to, but we’ve got a few thousand pages of contabulated intercepts from the past six months, that’s where the answer is.

FBI: That is not the priority.

Miles: It’s our priority.

Rather than a risky blind guess, Miles advocates a meticulous reassessment of the same documents API’s analysts have been screening for months. Serious analysis takes rigor and

time. The time-consuming nature of analysis is sometimes difficult to reconcile with the need for timely and actionable intelligence. The great contrast between, on the one hand, the numerous scenes depicting the interminable workload of analysts while attempting to uncover Kateb's identity and, on the other hand, the agitation at the end of the season, as they try to see through Kateb's plan, reveals different, not to say clashing, perceptions of temporality as an event becomes progressively inescapable. If the series seems to lean towards Miles' method, it is unfortunately too late. In a dramatic scene that expresses a sense of powerlessness and collective failure, API's staff gather in the meeting room with federal employees and watch, together, the bombing of an American oil tanker in Galveston Bay, Texas.

*Rubicon* sheds light on the meanings and uses of intelligence analysis in a contemporary security setting. This is particularly evident in a scene from episode 4, in which API's boss Truxton Spangler explains to a National Security Council official the absolute necessity of maintaining the contractor's financial and political independence. Only at this price will the executive dispose of an additional unbiased and objective source of intelligence, which is so crucial for decision-making.

Truxton Spangler: The gentleman to my right is a remarkable intelligence analyst. He is skilled in pattern recognition, system analysis, emergence theory but, but, in truth, his greatest asset for you is that you don't know him, and he doesn't know you, he doesn't care about you or your feelings, he just knows what your tie looks like. You can trust him.

According to Spangler, it is not so much the exceptional skills of API's analysts that make them so useful to decision-making, it is their impartiality, which is reinforced by the private, and a-political, nature of API as a contractor for the American intelligence community. Leaving aside the debate regarding the privatization of intelligence and its controversial role in government activities (Rathmell 2007; Van Puyvelde 2019), this scene provides a straightforward illustration of what analysis seeks to achieve: producing the most accurate and objective intelligence using a vast range of raw data and incomplete information. In *Rubicon*, analysts describe their work as a search for 'the truth, nothing but the truth', a quest for objectivity that matches one of the defining features of the American intelligence 'culture' (Stout 2017). But the protagonists are also aware of the limits of analysis. In episode 4, API's deputy director Kale Ingram (Arliss Howard) reminds his subordinates that 'intelligence is incomplete, that's the nature of it'. This pragmatic view underlines the imperfect nature of the findings resulting from API's analysis, and emphasizes intelligence's peculiar relation to knowledge. As Gill and Phythian have pointed out, 'the object of the exercise [analysis] is not necessarily to discover the 'truth'. Intelligence analysts seek knowledge with a degree of certainty sufficient to satisfy and inform those who wish to act upon it' (2006: 24). This does not mean that the normative standard of intelligence is not knowledge or 'an inferior alternative', but it simply underlines the particular and still unresolved question of the epistemological status of intelligence as a form of knowledge (Vrist Rønn and Høffding 2013).

In addition, *Rubicon* offers a complex reflection on the nature of intelligence analysis and the utility of intelligence for decision-makers. This is particularly clear in episode 2, when Miles and Will are watching news coverage of an ongoing coup in Lagos they had predicted beforehand:

Miles: Look at this. I mean we... we warned everyone that this was gonna happen, twice! We laid our options. Why?... What's the point? No one listens.  
Will: Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't.

Miles and Will's frustration - admirably rendered in this scene - does not come from a mistake in their assessment of the Nigerian situation, as it regretfully proved accurate. Rather, it comes from the feeling of powerlessness that analysts can experience when policymakers choose to willfully ignore their reporting. As scholars and professionals have repeatedly noted, it is one thing to dispose of good intelligence, it is another to see it successfully used by decision-makers to formulate and implement effective policies (Betts 1978; Wirtz 2007).

### **The extraordinary nature of secret intelligence**

By focusing on the rather tedious life of intelligence analysts, *Rubicon* could be seen as an attempt to normalize secret intelligence. But this narrow reading would be a mistake, as the series also exposes the extraordinary nature of secret intelligence. The serial format allows viewers to get progressively acquainted, episode by episode, with the peculiarities of a certain *milieu*. In *Rubicon*, three elements represent the uniqueness of this *milieu*: API's working protocols, the protagonists' failed personal lives, and the extreme violence of the intelligence world.

First, the different protocols and processes that organize work at API are far from banal. In place of the usual corporate work methods, the viewer slowly discovers an environment in which secrecy, suspicion, structured ignorance, and strict compartmentalization are the rules. API's different teams of analysts are all named after letters (team A, B, C...) and have little if no contact with one another. Analysts barely know each other outside of their own team. This peculiar relationship to others is especially well-expressed in the different scenes that take place in the cafeteria. When Travers' team brainstorms an assignment over lunch, they make sure that no one else can hear their conversation. When Tanya is transferred to the basement in order to recover from her drinking habits and drug abuses, she automatically loses her security clearance. If she remains welcomed at her former colleagues' table, they make sure not to discuss ongoing assignments in front of her. In the world of secret intelligence, anybody can be a spy or, conversely, be spied on, and therefore only has access to the information they need to know. In *Rubicon*, Will's secretary keeps an eye on him during the day at the request of the company's deputy director, Kale Ingram (Arliss Howard), who spends his nights looking for microphones in his flat. Suspicion and mistrust structure any human interaction, something that applies both to the office life as much as the personal one (Allard and Kraplak 2016; Fox 2019).

Strict compartmentalization and its social effects reach their peak halfway through the season when the company goes into lockdown over a suspected leak. All of a sudden, the use of phones is strictly prohibited while the whole company's workforce - senior executives included - get polygraphed. Miles' nervousness after having potentially misfiled classified documents is another reminder of the peculiar nature of his work. The familiarity between API's staff and the people in charge of the security vetting suggests that it is not the first, and certainly not the last time they see each other. The polygraph tests are followed, in episode 8, by mandatory urine tests which a sample of API employees have to take every fortnight. Will explains to his secretary that he finds this practice undignifying, but he nevertheless complies as he knows this comes with the job. While urine testing is not reserved to intelligence practitioners - private companies in other sectors impose similar tests on their employees - such procedures take on a whole new dimension given the sensitivity of the information intelligence professionals manipulate. This is well shown in the fact that Tanya's drinking and drug consumption gets exposed after her own urine test. Her habits not only pose a danger to herself, they also pose a threat to national security because they may affect her judgement, or make her particularly prone to voluntarily or involuntarily security breaches or blackmail (Hitz 2010; Johnson 2006, 226).

A second element of the series that constantly reminds spectators of the distinct nature of intelligence is the difficulty for professionals to have a personal life because of the secrecy that surrounds their day-to-day activities. Here again, the serial format allows viewers to progressively recompose *Rubicon*'s protagonists' personal environments. In the first episode, Will expresses to his mentor his concerns and reservations about his job:

David: I don't blame you for taking stock and weighing your options, with a workload like yours.<sup>4</sup>

Will: No... it's not that. I don't work too much. It's just that when I leave I can't talk to anybody about it.

David: That's the hardest thing in this job. Keeping secrets.

A similar frustration is expressed by Grant Test (Christopher Evan Welch) as he recounts to his co-workers a career day event at his kids' school and explains that his children think he is 'unemployed', considering the fact that he cannot tell them what he does for a living. Even Grant's wife is unaware of his day-to-day activities, although she apparently knows the address of his work. In episode 9, she shows up, unannounced, in front of API's building, after having been fired to share her frustration and anxiety with her husband given the financial pressure they will have to undergo. She clearly does not understand his life choice. Miles seems to have found a lighter way to hide his true profession from his children, having told them that he develops 'secret video games'. The viewer then discovers that Miles does not see his kids that often since his wife left him several months ago, a secret he has kept from his colleagues since. In *Rubicon*, the burden of secrecy spares no one.

When it comes to exposing the possible damage a career in intelligence might do to one's personal life, a further stage is reached with Tanya McGaffin (Lauren Hodges) who suffers from multiple addictions. The introverted and certainly brilliant young recruit (she holds two PhDs) proves to be a troubled young woman who spends most of her nights drinking and doing drugs. If the viewer is aware of her rough nights since episode 2, as she shows up for work completely hungover, her secret is eventually discovered by API's hierarchy in episode 8, after her mandatory urine test. When she is finally summoned to Truxton Spangler's office, the API's boss offers her a second chance at the condition that she follows a rehabilitation program.

Truxton: First of all, you're gonna be fine. There are programs, specifically designed for people in the intelligence community. You're not the first person to fall down this well. You won't be the last.

Tanya: I'm not fired...

Truxton: We take care of our own. You are gonna be working here a long, long time.

It remains unclear whether Tanya already suffered from these addictions before joining the world of intelligence, but it is quite apparent that the secrecy, workload and the responsibility the job entails have made her problems worse.

By depicting the tremendous responsibility that rests on analysts' shoulders, along with the extreme violence of the undercover world, *Rubicon* successfully underlines the particularity

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<sup>4</sup> CIA memoirs repeatedly stress the fact that intelligence officers often feel overworked. According to former CIA's Director George Tenet (2007), amongst the reasons given for missing 9/11 was the huge volume of work the Counter-Terrorism Center staff was faced with.

of secret intelligence. Even though the series shows first and foremost a group of geeky analysts working behind a desk, viewers are constantly reminded that analysts' assessments are essential to national and international security, as well as saving human lives. In episode 9, Miles urges Grant to finish his assessment of the Kateb situation as 'a threat means eventually a terrorist attack'. Once the attack has taken place, a similar sense of urgency and responsibility characterizes post-mortem assessments because their conclusions might inform the United States' response. Tanya confesses to Grant of being scared by the prospect of a state-sponsored act of terrorism in response to an isolated act, as this means potentially more attacks 'from where it comes', along with more deaths in the potential retaliation that could ensue from them (in this case, a potential counterattack by the United States on Iran).

Analysts are sometimes asked to bear a direct responsibility in life and death decisions. For instance in episode 4, the CIA and the National Security Council ask API a second opinion on a possible preemptive drone strike against the suspected terrorist known as Kateb. This request triggers a series of vivid debates within Will's team about the political and ethical issues such decision implies. But the legality of the so-called 'targeted killings program', a program that was vastly expanded under the Obama administration, or its compliance with international law is not so much of their concern (Kretzmer 2005). The analysts are mainly concerned about the cost-benefit ratio, assessing the utility and necessity of such actions, and whether the ends (preventing a potential terrorist attack on America) justify the means (the death of one man along with possible 'collateral damages') (Hunter 2009; Braun and Brunstetter 2013). This sub-plot suggests analysts will be able to accept the burden of signing a death sentence by establishing the utility of a lethal action following a classic utilitarian line. In addition to being extremely instructive regarding the moral dilemma intelligence and security professionals face in performing their functions, this scene also raises the question of whether or not alternative understandings of ethics are practicable in the world of secret intelligence (Omand 2006; Phythian and Omand 2018).

One last characteristic that emerges from the TV show is the violence of the intelligence world. This violence is emphasized in a long sequence in episode 8, where Miles and Tanya are flown to a classified location by a CIA officer to assist with the interrogation of a suspected Al-Qaida operative. However rude their treatment by federal officers might be, it is nothing compared to the one endured by the detainee: the interrogation turns out to be a torture session conducted with the help of local henchmen in a black site (Chwastiak 2015). In an interesting twist, Miles and Tanya become persecutors in spite of themselves by underlining the contradictions in the detainee's story, thereby causing a new wave of questions and abuses. Their thoroughness makes them accomplices of the very atrocities they clearly abhor. From the very beginning of this sequence the two protagonists express concern about such inhumane treatment, and agree on the inefficiency of torture, noting that all information obtained in this way is unreliable. Yet the two analysts appear to disagree on the philosophical bases of their objections to torture. Whereas Tanya considers that under no circumstances a prisoner should ever be treated in this way (a deontological perspective), Miles believes that torture should not be objected to for the prisoner's sake, who has 'earned his pain', but for the intelligence professional's sake: 'My objection to torture is because what it does for my soul. And the fact that is..., it is not reliable' (a consequentialist perspective). When compared to other post-9/11 TV dramas such as *24*, in which the simplistic 'ticking-time bomb scenario' is used as the moral ground for so-called 'enhanced interrogation techniques' (Greenberg 2006; Jackson 2007; Evans 2018), *Rubicon* offers a much more complex moral landscape by emphasizing the difficult allocation of responsibility, or the impossible moral burden extreme intelligence practices entail. When it comes to international security, no one, even analysts, is shielded from the day-to-day violence of the secret world.

## Conclusion

Using the case of *Rubicon*, this article has shown that fiction is an important conduit to access and reflect upon modern intelligence practices and their political or social implications. Rather than glamorous operatives living extremely perilous lives, *Rubicon* creates a slow-paced fictional world in which analysts' daily lives look at first very much like any ordinary office life, with lunch breaks, daily meetings and routines, along with disagreements in the team over the best method to achieve specific goals. Such a creative choice probably explains the series' cancellation after one season, the public being more used to trigger-happy super spies in post-9/11 television. But although *Rubicon* might have been a commercial failure, it left an indelible mark on viewers and critics, and it would inspire a new generation of spy fiction that would all attempt to break away from the typical action-packed counterterrorist TV show *à la* 24.

In addition, the focus on analysts allowed *Rubicon* to make visible several dimensions of intelligence that are rarely seen in spy films or series: the meanings and value of analysis for decision-making and international security, the complex nature of the American intelligence community, along with the profound administrative nature of intelligence. In doing so, *Rubicon* sheds light on the significance of ordinary men and women in intelligence, as much as it reveals the numerous and imperceptible links between everyday practices, which might appear as unimportant, and the larger power dynamics that are at play within the contemporary security environment. This insistence on the routine and bureaucratic aspects of intelligence probably also explains the series' popularity among professionals, a question that is worth exploring further because it also relates to the role of fiction in professionals' self-presentation, as well as the more general issue of normalizing intelligence in the public sphere.

But even though *Rubicon* seems to present the day-to-day life of intelligence analysts as normal, it also underlines the many ways in which their ordinary remains, undoubtedly, extraordinary. The power of *Rubicon* comes from the fact that it effectively depicts the ordinary life of intelligence analysts navigating the extraordinary realm of intelligence and international security. In fiction as in real life, the extraordinary is often more apparent in the details. A closer look at *Rubicon* reveals the impact of compartmentalization on analysts' work environment and methods, as well as the way in which mistrust organizes human interactions inside and outside the office. Furthermore, *Rubicon* reminds its viewers episode after episode of the great personal cost that comes with such a career choice, as the burden of secrecy spares no one. Finally, the series highlights the violence of national security intelligence by confronting the analysts - and the viewers - with difficult moral choices. When doing so, the series addresses challenging issues regarding the ethics of intelligence and the allocation of responsibility for state violence. All of these questions need to be urgently investigated in fiction as well as in real life, by revealing and analyzing the hidden side of government. Methodologies that leverage fiction and TV shows have much potential to develop new and innovative research into the everyday lives of intelligence professionals.

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