

Not Enough Hank Schraders in a Walter White World

☒ Very rarely does a television show of Breaking Bad's brilliance come along. With such marvelous writing and superb acting, it was one of those shows that dragged skeptical viewers in, solidly invested them in the plot and characters, and would absolutely not let them go.

The show wrapped up its final season last Sunday, and as expected, it went out with a bang. Now that it's over, it seems like a good time to reflect on what exactly made Breaking Bad successful.

There were certainly many elements to that success, but what got me (and I assume many, many others) hooked on the show was how accurately it captured the human condition. It gave viewers an intimate look into people's souls, the things that motivate them, and how they bring themselves to rationalize their bad behavior.

In real life, we're able to identify such elements in the people we know – the people we're quite familiar with. However, people who we don't know on a personal level are often much harder to read. We can't tell exactly what is going on in their heads because they're not as transparent.

One exception to that rule, however, are those in the political world.

In a culture filled with charlatans, demagogues, and professional phonies who are more likely to tell you the truth by accident than they are on purpose, one would think that it would be tough to get an accurate read on such people. After all, what we see of them is, in many cases, little more than a persona created with a specific intent.

I would dare say, however, that there are few clearer examples of the raw, honest condition of human behavior than there are in the realm of politics.

When I look at the personal journey of the Walter White character, as portrayed masterfully by Bryan Cranston in *Breaking Bad*, it's not all that hard to identify that of a politician's.

I personally believe that most people who run for public office do so with the best of intentions. They see a problem and they want to fix it because they wish for the people they care about to have a better life. Thus, they enter this dark, morally-compromised world with a specific, noble purpose to do exactly that.

Once they find themselves on the inside, however, they begin to quickly realize how naive they were to believe that they could achieve the admirable things they want to achieve without doing things that they find personally and morally objectionable. They begin to surrender their better judgement, compromise their integrity, and tell themselves that the ends justify the means because the ultimate goal is still a dignified one.

They begin to realize the amount of influence that comes with tapping into people's addictions and dependencies, and they play those human weaknesses to their favor. They find that there are rarely any consequences that come with being dishonest. And even when there's an attempt at accountability forced upon them, they figure out that they can successfully side-step it with more deception. And with loyal partners like the Saul Goodmans of the media-world watching their backs and running interference for them, the bad behavior continues and worsens.

As their power grows, and they continue to escape accountability, the Walter Whites become more brazen. They say

or do whatever is necessary to maintain that power and prestige, and they no longer find any qualms in using their destructive methods. They find that if their story is convincing and appealing enough to the credulous listeners around them, there's practically nothing they can't get away with. The problems that they originally entered that world to fix are no longer of their concern – completely forgotten and replaced with personal prominence and expanding influence, leaving behind them a trail of despair.


At least, that's the story of Walter White. Not all politicians take this journey.

Some are like *Breaking Bad's* Hank Schrader, a man of integrity who views his role in the world not through a prism of moral relativism, but through the colors of black and white – right and wrong. *By the way, if actor Dean Norris doesn't win an Emmy next year for his work this season, there truly is no justice in the world.*

Those like Schrader find great pride and nobility in protecting the public they work for. Their disdain for the world that Walter White lives in fuels them to work harder to fight the corruption, change the culture, and do the right things for the people they represent.

The problem is that there are far more Walter Whites than there are Hank Schraders in our political culture, and because of that, it's often the Hank Schraders that end up suffering the consequences for the events put in motion by the Walter Whites. They're the ones you'll typically find on the receiving end of a hail of gunfire for sticking up for their principles, not backing down, and refusing to live in Walter White's world.

The Hank Schraders are blunt and unrefined. The Walter Whites are shrewd, calculating, and know how to game the system to their advantage. They're willing to do whatever it takes,

regardless of how disgusting the act, to achieve their goals. The Hank Schraders, on the other hand, are bound by their own ethical codes and sense of duty, and living by those ethical codes makes it tougher to combat the actions and influence of the Walter Whites. 

Now you can probably guess which groups I'm comparing to Walter White and Hank Schrader, but let me assure you that the comparisons don't flow purely along political party lines. Breaking Bad was about the choices made by individuals, and the same ultimately goes for politics.

It was interesting to see a few weeks ago that Walter White handily beat Hank Schrader in viewer polls of who fans wanted to see come out on top at the end of the series, after the two characters' inevitable, final confrontation. I guess it just goes to show you that when you *break bad*, you often come out on top.