

# Red-Hot Cold Warriors

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## ABSTRACT

The U.S. is led by seventysomething Ronald Reagan, who showed up to the 1983 G7 economic summit without reading the briefing materials and explained, "The Sound of Music was on last night." For these Americans, parenthood is exactly like the nuclear-arms race - there's no master plan behind it, no way to go back and rethink the original strategy, not even a way to process all the fear.

## FULL TEXT

Red-Hot Cold Warriors

Sex, spies and nukes make 'The Americans' TV's most paranoid thriller By Rob Sheffield

"I LIKE NEW WAVE MUSIC," one Soviet agent tells another on *The Americans*. "I'd like to meet Blondie. She's my type." Yeah, right, comrade - she's just your type. It's a funny moment, but it also sums up everything that makes *The Americans* so poignant and harrowing. You can really picture this Russian agent in the 1980s, at the height of the Cold War, grooving to his Walkman and dreaming of dating Debbie Harry. The FX espionage thriller is full of spies - some serving Mother Russia, some serving the USA, some playing both sides. Yet no matter which side they're on, they can't help falling in love with their fantasy of America. Under the hard-boiled surface, they've got a heart of glass.

After a brilliant debut season, *The Americans* brings all that Cold War dread back. Keri Russell and Matthew Rhys play a pair of KGB agents posing as a suburban married couple in Washington, D.C., circa 1982. They live amid the conformity of the subdivisions, the kind Rush sang about at the time. Even their kids think they're a regular American family from Chocolate City's vanilla suburbs. Nobody suspects Philip and Elizabeth Jennings lead a secret life of sex, murder and betrayal. But everybody can tell the country is getting crazier. The Big One could drop at any moment. No wonder people look a little paranoid.

*The Americans* depicts one of the grimmest moments in U.S. history: The two superpowers plan their foreign policy around the assumption they'll be blowing up the planet soon. Every day is a nuclear standoff that makes the Cuban Missile Crisis look like a polite tiff. The Soviets are led by seventysomething Leonid Brezhnev, currently boozing his way to his next (and fatal) stroke. The U.S. is led by seventysomething Ronald Reagan, who showed up to the 1983 G7 economic summit without reading the briefing materials and explained, "The Sound of Music was on last night." Those are the two gents entrusted with the nuclear launch codes. So long, farewell, auf Wiedersehen.

Russell and Rhys are the heart of *The Americans* - for them, these geopolitical nightmares get tangled up in their domestic ones. They're like the Griswolds with a body count. The rest of the cast is top-tobottom great - Noah

Emmerich is the ruthless FBI agent next door, and Annet Mahendru returns as the foxy double agent Nina, the most sympathetic spy here because she knows she's getting screwed by both sides. As usual, *The Americans* gets the Eighties details right, from Alpha-Bits cereal to Bo Derek's Playboy cover to the terrible wigs. (Do they give out an Emmy for Best Supporting Performance by a Down Vest?)

"Things go wrong - they usually do," Russell tells a rookie spy. "It's part of the job." Whether these operatives are setting up a sex trap or at home with the family, they bristle with check-the-windows-again tension, the kind you see in the coke-binge scenes of any Eighties-themed movie. It's almost like cocaine and nuclear paranoia are the same drug, wreaking havoc on the nation's brainpans. The unspoken theme is No wonder we're all so nuts.

And yet for all the violence, Mr. and Mrs. Jennings still seem like your everyday American parents. As Soviet agents bringing up American kids, they don't understand (or trust) this new generation they're raising. But what parents don't feel that way? For these *Americans*, parenthood is exactly like the nuclear-arms race - there's no master plan behind it, no way to go back and rethink the original strategy, not even a way to process all the fear. Just a daily struggle to put off the day when it all could go kerblooey.

## Sidebar

The Americans

Wednesdays, 10 p.m., FX

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