

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, I'm Eric Molinsky.

Friends who listen to this podcast have asked me — where the magic? Literally, why aren't you into magic and sorcery?

The thing is, my favorite fantasy worlds involve some element of science fiction, technology, superpowers. But a pre-industrial world of knights and castles? Eh. I know there are monsters and stuff but -- eh.

Then this show came along.

SONG

Just to warn you, I'm going all the way up to the present with Game of Thrones in this episode, so if you're waiting to binge watch them some day – many spoilers ahead!

SONG

My problem with a lot of these faux-medieval worlds is that they're so earnest. Take Sean Bean. In Lord of The Rings, his character Boromir dies because he's morally compromised in a world of good and evil. But in Game of Thrones, his character Ned Stark dies because he's too moralistic in a world that's all shades of grey.

DAN: I wasn't sold on it until they killed Ned.

Dan Drezner teaches International Relations at the Fletcher School of Diplomacy.

DAN: It was when they killed Ned they made it clear people can die in this show, there are consequences if you act in a certain way, or if you don't take this seriously. If he gets saved somehow, it indicates that there are no consequences for acting stupid.

And that is the unofficial motto of the Obama foreign policy – don't do stupid stuff, although some of Obama's critics have compared him to Ned Stark. Really.

I find this really fascinating. There are huge numbers of International Relations experts that have written about Game of Thrones and the books they're based on, A Song of Ice and Fire by George R.R. Martin. And they're not just on websites like Salon or The Daily Beast. These articles appear in Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy dot com or Washington Monthly. Headlines read, "Winter is Coming: Can Game of Thrones Change Climate Politics," or "Why Game of Thrones is the TV show of our time; how narrative unpredictability reflects economic insecurity." Even Benjamin Netanyahu mentioned the show during his speech to Congress.

Dan Drezner uses it in his classroom lectures.

DAN: Part of the problem is that you take a look at fictional treatment of politics particularly now on one hand live in golden age, House of Cards, Scandal, a bevy of other shows, Madame Secretary and State of Affairs but the truth is most shows hew to one of three stereotypes. Stereotype 1 is the West Wing people are in politics to do nothing but good and anyone who opposes must be malevolent, greedy or selfish, black and white pat kind of thing and it has its appeals but that's not how politics works. The second stereotype is The House of Cards stereotype where everyone is venal, corrupt and power hungry but in House of Cards only Frank Underwood has any strategic sense whatsoever. That's also not how politics works, even at the international level.

The fantasy worlds that I grew up on were heavily influenced by The Cold War. Tron, Flash Gordon, Star Wars even Conan The Barbarian have heroes that go behind a Galactic or Magical Iron Curtain, overthrew the dictator and bring freedom to the land. End of story.

Game of Thrones reflects the instability of the post-Cold War world, where the center of power keeps tilting. While the big powers try to gain an upper hand, they're fighting off insurgencies. No one is sure who their friends are, or which enemy is a bigger threat. So they make their circles of trusted people really tight but that doesn't make them feel any more secure.

DAN: In some ways most important thing and theme the show has visited again over and over again in various iterations is what is the nature of power? What is the source of power?

And policy wonks like Dan Drezner believe that a show like Game of Thrones can help us, and our leaders, figure out the answers to these

questions. NOT show like House of Cards or Scandal – those are just soap operas. He says Game of Thrones is much true to life.

He like to use this scene as an example. Varys, the court advisor, is talking with Tyrion Lannister -- a dwarf who has to be clever to survive his backstabbing royal family.

CLIP: POWER IS A TRICK, IT'S A SHADOW ON THE WALL

DAN: And if you can actually change men's minds, that's the most power, and that's a subtle disquisition on the nature of different dimensions of power in world politics, that it's not just about brute force, it's about getting people to want the same things that you want.

That's a great definition of leadership – getting people to want what you want. Who does it best? Dan Drezner places his bets on Daenerys Targareon.

She is the survivor of an exiled royal family. She inherits three dragons, which allows her to build an army and take over land quickly, where she frees slaves, punishes slaveholders and allows people to air their grievances in court. This isn't about being nice – she wants her subjects to enjoy being ruled by her. Her eventual goal is take The Iron Throne, which rules the seven kingdoms.

DAN: Dany is the ultimate neo conservative and she will use force to eliminate what she sees as human rights abuses anywhere.

Why neo conservative, to me she seems fairly liberal even though she has so much weaponry?

DAN: First of all dare but grace of God liberal becomes neo con, the different between the two isn't that great. Liberals and neo conservatives both believe in human rights and democratic institutions where liberals are more enthusiastic about international cooperation and only using force through multi-lateral channels. Neo conservatives are extremely distrustful of multi-lateral institutions because they seem them as the weapons of the weak and the authoritarian and so as a result prefer unilateral use of force. And the thing is Dany is a big fan of unilateral use of force, she's perfectly willing to use dragons to double cross slave holders and so forth because she thinks that the right thing to do.

Timothy Westmyer is also solidly on team Dany. He's an analyst at a think tank in Washington called The Rising Powers Initiative. His specialty is nuclear strategy. And he was fascinated to hear George R. R. Martin say that dragons in his books are metaphors for nuclear weapons.

So Tim wrote an article called "Deterrence with Dragons" for The Bulletin of The Atomic Scientists.

TIM: Deterrence with dragons was an interesting idea because Daenerys was the only one who had them in the show, so what does she use with them? How does she get the objective that she wants? She uses them in short bursts, and so she deters people psychologically from wanting to deal with her because they don't know full extent of what dragons can do.

And dragons can bypass all that land an army would have to slog through and they can strike from the sky like a missile.

TIM: And so yeah economically nuclear weapons, dragons, great weapons to have.

But if conquering is easy for Daenerys, ruling is tedious and complicated.

At one point, she realizes that one of her dragons has escaped. A farmer drops the bones of his daughter – burnt to a crisp – at Daenerys' feet.

CLIP: WHAT WAS HER NAME? HOW OLD? THREE. THREE?

TIM: I mean the worst thing you can have is another side or a rival who thinks your weapons don't work because then no longer deter, you need to be able to show that you have the willingness to use them but also the capacity and I think that's interesting in Game of Thrones is Daenerys once she loses one of her dragons, it flies away and she locks the other two up, it's clear that she doesn't have control over them that's when people found the time to strike.

CLIP: CHAINING UP DRAGON

Tim says the real stabilizing force isn't dragons or any weapons – it's the Iron Bank. And money is the only thing that ties our post-Cold War politics together. We still can't trust our former foes, Russia and China, but at least they now want the same things we want – that Lannister gold.

TIM: I conclude that Martin has anti-war theme, even though he's known for these big battles, they get to nitty-gritty the consequences for small folk is something that didn't come up in Lord of the Rings when these battles are happening that there are people on both sides, that's why not optimistic even though the dragons are popular, I love them too, but I'm not convinced it's going to end in happy place, I think Daenerys will have consequences and for her and for the people around her.

Really, why?

TIM: There's lot of examples in stories people who become too obsessed with dragons. There was the idea once dragons disappeared from the world everyone wanted them back, there was the idea that once dragons disappeared everyone wanted them back, there was guy drank wildfire to become dragon himself, so interesting in our world these ideas of dragons and the type of destruction that they can unleash can come out in our literature and in our nomenclature, a lot of people that were weapon designers talked about experiments that you would do, one in particular that Louis Sculton did I think it was in 1946, he did an experiment to test the exact critical mass that you to cause a nuclear explosion and the experiment which ultimately killed him due to radiation leak, it's called Tickling the Dragon's Tail. These concepts are very strong in our literature. I think Martin's picking up on that, his idea of what it means to be a ruling power, and what it means to be a leader, I don't think nuclear weapons fit into that world, either Daenerys recognize that or her dragons will have consequences for her in the end.

< MUSIC BREAK >

But what about the most dangerous players in this world? How we protect ourselves from them?

I got into a debate once with a friend about who is more dangerous, Joffrey or Littlefinger. He thought it was Littlefinger, a former court adviser who has been manipulating major events in secret. I thought it was Joffrey, the sadistic boy-king. Dan Drezner says I'm wrong.

DAN; Littlefinger is the more dangerous character, there's a difference between evil and dangerous. Joffrey is evil but no guile and strategic thought whatsoever. Littlefinger clearly has no norms willing to double cross anyone and is increasing his power, so that said, and that's the sort of thing is an unanswered question with Littlefinger, assuming he gets power, how does he rule at that point? Does he rule in a sustainable way or does he cater to his every whim?

That's why I find him less dangerous, Joffrey so unstable and he's almost so destructive he's the kind of guy like Kim Jung Un is angry and launch a nuke, Littlefinger so concerned with self preservation, he'd do the right things for wrong reasons, Machiavellian sense that if I play my hand too hard, I'm going to loose, I'm going to fall. How do I be a good dictator to some extent, and it would probably be more humane for average peasant you'll be living better under King Littlefinger than King Joffrey.

DAN: Yeah at least with Littlefinger the horses ran on time.

Laughs!

DAN: That would be argument there.

Yeah, I basically just made the same argument as Mussolini's supporters. Thanks, Game of Thrones. For the record I do not want to live in a fascist dictatorship. Tim Westmyer agrees that Littlefinger is more dangerous, but Joffrey does scare him.

TIM: He's a little like Kim Jong Un who is 30, he's may age. I wouldn't be responsible for an entire nuclear arsenal.

Wow, you're only 30?

TIM: Yeah, just 30.

Wow, I'm 43, saw The Day After in 5th grade, in our elementary school, they would take a day off so teachers could in a psychologically sensitive way talk to us about nuclear so in the news and we were all scared of, I lived and breathed and we were all afraid that would be it. But you didn't grow up with any of that?

TIM: Well one of the reason why I wanted to write an article like this is because I think for my generation the ideas that we get from nuclear weapons and nuclear war don't come from reality, they don't come from that experience being under umbrella of nuclear war, that we feel like it's a lot peaceful, and you see a lot of these young men who are in the military who are in the Air Force and they're in silos they think there is no threat out there and that their job is not valued. The people push button so you get these scandals, when the people cheat on tests, they will leave doors open on silos, they'll go to sleep when they're their post there is degradation of credibility of our deterrent when that

happens. I don't think my dragon article does that but real challenges to these things. In movies you have the bomb, you win, you're in control, hopefully terrorists don't steal it, hopefully Greyjoy doesn't come by with a magic horn to steal your dragon, like those debates are real, the idea of securing your arsenal, protecting people from stealing it, making sure that it's survivable so if you get attacked, you can respond, those are all these interesting ideas that are real and it's not jokey plot of a James Bond movie.

Our foreign policy today still comes down to one basic thing – don't get nuked.

And that's my skin in the game. I became a news junkie in the sixth grade. 1983 was a scary time for a kid to watch the news. I developed my first symptoms of OCD then. I had this magical thinking where if I expected the Soviet Union to attack at any moment -- if I expected an emergency broadcast signal every time I turned on the TV or the radio – it wouldn't happen because I was expecting it. Yeah, so I was a pretty neurotic kid.

Even as an adult, I keep producing news pieces about men who worked in missile silos or Strategic Air Command in the '80s because I like taking to the people who were making decisions then – the people who steered us out of danger.

Now we're the grown ups in charge. And we're trying to figure out – any way we can – how not to fuck it up.

<HIP HOP GOT>

That's it for this week's show, thanks for listening. You can like Imaginary Worlds on Facebook or leave a comment in iTunes. I tweet at emolinsky. The show's website is imaginaryworldspodcast.org.