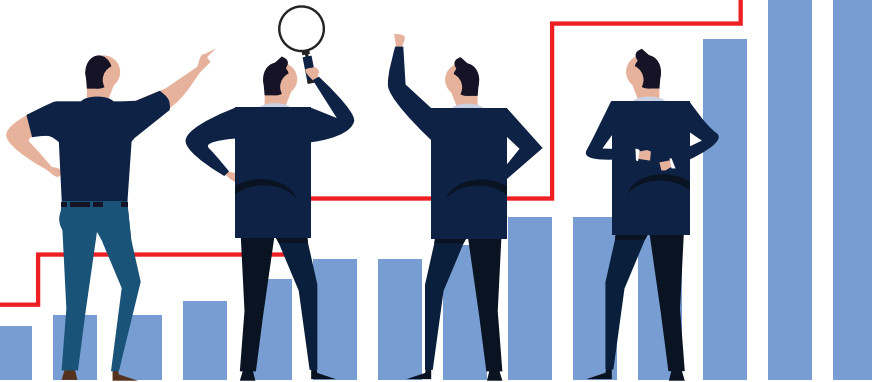




Spoiler alert!

DEBT CEILING



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The last episode of *Succession* dropped a few weeks ago (don't worry, I won't spoil it for you). A few minutes before the very end, leading lady

Shiv Roy shouts at her brother that she really loves him, but she cannot stomach him. This remark rather sums up the mixed feelings I have about the whole genre of television series.

Make no mistake, I really did love every single episode of *Succession*. But I have often got about halfway through some random Scandi noir series, thinking: I've already watched 10 hours of this; how much longer do I have to sit through? How many more red herrings do they need to introduce, such as that shady-looking plumber with a conviction for shoplifting two decades ago, who happened to fix a toilet near the scene of the crime a few days before, but of course the poor dude is totally innocent? Just go ahead and reveal that it was the little girl's frail old grandma who pulled the trigger!

If there's one box set that I found more difficult to stomach than most this year, it was *American Debt Ceiling*, Series 91, which eventually came to a head in the same week that *Succession* did at the end of May. Ninety-one, I hear you ask, with no pun or slight intended

at my friends who used to be part of the Investec stable. Yes, even before the latest instalment, the US debt ceiling had previously been lifted 90 times in the past century, as highlighted in a recent column by Martin Wolf, chief economics commentator at the *Financial Times*.

We see this practically every year: politicians and commentators in the US get worked up about the fact that an ever-increasing public debt pile is approaching some arbitrary limit as negotiated and agreed a few months before. Inevitably the whole farce goes down to the wire, as senior members of the two biggest parties make threats and play silly games. Depending on the balance of power between the House and the Senate, even analysts, strategists and journalists in other parts of the world get all excited.

Spoiler alert: it always ends the same way, with agreement being reached in the nick of time. Peace breaks out in Washington (until next time); cue high-fives all round. Yet every party to the deal will complain that they didn't really get what they wanted – which means that the compromise struck was probably a good one. The *New Yorker* recently summed it up with a brilliant piece where you probably only needed to read the head-

line: "The Irrational Exuberance of a Non-Catastrophe".

There was one episode of the latest debt ceiling saga which I did find rather amusing, namely when former Federal Reserve chair Janet Yellen said with a straight face that the Treasury's ability to use "special accounting manoeuvres to stay within the debt limit" would soon be exhausted.

Creative accounting to hide liabilities may be par for the course when it comes to global furniture retailers with headquarters in Stellenbosch, but it's not something you'd expect from the US government.

A soap opera

The crux of the issue is that there is zero chance that the US will ever default on its national debt. The country has the most resilient economy and the largest tax base in the world, and it literally owns the printing press of the undisputed global reserve currency.

If you think this oversimplifies the issue, perhaps take comfort from the 14th amendment to the US Constitution, where you'll find the following truism: "The validity of the public debt of the United States, authorised by law, including debts incurred for payment of pensions and bounties for services in suppressing insurrection or rebellion, shall not be questioned."

For all the political posturing, the president therefore only needs to invoke this clause and make sure the national debt gets rolled over if push ever comes to shove. All the rest is just a soap opera.

There will never be another season of *Succession* to enjoy. The makers have decided that four seasons are enough, and they chose to quit at the top before running the risk of overstaying their welcome on our screens.

Sadly, in about 18 months' time, we will no doubt have to deal with yet another series of *American Debt Ceiling*. Wake me up when it's all over; I'd rather watch some Scandi noir. ✘

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