

The West Wing Weekly
0.07: Parks and Recreation Special
Guests: Rob Lowe, Adam Scott, and Michael Schur

HRISHI: You're listening to a special episode of The West Wing Weekly. Today, we're talking about all the ways in which *The West Wing* helped influence another show about idealistic people in government: *Parks and Recreation*.

JOSH: *Parks and Rec* aired on NBC from 2009 to 2015, was nominated for loads of Emmys and a couple of Golden Globes, including a win for its star Amy Poehler in the role of Leslie Knope who, frankly, would have done very well in the Bartlet administration.

HRISHI: If you haven't seen *Parks and Rec*: one, get on it because you're missing out, and two if you want a quick crash course before you keep listening to this episode, press pause here and then we recommend you watch, at a bare minimum, the last two episodes of Season 2, plus the "Live Ammo" episode which is Season 4, Episode 19.

JOSH: This is an amazing show and if you can't be bothered to watch all of it, well God, Jed, I don't even wanna know you.

HRISHI: There are two parts to our conversation today. We spoke with the co-creator of the show, Michael Schur, who is also responsible for creating or co-creating a bunch of great TV shows: the American version of *The Office* and then *Parks and Rec*, followed by *Brooklyn 99*, and then most recently, *The Good Place*. Some of the best TV around.

JOSH: We also have the charming and dashing Mr. Adam Scott who played Ben Wyatt in the show and also was a *West Wing* super fan. Separately, Hrishu spoke to Rob Lowe (dreamy) about joining the cast and playing the iconic character of Chris Traeger, of whom we have *literally* spoken in the past in relation to Sam Seaborn.

HRISHI: That's all coming up right now.

[Intro music- *Parks and Rec* Remix]

HRISHI: Thank you guys for joining us.

ADAM: Sure.

MICHAEL [MIKE] SCHUR: This is Michael Schur. I was the co-creator of *Parks and Recreation* and a big *West Wing* fan, which I think is more why I'm here.

ADAM SCOTT: This is Adam Scott. I played Ben Wyatt on *Parks and Recreation*. Also a big *West Wing* fan.

MIKE: Oh, that's where I know you from.

ADAM: Yeah. We have met many times.

MIKE: Yeah, I knew you looked familiar.

ADAM: Ok, alright.

HRISHI: Thank you both for being here. Mike, I was wondering if you could tell us how *Parks and Rec* got started because it feels like *The West Wing* was kind of part of the DNA of the show.

MIKE: It was very much. So I worked on *The Office*, the 'American' Office with Greg Daniels for the first four seasons and then he asked me if I wanted to develop a show with him, and I'm not an idiot, so I said yes. So, we started kicking around ideas and the one that was very sticky very early in the process was to basically say "Ok, *The Office* was about a fictionalized private sector and so what if we do fictionalized public sector?" And at the time, my first child had been born fairly recently and I was binging *The West Wing*, which I had never seen before. I totally missed it when it was on. So this is like 2007, 2008, and my wife and I started watching it because we were up all night with the kid and just fell in love with it. And the way Greg and I actually ended up pitching the show was a comedy version of *The West Wing*, and the thing that we said in the pitch was if the stakes of *The West Wing* are Russia and China are facing off in Kazakhstan, the stakes of this show will be the boy's soccer team and the girl's soccer team both booked the same soccer field and this is about the people who have to deal with those kinds of problems. And that's the way we pitched it, as comedy *West Wing*. From the very beginning, that was the idea. If we take the drama of *The West Wing* and turn it into the comedy of a small semi-incompetent town, that'll be where our show lives. So, that was the actual pitch.

JOSH: You created characters who would treat those stakes...

MIKE: ... exactly as importantly as President Bartlet did.

JOSH: [Cross talk] Exactly. Which I loved. That's the secret sauce.

MIKE: Yeah, the people who work in local government, there's two versions of them. There's the people who are doing it because there's nothing else to do or because they fell backwards into it or whatever and then there are the people who, like in government at any level, who are true believers who care very deeply about the town, the place that they're representing. So we were like we're going to show one of those people and a bunch of the other people who don't care that much, and then we're going to follow her path through life. And so from the very beginning, that was the pitch.

HRISHI: And how did that pitch go over? Because when *The West Wing* was first pitched, there was a lot of resistance about the idea of doing a show about politics at all.

MIKE: Sure. It was an easier sell for two reasons. Reason number one, Greg Daniels was the most powerful showrunner in America at that point because *The Office* had been this incredible success story and NBC basically said do whatever you want, so they had no choice [laughs]. They had to let him do what he wanted and put it on the air, so that was good. The second thing was, it's an easier sell, I think, to say this is not Republican-Democrat politics. In fact, most local governments don't even have party affiliations. Most city council people don't have party affiliations or at least don't have to declare them. We were able to say leave all the intensity and partisan bickering behind and just say this is just about the way that people need their government for basic things, for pothole filling and driver's licenses and soccer field bookings. So, by sidestepping some of the rancor of the national debate, we were able to sell the show as this will just be fun.

HRISHI: And the first season was just six episodes.

MIKE: Right.

HRISHI: How long did it feel like before you figured out what the show was?

MIKE: Right around the time we shot the finale [laughter]. I would say I was like, 'Yeah, ok, I get this now.' Yeah, so we only did six the first season, mostly because Amy Poehler had been pregnant and the show was supposed to debut at exactly the moment that was supposed to give birth. We were picked up for 13 episodes without a script or an idea or anything, but then Amy's schedule- her pregnancy schedule- didn't work out with our proposed shooting schedule, but we were like, 'Well, who cares? It's Amy Poehler. You don't not cast Amy Poehler because of some imaginary schedule you made up.' So we voluntarily gave up seven of our episodes and a spot debuting after the Super Bowl in order to get Amy. And as a result, our season was cut. We could only shoot six. It was very chaotic. The sixth episode of that first season was called "Rock Show" and it was the first time that we, at least in the writers' room or backstage of the show, it was the first time that we felt like we got it. Like, what the show should be, what the character's attitudes should be, that sort of thing. That was the first time. And that episode was about Leslie goes, has a meeting with a powerful guy from a neighboring town set up by her mom and she thinks it's going to be a high level strategy session and then what she finds out is that it's actually her mom was setting her up on a blind date with this 65 year old bald guy, and the way that Leslie Knope reacted to that situation, we were like 'Ok, this is right. This is correct.'

[Parks and Recreation Episode 1.06 excerpt]

LESLIE KNOPE: Hi mom. He thinks we're on a date. Did you tell him we were on a date?

MARLENE KNOPE: Honey, if I'd told you it was a date, you never would have gone. You're not getting any younger.

LESLIE: Well neither is he. And he's 62 years old.

MARLENE: Oh, just go back in there and finish the dinner. You don't have to have sex with him if you don't want to.

LESLIE: What, are you crazy?!

[end excerpt]

MIKE: Because what she wanted to be taken seriously as a professional and as a person who had an interest in government, and she wanted to get into the nitty gritty kinda wonky government stuff, and the rest of the world was seeing her as an eligible bachelorette. And so the way that she reacted to that and the way that we wrote Chris Pratt's character and just a bunch of stuff about the mechanics of the show just sorta clicked, and so that was the first time I felt at all even competent, I would say.

HRISHI: In the second season, I felt like *The West Wing* parts of the show really start to shine in terms of the optimism about what government can accomplish.

MIKE: Yeah. Yes. I would say that's right. You know what's interesting, maybe because *The West Wing* was so baked into the idea of the show we tried to do a bunch of *West Wing*-y things in the first couple years, and they all failed.

JOSH: How so?

MIKE: I wrote a cold open early in the second season, the idea of which was a classic *West Wing* cold open walk-and-talk. It was going to be Steadicam, which we had never done before. This show was very handheld and very loose and stuff, and I was like 'We're going to go Steadicam, handheld, walk-and-talk thing' and the point of it is going to be that Leslie Knope is walking through the hallways and instead of the important C.J. Cregg being handed memos and then writing something and handing them back and people coming in and talking and then leaving and whatever, it was just going to be annoying stupid things that she had to deal with in her life that were unimportant and that were annoying. So we wrote it and I think we actually, I could be wrong, I think we actually did it in the readthrough, and the problem is that walk-and-talk is terrible for comedy, because comedy is so much about rhythm and it's about shaving frames off of a reaction shot in the edit bay and whatever that when you had to do it as a one and people are moving while they're doing jokes, it was like 'Oh, this is never going to work' and we just junked it. And so, all the kind of stuff that I had at one point imagined being *West Wing*-y about the show, a lot of it kind of fell away. What was left was what you're talking about, was the optimism and the sense that like, it stinks and it's hard and you make mistakes and when you make mistakes people get hurt and all that sort of stuff, but when you do something good it's worth it. That the people who are dedicated to the idea that government can help people. When they have successes, it actually matters. They actually affect people's lives in a good way. That

was what was left. That sort of *West Wing* residue then permeated the show forever, I would say.

JOSH: Yeah, one of the most successful things about the show was that it's so incredibly funny and yet, the poignant and touching moments actually pay off. I re-watched in anticipation of talking to you guys just the moment where Leslie gets to vote for herself.

[Parks and Recreation Episode 4.22 excerpt]

BOBBY NEWPORT: Leslie, I can't figure this thing out. Can you help me?

LESLIE: Yeah. Just hang on a second, Bobby.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I thought his is as moving as any single moment in *The West Wing*. And then there's immediately jokes following and you're laughing again, but it lands emotionally.

MIKE: It's not an easy thing to do all the time, to carve out space in a comedy show to do that, and because it's not cool. If you were sincere in your writing or your acting, it's uncool. And being uncool is the number one fear of a lot of comedy writers. I don't want to locate too much of this on *The West Wing*, but no one did sincerity like *The West Wing* in TV at the time and I just always felt like, and so did Greg and so did everybody who worked on the show- and by the way, this came from *The Office* too. On *The Office*, Greg Daniels' whole thing was we're going to take ninety seconds or two minutes an episode and say there don't have to be jokes here. These are purporting to be real people. We're purporting to be documenting their real actions and emotions and stuff, and so the reality is there's going to be chunks of time where we just say these are just people talking to each other, and that's ok. *Parks and Rec* did that faithfully until the very end. Almost the entire finale is like that on some level.

JOSH: [cross talk] That's funny.

HRISHI: So, at the end of season two, you introduce Ben Wyatt and Chris Traeger. Adam, do you remember when you first heard about *Parks and Rec*? Were you watching the show before you got on the show?

ADAM: I was. Actually, the first time I heard about it was when they announced that Mike and Greg were gonna make a new show together, and I think at the time, correct me if I'm wrong, Mike, but I think at the time when it was first announced, it was announced as a sort of an *Office* spin-off?

MIKE: Mhmm. That was an unfortunate leak of an incorrect piece of information.

ADAM: Yeah. But whatever it was, I remember I was in a house. I was on location in a freezing part of Connecticut, and I was between seasons of *Tell Me You Love Me*-

MIKE: Right.

ADAM: -on HBO, and it was before they had cancelled it and we were going to go shoot another season, I think, but I remember seeing this announcement and emailing one of my reps and saying 'Hey, can we get me off of this show and can I get on this one?' like as a joke, because we had been waiting a year to start shooting the second season, and it was starting to feel like maybe it wasn't going to happen, which it didn't. So by the time they were auditioning people for what ended up being *Parks and Rec*, I was able to audition for it, and I went in and auditioned, I remember, with Rashida and Mike, and choked. I was too nervous and it just didn't happen and I was really bummed out, but then immediately afterwards my friends Rob Thomas, Dan Etheridge, and Jon Enbom, and Paul Rudd who had created *Party Down* asked me to go and do that, and so I was like 'Oh yeah, I'm free.' And so, I went and did that. And then, I think because of *Party Down*, Mike ended up asking me ... Is that right? Was *Party Down* part of the equation?

MIKE: I was a fan of yours before *Party Down*, and you like to talk about how you bombed in that audition, but you really didn't, and I remember talking to Howard Klein from 3 Arts about-- I remember being like 'This guy, we're bringing this guy back. We gotta bring this guy back.' And then we were making changes to the show at the end of season two.

ADAM: Yes. Yeah.

MIKE: You and I had a meeting in my office and I was like 'Listen, we don't know exactly what this is but we're adding a character who's going to be a love interest for Leslie. Do you want to do it? It wasn't like 'Let's have a coy Hollywood meeting where we pretend that I have a lot of options and you have a lot of options. It was just kind of like, 'Do you want to be on the show?'

ADAM: [cross talk] Yeah. Yeah.

ADAM: Yeah, I remember that and I was so flattered because I was a fan of the show. Once it started airing, I watched the show. And I think I said yes right there and then. So it was an uncoy, very honest Hollywood meeting.

MIKE: [cross talk] You did. Yeah.

MIKE: Yeah, which is the better kind of meeting.

JOSH: It happened in the room.

HRISHI: And when was the idea created that Ben would also have this partner-in-crime of Chris Traeger?

MIKE: Well, early on, the idea for Adam's character became this thing that I had been obsessed with for a while which was that story-- You read it once every couple years about an 18-year-old high school senior who becomes a mayor. Because every time that story happens, I think to myself the same thing, which is you never get a follow up where it's like 'Four years later, he's doing great!' You never hear about it again, because undoubtedly, there's no way that goes well. Either nothing happens. Either it's a town where the mayor is sort of an honorary position, or the 18-year-old moron runs the town into the ground. In fact, one of the original ideas for Leslie Knope was that she was that person. She had been the mayor and had dug herself a hole and was trying to climb back. We eventually abandoned that because we thought it was too limiting for the main character of a show to build around. But I was like, 'Oh wait, here's the guy. A guy who had that happen to him and then had spent the rest of his life trying to prove he was a responsible adult.' That's not only a perfect character for Adam, but a perfect love interest for Leslie Knope.

JOSH: Yeah.

MIKE: And what we loved about it is that Leslie was so wonky that she would have known this guy.

[Parks and Recreation Episode 2.23 excerpt]

LESLIE: Have you ever been part of a government body before?

BEN: Uh, I have. Yeah, a small town called Partridge, Minnesota.

LESLIE: Why does that sound familiar... You're Benji Wyatt?

BEN: I am. When I was 18, I ran for mayor of my small town, and won.

[end excerpt]

MIKE: And she starts to get a flash of recognition in her face, and we just liked the idea that she was such a nerd about politics that that story is in her filing system.

HRISHI: Immediately I thought, 'Around that time when she was that age, she probably was jealous.'

MIKE: Oh, of course she definitely was. She was like 'Why does that guy get to be mayor?'

ADAM: I remember you telling me about this backstory on the phone. I remember driving exactly where I was when you told me about this idea for backstory for Ben Wyatt, and when you hear a nice juicy chunk of backstory like that that you get to play, it made me so happy that this was the character. [laughter]

JOSH: And you do wear it from the downbeat. From the first intro to Ben, when you subsequently find out, you realize he's wearing his backstory.

MIKE: It's deeply ingrained. So we really liked that idea and we went to NBC and we were like 'This is the guy' and they were like 'Great.' Then, they called me like a week later and said 'Hey, on the DL, Rob Lowe is looking to--' he's either decided to leave or they... I can't remember exactly the situation. He was on that show *Brothers & Sisters*, and they're like 'He might be available and we think he would bring a lot of eyeballs to the show' 'cause the show wasn't a blockbuster in terms of its ratings. So, I was like 'He's not the right guy for that character at all. But also, he's Rob Lowe, and he's pretty captivating as a performer, and he would bring an interesting energy to the show.' So, I remember having this conversation with NBC where I said 'Do you think we could just shoot the moon here? Do you think we could get both of them?' And immediately, it sort of fell into place. They were partners. Rob's character was all sunshine and handsomeness and intensity and positivity, and he would come in and say 'You guys are great and I love you and we're going to do amazing things', and then he would leave and Adam would come in and just bring the hammer down.

[Parks and Recreation Episode 2.23 excerpt]

CHRIS: Simply, we are here to tinker with your budget. My partner Ben is going to stick around for a little bit, and I will see y'all later.

BEN: Ok, you need to understand that just to keep this town afloat, we probably have to cut the budget of every department by 40 or 50%, okay?

LESLIE: Well, but Chris said that you just had, y'know, tinker with things.

BEN: Yeah, he said that because that sounds a lot better than "We're going to gut it with a machete."

[end excerpt]

MIKE: And so I sort of laid out, almost extemporaneously, how it would work and they were like, 'Yeah, alright, sounds good.' And it became like a comedy team, and from the very beginning, it was a very successful comedy team. You always hear network horror stories, right? People love telling network horror stories of meddling and screwing things up, but in this case they were really great. Not only were trusting of us to say 'Yes, create this character for Adam Scott, great.' But then they were like 'Also, Rob Lowe is available and we'll pay for Rob Lowe to be on your show too.' That's a very rare thing, and it was smart. When networks are good, this is how they are good. They are proactively thinking about 'We like this show. What could we add to this show that would bring new viewers?' I'm forever grateful to them for that time because they were supportive of the organic creative idea, and then they had their own outside idea that was also good that helped the show.

HRISHI: So, let's switch gears here for a moment. I spoke to Rob Lowe to get his thoughts on *Parks and Recreation*. When *Parks and Rec* was first airing, Rob had been on another show, *Brothers & Sisters*. So, I was wondering if you remember how the conversation about *Parks and Rec* first entered your life? How did you first hear about this show and get approached about being on it?

ROB: So, around the fifth year of *Brothers & Sisters*, the network gets the bright idea that they don't want to do any more stories with anything political in them. No political storylines whatsoever, under any circumstances. I'm playing a guy running for president, so that's not a good day in my house.

HRISHI: Right.

ROB: So instantly I go from what I thought was a really compelling, interesting, fun character to a guy who stood around in kitchens wearing oven mitts making cheese blintzes with Sally Field. So, that was the end of the road on that. So, as that was winding down for me, my agents and managers were looking for what would be the next thing, and I'm a big *30 Rock* fan. Who isn't? I'm a huge Alec Baldwin fan, and somehow somebody had the notion that maybe I would join *30 Rock* in some capacity, preferably as Alec's nemesis or brother or something, and they took that to the network.

HRISHI: And, this is a different network. I mean *Brothers & Sisters* is an ABC show. *30 Rock* is back at NBC.

ROB: Yep, totally unrelated, because I'm going to be off of *Brothers & Sisters* and I'm a free agent again. And NBC was like 'uh, yeah, sure, oh sure, I guess... but I'll tell you what would be great, if you would ever think about coming on *Parks and Rec*.' And they were at a moment where they were, like *Brothers & Sisters*, extremely worried about getting picked up again.

HRISHI: Right. So it's not so much that they didn't like the idea of you being on *30 Rock*. It's just that they thought that your power could be better leveraged some place where it was needed more.

ROB: One hundred percent. So it was sort of a shotgun marriage to be honest. I liked *Parks and Rec*, but I didn't know much about it, and I don't know how Mike felt about me. I think he was a *West Wing* fan, but we didn't know each other. But I knew he was smart, and the show was good, and there was great people on it, and it was a comedy, which I was looking to do. So we met and had a great, great, great meeting and that's how I ended up on *Parks and Rec*.

HRISHI: Can I back up for one second? You said you were looking for a comedy to do next, but can you tell me about that decision and that feeling that you wanted to do comedy at that moment?

ROB: I kind of like to do whatever it is that I haven't been doing. If I've been doing a few seasons on a drama, I'm ready to cleanse the palate with comedy. And on the other side of it, when I finished *Parks and Rec*, which I did 4 seasons of, I was very ready to go back and do drama. It's just a thing of keeping it fresh and interesting and doing something different.

HRISHI: Yeah. So you had this first meeting. Was it with Michael Schur and Greg Daniels, that meeting?

ROB: The one I really, really, really remember is the one with Mike, and Amy came by, I remember she was very, very pregnant at the time, and we had not met. Amy and I had not met. And clearly, it was a meeting where she would come in and go 'Is this guy crazy? Could I work with him? What's the deal?' I can only imagine from their perspective, they have this family that loved each other and worked really well together, all the pieces fit, and now all of a sudden you're bringing in another big piece, I'm sure it was kind of stressful for them. But, the deal that we all made collectively was I would do six episodes, and then at the end of the sixth episode, we would reconvene and see if we all mutually thought it had been a good fit.

HRISHI: Right. Does Lorne Michaels play into any of these conversations at all? Like, you were saying about the meeting with Amy stopping by and kind of having a gut-check. You had both worked with Lorne Michaels. Was there any kind of connective tissue that he provided in any of this?

ROB: Well, other than the fact that Amy and I fantasized about secretly opening a Twitter account for Lorne Michaels and having daily Lorne Michaels quotes...[Hrishi laughs]

HRISHI: But there wasn't that same kind of Broadway Video Productions connection with *Parks and Rec* as there was with *30 Rock*?

ROB: No, no, no, absolutely not. Frankly, it had the feel of if Lorne is everyone's dad in that world, which he is, this was the children's first job away from dad.

HRISHI: Got it. So when you started talking to them, what was their pitch to you about the character you'd be playing?

ROB: They didn't have one.

HRISHI: Ok.

ROB: Which is really great. One of the great things about Mike is that he finds people he's interested in and then sort of writes to them, as opposed to 'I'm going to write this great character and you will play it.' He famously did that with Rashida. Rashida was the first person involved in *Parks and Rec*, and he kind of tailored elements that he felt she brought to the table. He *really* did it with Nick Offerman, I mean, Ron Swanson is an accumulation of Nick Offerman's most interesting character traits. [cross talk]] Which is one of the reasons our first two meetings

were so pivotal in coming up with Chris Traeger. He didn't know me from Adam, and it's really both interesting and mortifying that Chris Traeger is a direct result of what Mike Schur thinks of me. [both laugh]

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

HRISHI: That's great. So when did you finally learn what the character would be like, what Chris Traeger would entail?

ROB: When I read it.

HRISHI: Oh, really?

ROB: Yeah, when I read it. There is a Lorne connection, though, that I'd just forgotten. In the beginning, and this changed almost immediately, the notion was that Ben Wyatt, Adam Scott's character, and my character were this team, and that we would come into these departments and make them work correctly, and the way we worked was that Chris Traeger was this amazingly charming, feel-good guy that had the ability to deliver the bad news in a way that made you completely happy.

[Parks and Recreation Episode 4.20 excerpt]

CHRIS: This is the best possible job for me. I could *literally* make anything sound positive.

TOM: Your house just burned down, and you lost all your money in the stock market.

CHRIS: It's a chance to start over, fire is cleansing, and true wealth is measured by the amount of love in your life. If I had to have anybody tell me that I had cancer, I would want it to be me.

[end excerpt]

ROB: And then, Adam came in as the hatchet man. And then he said, 'It'll be like Lorne. Lorne has a way of telling you bad things or giving you criticism or making you want to do things you never thought about doing, and feeling good about it. So that was a little bit of it, and we dumped that almost immediately.

HRISHI: The good cop/bad cop dynamic?

ROB: Yeah, we totally dumped it. But, the first two episodes are very good cop/bad cop.

HRISHI: Right, because the first episodes that you appear on are actually the tail end of season two. You're in the last two episodes of season two. I remember when I was watching when it was first airing thinking that this is an enormous guest appearance for the end of a season.

ROB: Because of Amy's pregnancy, we did not film it as a season ending. When I came in, I did my six episodes uninterrupted.

HRISHI: Oh!

ROB: So, we did the end of season two and a large chunk of the next season together so we could take the time off so Amy could have the baby.

HRISHI: Wow, alright.

ROB: Which is why, really early in the end of season two, the network was talking to me very seriously about whether they were even bringing the show back. Because it was either they're not bringing it back, or they're bringing it back and we can do this big six episode guest arc that we have to pay off in a season that we don't that we're bringing it back or not.

HRISHI: Right. And at what point did you know that season three was going to happen and that you were going to be continuing on the show?

ROB: From my perspective, when they cast me.

HRISHI: And at what point did you feel like this was working?

ROB: For me, we were doing a scene where it was after work, it was very early on, it might have even been in the second episode, and we ended up at a bar, all of us in the show, and we didn't know that it was a big gay bar, and it was. And, Chris was really excited about how friendly everyone was at the bar and was really excitedly dancing with all his new friends, and had no idea what was going on. And I had so much fun. It was the first time we really discovered that Chris Traeger dancing was fun, and I just remember thinking 'I'm having the time of my life here'. So for me, it was very early. And I think for them, and you'll have to ask Mike. It's gotten back to me secondhand that in one of the early episodes which became one of the big ones for Chris called the "Flu Season", [cross talk] you know, where his body is the microchip.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Oh yeah.

[Parks and Recreation episode 3.02 excerpt]

ANN: Well, you definitely have the flu.

CHRIS: Oh my God. The microchip has been compromised.

CHRIS: Stop pooping.

[end excerpt]

ROB: So, 'stop pooping' was an ad lib.

HRISHI: Really? [laughs]

ROB: We would get to do these things on the show called fun runs, and the fun run would be once you've done the scene the way it's scripted, and even the way it's scripted, you always did it the way it was scripted verbatim, but you could always add a little bit to it, but then the fun run you could legitimately do anything you wanted, and I mean anything. Sometimes our fun runs would go on for two minutes, and most of it didn't make it into the show. But 'stop pooping' was on a fun run, and I remember Nick Offerman was at the monitor and he was like 'Ok, anybody who can be on national television looking at himself in the mirror and say stop pooping is welcome here'.

HRISHI: [laughs] That is one of my favorite moments from the show.

ROB: It was a good one. Oh, then there's one other thing that's coming back to me. I just ran into Morgan Sackett who produced all the episodes and was a big part of the show, and he said 'We knew you were a good fit when we had you legitimately as an extra in a crowd of two hundred and fifty people. Literally you were background, you had no dialogue, you were background, and Amy is making a speech and Amy is trying to say something that the audience isn't liking at all, so it's deadly silent.'

HRISHI: Yeah.

ROB: It's a big applause line and it falls flat, and way way way way way in the back, again not in the script, is Chris Traeger going "Yeah, yeah!" and they went 'He's not even really in the scene and he's acting. That's a team player.'

HRISHI: That's great. And that's the season finale, the Freddie Spaghetti episode.

ROB: Ok, so literally, it was my second episode.

HRISHI: Yeah. I want to go back to what you said about Michael Schur drawing from the characteristics of the people that he's working with, something we've talked about a lot as a tool that Aaron employs as well.

ROB: Yes.

HRISHI: So, you have these two characters, Chris Traeger and Sam Seaborn, both of whom have been deliberately imbued with some inherent qualities that you have and characteristics have been written in. In your perspective, how are these two guys similar, and how are they different?

ROB: They are both inherently optimistic. They are both inherently energetic. They both legitimately like people. They have sort of unfailingly sunny dispositions. And, both of them have sort of an idealized version of what's sort of wrong and what's right.

HRISHI: Is it fair to imagine that those are also qualities shared by you?

ROB: And, they're both nerds and bad dancers. So, let's start with nerds and bad dancing: yes and yes. Yeah, I mean it is one of those things that never really occurred to me until two really smart guys wrote these similar traits into two very different characters that maybe it's more about me. And like I said, sometimes it's mortifying and sometimes it's highly complementary.

HRISHI: Yeah, Josh has always said about his character on *Sports Night* and his character on *West Wing* that they are smarter, nicer versions of him.

ROB: Yeah, I like that. That makes perfect sense.

HRISHI: What do you think are the biggest differences between Chris Traeger and Sam Seaborn?

ROB: Well, one of the things we discovered and then we wrote to it a couple of times, is when Sam threw the guy up against the wall and says...

[West Wing Episode 1.11 excerpt]

SAM: If you come after Leo, I'm going to bust you like a pinata.

[end excerpt]

ROB: Coming from Sam who was so sunny, I always thought of Sam as a puppy. That was a really compelling turn for him, so he always had that edge underneath him, which was really really fun. It made the puppy, sweet, nerd stuff not just one dimensional. And what I realize about Chris Traeger is what's amazing about that character and multifaceted is that he doesn't have any facets. Like legitimately, I would think about things going, 'Well, maybe there's more of this and there's more of that', and the answer was no. It's energy, positivity, and sunshine. And the only real question is how much can you bring to bear.

HRISHI: Yeah. I do love that moment in *The West Wing* when Toby says...

[West Wing Episode 3.21 excerpt]

TOBY: Is there anyone you'd rather have as a blood enemy less than Sam?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: But you have to dig really deep to get to that kind of heat from him, and I thought maybe you just have to dig a lot further to get there with Chris, but you're saying you just keep digging and you're just going to keep getting more sunshine.

ROB: With Sam, you keep digging, you get closer to the darkness. With Chris you keep digging and you just keep getting closer to the sunshine.

HRISHI: [laughs] That's great. There's an episode of *Parks and Rec*, "Live Ammo," where Bradley Whitford guest stars, and I'd read that this is the episode where Mike really sort let his *West Wing* fandom loose.

ROB: Yes. The one thing I remember about that episode was- you'll have to ask Mike about this- he designed the show, coming from *The Office* to be very anti-lighting, and I remember at one point going 'Would it kill you to put a scrim above our heads when it's noon and the sun is directly above us? [cross talk] I mean, I know you don't want us to look great, but how about a little help?' [cross talk] and he was like "no," so that was sort of the running joke. So I believe on this episode, because he was letting his *West Wing* fandom go crazy, we actually lit it like a proper television show. And they put a beautiful shaft of light. In Pawnee, Indiana, on that week, the sun appeared in places it had never appeared before, [Hrishi laughs] and one of them was streaming directly with amber light through Chris Traeger's office. And I took one look at it and knew 'I know where to stand', and I did my best Sam Seaborn pose in the shaft of light, and we did that thing of somebody coming in and you cut and it's the silhouette back to camera in the shaft of light, which we would have done a hundred times on any *West Wing* episode and we got to do it just once for one moment in *Parks and Rec*.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah.

HRISHI: Which was the harder role to play for you, Chris Traeger or Sam Seaborn?

ROB: I think Sam for sure was more technically hard, and that's the beauty of working for Aaron is not only is it a great character and the writing is stupendous, but Chris, for me, was way more demanding. First of all, dude, I was doing push-ups and pull ups and running and jumping every scene. I mean, dude, I had to do a standing jump on top of my desk once. You could do Sam Seaborn in gear one, as opposed to gear five. You could do him in gear three. Chris was balls to the wall 24/7 on a day when maybe you have the flu or you haven't slept well or you're irritable or you're tired. With any other character you can imbue it with that, because that's what human beings are. Chris was not a human being in that way. [cross talk] So, it was always that one really intense, frankly exhausting, gear to play all the time.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

HRISHI: Yeah, your body had to be that finely tuned microchip.

ROB: It was a microchip. I've never been in better shape than I was when I played Chris.
[laughs]

HRISHI: If you don't mind, I wanted to ask you just another question about *A Few Good Men* and post-*West Wing* stuff.

ROB: Yeah.

HRISHI: I don't really know much about the details exactly about how everything went down for season 4 in *The West Wing*, but that was, I guess 2002, that all that stuff was happening.

ROB: Right.

HRISHI: You were in *A Few Good Men* with Aaron. That was 2005?

ROB: Right.

HRISHI: So, you patched things up relatively quickly, is that fair to say?

ROB: Lost in the mix is that really when you really just do the math, Aaron and I left the same season. You can make the argument that we kinda left for the same reasons, really. The show was so big. It was this gargantuan thing and everybody was fighting over the scraps and now everyone wanted to take huge ownership of this massive hit, and at the end of the day, I would have never wanted to be on *The West Wing* without Aaron. And in my book, *Stories I Only Tell My Friends*, there are two chapters devoted to my time on the show, and I think if you read those chapters, you know everything you need to know about the ins and outs and the whys, which at the end of the day aren't that important, but I realize a lot of people were interested, so that's why I wrote it. But, Aaron and I loved each other. It was love at first sight in the audition for Sam, so it's always been passionate love-hate. Josh says his character is a smarter version of himself. I frankly have always thought that Sam was an idealized version of Aaron. So the minute we could figure out a way to do something again, we did, but we always had a connection. And forgive me if I told you this story the last time we spoke, but when I had just left *West Wing* and we weren't really speaking, I came across the transcript of Steve Jobs' Stanford commencement and read it and thought 'Wow, this is amazing', and something made me think of Aaron and something made me send it to Aaron. And I'll never forget sending him the Jobs commencement and saying 'I know we haven't spoken in a while but I read this. It's so extraordinary and it made me think of you. I hope you've seen it.' and he wrote back to me 'Glad you like it. I ghost wrote it.'

HRISHI: Wow. No, you haven't told me that story. That's awesome.

ROB: Isn't that crazy?

HRISHI: That's great. This has been so fantastic. I can't thank you enough.

ROB: Oh good, thank you.

HRISHI: And just personally such an honor and a delight always for me to get to talk to you.

ROB: Oh, thank you. Thank you for sort of keeping *The West Wing* flame alive for everybody. People take just unbelievable unending pleasure in it, and the fact that you give Josh a job is so nice of you. [Hrishi laughs] It's really great. You know, Josh needs some help sometimes. We all know that about him.

HRISHI: [laughs] I do what I can.

HRISHI: Ok, we're gonna take a quick break and then when we come back, we'll have more with Mike Schur and Adam Scott.

JOSH: Did the ratings immediately see a Lowe-Scott bump? [laughter]

MIKE: They did. It's unclear how to attribute any kind of ratings bump, but I remember specifically an email after their first episode where they were like 'Look, the ratings went up!' You know, that's what's supposed to happen, and in this day and age, and that's eight years ago already, 2010...

ADAM: Yeah, 2010.

MIKE: It was already hard to track things like overnight ratings. People were already watching stuff on DVRs, but I do remember there was an actual ratings bump that happened.

ADAM: I would imagine that whatever the ratings were, it was bigger than most anything on network television now, I would imagine, right? Like, ratings have changed so much just in eight years.

MIKE: Yeah. I remember when we got like a 2.1 overnight rating and it was like 'uh-oh'.

ADAM: Right, that's a blockbuster.

MIKE: That's twice the rating of most network comedies now.

HRISHI: Adam, did you and Mike talk about *The West Wing* at all before you started the show? Did you feel the sort of *West Wing* qualities of *Parks and Rec* that were in there just when you were viewing it, before you were on the show?

ADAM: Well, I think that *The West Wing* was so ingrained in me already that I was just always looking for opportunities to... Like, the fact that I got to wear shirt and tie with the sleeves rolled

up, I just felt like I was Josh Lyman just inherently, and I was working with Sam Seaborn. It's just sort of everywhere for me anyway, just as a person.

MIKE: We should have put you in pleated slacks. Then, you really would have felt like Josh Lyman.

ADAM: Or giant suits? [laughter]

HRISHI: When did you start watching *The West Wing*?

ADAM: Well, I did watch it when it was on, but I watched it when I could, 'cause it was pre-DVR so I loved it but I wasn't always home at Wednesday at 9 or whenever it was on. But then, I do remember once TiVo started integrating itself into culture, it was on Bravo every afternoon or something, but I just remember just a cache of *West Wing* episodes I could burn through. That's when I started getting to piece together the entire arc and the entire story and that's when I just couldn't get enough of it. And then, I remember when that was happening it was in its last few seasons, and so I remember, especially the final season, the election storyline, making sure to watch that every week while at the same time catching up on the earlier episodes. So, I was kind of all *West Wing* all the time there for a while.

HRISHI: You had this *West Wing* influence from the beginning, but then you actually had Rob Lowe on the show...

MIKE: That's right.

HRISHI: I mean it really became explicit, and so for the combo of these characters, I think both Ben and Chris Traeger have *West Wing* qualities too, but the Sam stuff is obviously right there on Rob Lowe's face.

MIKE: Yeah, that's right.

HRISHI: So, did you feel like you were actively addressing that part, the Sam Seaborn aspect of it when you were creating Chris Traeger and Ben Wyatt?

MIKE: I remember having a couple conversations with writers in the room about the characters and I was like 'There's a bunch of things we could do that would sort of evoke the *West Wing* directly. Like for example, we could say that Chris Traeger went to Princeton or something.' For a while I think we actually talked about the idea that he had worked in the White House in some capacity at some point or had been an intern in the White House or something, but I kept being like 'what's the point, you know?' We're already aiming at the themes of *The West Wing* like we talked about, like the sort of general optimism of what government can do when it works well or what sort of optimistic people can achieve when they remain optimistic and don't get dragged down by cynicism or whatever. And so then it just started to seem cheap or something you know later when we sort of did a *West Wing* themed episode called "Live Ammo" in the fourth

season, there was a lot of discussion of should we-- and Bradley Whitford was a guest star right, so we were like "okay-..."

JOSH: [cross talk] Boooooo. [laughter]

MIKE: Do you do that every time his name is mentioned?

JOSH: I try to. Actually, the truth is, I don't try to, it just happens. I try not to. [laughter]

ADAM: It's involuntary?

JOSH: Yeah.

MIKE: Watching you guys troll each other on Twitter is the best. I recently left Twitter, but it was my favorite thing. Anyway, when we were doing that episode there was a lot of discussion amongst the sort of 'Team *West Wing*', the people on the writing staff that really cared about the show, about 'We obviously have to have Josh Lyman and Sam Seaborn run into each other.' And then it was like, 'you know we don't actually. We actually don't have to do that', and I have a very bad memory in my head somewhere of- I think after *Seinfeld* ended, Jason had a show, right? It was a sitcom- Jason Alexander- and it didn't go that well in my memory. I could be wrong. But like in the sixth episode, Michael Richards showed up and in the promo for the episode, it was like special guest star Michael Richards and there was a shot of them and Jason Alexander was looking at Michael Richards and he literally was like "Don't I know you from somewhere?" or like "You look familiar..." and the crowd went crazy and it had left such a sour taste in my soul that I was like if we have Bradley Whitford on the show and he crosses paths with Rob and you make any even tiny gesture at that, it's just going to be so creepy and sad. So it was like, no, the actual answer here is that they're never going to be in a scene together.

JOSH: Also because Rob Lowe looked exactly the same and Brad...[laughter] it just would have been sad to see Brad in the same frame. [laughter]

MIKE: Come on man, he's not here to defend himself.

JOSH: Right. [laughter]

ADAM: Exactly.

MIKE: So, anyways, this is all a very long-winded way of saying we decided not to do anything.

JOSH: To gild the lily?

MIKE: Yeah exactly. In terms of character backstories or anything, we felt like the show was evoking the themes of *The West Wing* in a certain way and that was probably enough.

ADAM: You know, that reminds me of just not the exact same thing, but a similar sort of cultural-something that shows reach for sometimes that bum me out, I always think of the time when John Cleese was hosting *SNL* and he and Michael Palin decided to redo the dead bird sketch...

MIKE: [cross talk] The dead parrot sketch? That was right before I got to *SNL*. Literally, I think a month before I got there.

ADAM: Oh, ok.

MIKE: And it was played to dead silence.

[*Saturday Night Live* Episode 22.10 excerpt]

SHOPKEEPER: I've got a slug.

MR. PRALINE: A slug?

SHOPKEEPER: Yeah, a slug.

MR. PRALINE: I see. And pray, does this slug talk?

SHOPKEEPER: Not really.

MR. PRALINE: Well it's scarcely a replacement is it?!

[end excerpt]

ADAM: It felt like the audience didn't understand what was happening. It was a live sketch to begin with so it was lightning in a bottle so to try and recreate it in front of a live audience is such a risky thing to do and watching that happen was a real bummer.

JOSH: This speaks to- even though I'm constantly stirring the pot because I have a lot of free time- I'm always throwing little breadcrumbs at creating a trail leading to a reboot of *The West Wing* but it'll never happen nor should it.

ADAM: I thought it was discussed recently. Didn't Aaron Sorkin say you guys were all together discussing it?

JOSH: We had dinner, a bunch of us, and I said let's take a selfie and I'm just going to write 'Talking reboot'. So there was no basis. There was no substance to it. I just wanted to get people.

ADAM: Oh, I see.

MIKE: That's a pretty big breadcrumb. That's a big fake planting there.

ADAM: [cross talk] That's a loaf.

JOSH: [cross talk] It was an entire challah, really.

HRISHI: We talked about "Live Ammo", that episode from season four with Brad and he gave us some thoughts about it. He said that he loved doing it and he said that it was the sweetest people and such a wonderful show. And he thinks that you should reboot *Parks and Rec* but with *The West Wing* cast.

JOSH: [cross talk] Oh there you go.

MIKE: [cross talk] I like that.

ADAM: [cross talk] Yeah, that's a good idea.

HRISHI: Let me read a little more of what Brad wrote to us. He said, "Love the show, love the people, and was thrilled to be on it. I was bummed Rob wasn't working that day 'cause I wanted to torture him. I remember getting really insecure because after every take a bunch of writers would get together with the director and then give you an alternative line or tell you how to say it differently, which I had never experienced doing *West Wing* where the words were locked and if you told us how to say something Richard might douse himself with gasoline and immolate himself [laughter]. So for half the day I just thought I was just terrible, which gave me an insight into how Malina must feel all the time."

JOSH: And you said he wasn't here.

ADAM: That's incredible.

MIKE: I take it back. Yeah, he is here.

HRISHI: "Then I realized, oh this is how they do comedies, and I calmed down and it was really fun."

MIKE: That's great. I embarrassingly have to say that it never occurred to me, because comedy is a lot about try this one, try this, try this, like on that show, and this came from *The Office* too, we had a document called the candy bag which was like if we wrote a joke and it didn't fit into the script or something we would throw it into the candy bag and then the writer would have the candy bag on the set and throw out 'Here's some alts' or whatever. I knew about the word-perfect Sorkin world. It never occurred to me that that might be tricky for an actor who is used to that world stepping into our world and being thrown a bunch of different options. I should have been a little more sensitive about that with him, but he was great.

ADAM: Yeah, he was great.

MIKE: Yeah, he was wonderful, and it happened very organically that we started breaking this story and I was like 'You know what this is? This is basically the story where Ainsley Hayes writes the memo and reverses the position in this two-page memo and it just is accepted and she's freaked out.

[The West Wing Episode 2.06 excerpt]

AINSLEY: I don't understand.

SAM: Leo said yes, that's the end of the meeting.

AINSLEY: I was just talking, Sam, I was just talking to you.

SAM: Well, we play with live ammo around here.

[end excerpt]

MIKE: That's how we started breaking the story, and then as we got more and more into the actual story, I was like 'This isn't just like that story, this is that story, and this is dicey now and I feel like we're just ripping off'- I didn't think anyone was going to accuse us of plagiarism or anything because the actual details of the story are very different, but the more we talked about it the more it was like 'this just is that story'. That's the whole point that in the story Leslie Knope goes to a city councilman, who ended up being played by Bradley Whitford, and says "Hey don't cut the Parks budget, cut this other thing." And he does and it has this ripple effect and she's like 'Oh no, what the hell' and she keeps trying to fix it and it keeps screwing things up and at the end of it he says...

[Parks and Recreation Episode 4.19 excerpt]

COUNCILMAN PILLNER: In fact, every decision you make is going to make a lot of people very unhappy. We play with live ammo around here.

[end excerpt]

MIKE: Ok, so what happened was as it got more and more intense, in terms of its connection to that original story, this is at the point now where I think I need to ask Aaron Sorkin permission, basically. And so, I didn't know him, and I still don't, but I knew Rashida Jones and Rashida Jones knows everyone, so I went to Rashida and was like "Hey, do you happen to know Aaron Sorkin?" and she was like "Yeah, here's his email address." Immediately, it was like 'Of course.' So I wrote him this note and I said "Hey, I don't know you but I'm a huge fan and we're big *West Wing* fans over here and we have this episode that is like that episode, and is it ok?" And he immediately wrote back this incredibly kind email that said he was a big fan of the show and he

ended it by saying “You asked me for my permission. I say hell yes.” And it was so meaningful to me I printed it out and it’s hanging on the wall in my office. And so, once we got that go ahead then it just became a full on *West Wing* bacchanalia. We went after Brad and got him to do it. We added a bunch of references to the show, his name is Councilman Pillner, and there’s a napkin that says ‘Pillner for Pawnee’ that is written in almost the same handwriting. [cross talk] A very good prop by our props department. There’s a bunch of things. Adam, at one point, says, it’s a tiny thing, but he says...

JOSH: [cross talk] Yeah, well done.

[Parks and Recreation Episode 4.19 excerpt]

BEN: There’s a reason we strategize before we make decisions.

LESLIE: Ok.

BEN: Ok, I’ll make some calls, see where we are.

[end excerpt]

MIKE: Which, in my head, is what everyone in *The West Wing* is always doing [laughter]. There’s also the end of the episode is the solution that Leslie comes up with- Paul Rudd was playing her opponent in the election and she goes to Kathryn Hahn who’s playing Paul Rudd’s campaign manager and basically says “Here’s how we’re going to get out of this mess.”

[Parks and Recreation Episode 4.19 excerpt]

LESLIE: You are going to announce that Bobby Newport will use his personal fortune to save the animal shelter.

JEN BARKLEY: No. No that’s, that’s um... That is a great idea. In fact, I don’t know why I hadn’t thought of it already. Dammit. Dammit! What’s to stop me from just paying for the shelter and still running the ads?

LESLIE: Because I told Councilman Pillner that if you don’t agree to our terms, he should cut the parks budget.

BEN: And, we’ll leak that it was Leslie’s decision making her seem tough and fair, what with sacrificing her old department.

JEN: Ok. What’s in it for you?

LESLIE: A safe home for the animals, a job for my friend, and a full parks budget.

JEN: I wasn't born yesterday. You've gotta have an angle. This is a home run for us! We're gonna dominate the news cycle for a whole week!

BEN: Well you can have this week. We'll take the next one.

JEN: Oh yeah? What makes you so sure?

LESLIE: Because in a week, we have a debate. And your guy, Bobby Newport, is gonna have to show up and he's going to have to open his mouth. And I'm gonna kick his ass.

[end excerpt]

MIKE: Which was itself a direct reference to "For the record: Boy, crime, I don't know.' is the moment I decided to kick your ass." We're ending it on that, and that's sort of what sent us into the debate episode at the end of the year. So once Aaron sort of signed off on the idea that this was an actual homage, then we were like 'how many references can we back in?'

HRISHI: That's great. So, all of season four is really centered around this election storyline and Ben really does kind of step into a Josh Lyman role as the campaign manager for Leslie. The sleeve rolling-up really did take on a new import. And you mention the debate episode. It may be less overtly than "Live Ammo". It also feels a lot like *The West Wing* reelection storyline and the debate. I'm going to play a couple more clips. Here's one from *The West Wing* with C.J. talking about Governor Ritchie:

[West Wing Episode 4.04 excerpt]

C.J.: Toby, I'm absolutely terrified we're going to lose the expectations game. I can't believe how many times I get asked "What would be a win in the debates?" At this point I feel like if and *only* if Ritchie accidentally lights his podium on fire does the President have a fighting chance.

TOBY: I disagree.

C.J.: Disagree all you want but I'm right.

TOBY: These two men are gonna be side by side on stage answering questions. That's the ball game.

C.J.: If the whole thing is he can't tie his shoelaces and it turns out he can, then *that* is the ball game.

TOBY: And I believe he'll have to do more than tie his shoelaces.

C.J.: Not much more.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And then you mentioned Kathryn Hahn's character is the campaign manager for Bobby Newport and then this is what she says:

[Parks and Recreation Episode 4.20 excerpt]

BEN: Your boy looks a little lost out there.

JEN: Oh, he'll be fine. Expectations are crazy low. If he puts two sentences together without crying, the press is going to say he's doing surprisingly well, and if he falls to pieces, he's going to look sympathetic. It's a win-win.

[end excerpt]

MIKE: She's so good, man.

ADAM: Yes.

HRISHI: Did you know how prescient you were going to be with that storyline about putting an incredibly qualified, smart woman in a debate next to a son of a businessman who's unqualified and wants to run the city like a business?

MIKE: No, although during the entire run up to the election when it became clear Trump was going to win the nomination, there were a lot of Bobby Newport comparisons that I saw on Twitter and stuff. And to me, that was more about Gore-Bush. We were looking backwards there. Because that was the thing at the time in 2000. It was like this incredibly wonky, slightly uptight guy who knew the material inside and out and had every possible qualification you would ever want in a president versus a guy who was like "Hey guys, what's up? You're wearing a hat, I'm going to call you hat guy" [laughter]. Like, that was all he did and there was at that time, I remember, a lot of discussion about like at the first debate, basically he didn't set his podium on fire. And I think that's probably what *The West Wing* was talking about too at the time, but he didn't set his podium on fire, great job. Everybody catered to the slight overachievement of the dingdong instead of saying who cares because the other guy is smarter and better, right? The parallels in the 2016 election are insane and completely coincidental, or mostly coincidental. I mean, obviously Leslie had a framed picture of Hillary Clinton on her wall. That comparison, we made a lot. But that's not the only time in American history that an election has come down to one person who is really smart and competent and capable and experienced, and another person who seems like they would be maybe more fun to hang out with at a bar or something.

JOSH: That was one of the genius things about Bobby Newport and having Paul Rudd play him is that he's utterly vapid, but he's sweet and he's very likeable. He congratulates Leslie at the end of the debate.

[Parks and Recreation Episode 4.20 excerpt]

LESLIE: This is my home. You are my family. And I promise you, I'm not going anywhere.

BOBBY: Holy [expletive deleted] Leslie, that was awesome.

[end excerpt]

MIKE: That's why Rudd was the dream get for us, because we really didn't want it to be if you make that character a total a-hole then it's too cynical, it's too awful of a situation. Like you wanted her opponent to be someone who's like not a bad person, just shouldn't be in politics, and Rudd is like a world-class dingdong when he plays a dingdong and he's Paul Rudd so you love him because he's Paul Rudd. So yeah, that was the dream. There was a period of time in season four when we had these stories going that were Amy Poehler, Adam Scott, Paul Rudd, and Kathryn Hahn and it was just like [cross talk] this is a murderer's row.

JOSH: [cross talk] Dream team.

MIKE: Like that debate episode that Amy wrote is to me one of the best ones that we ever did, and it's because it's those four people just kicking ass every line.

[Parks and Recreation Episode 4.20 excerpt]

FESTER TRIM: Grenade launcher.

BOBBY: Daniel Craig. No, Timothy Dalton.

LESLIE: I was in favor of closing the Borders *bookstore*, not the border to Mexico.

BOBBY: I guess my thoughts on abortion are: you know, let's just all have a good time.

[end excerpt]

ADAM: It was so fun. Like traveling, because we had that Winnebago which was her campaign thing and it was just so deeply fun, that run of episodes. I mean the whole thing was, but particularly fond memories of all that campaign stuff. But I will say that I would take Bobby Newport any day as president [cross talk] [laughter] over Donald Trump.

JOSH: [cross talk] Seconded.

HRISHI: I can't remember. Was John McCain's 'Straight Talk Express' already a thing when the Winnebago was written?

MIKE: Oh yeah. Well that was 2000. That was eight years earlier. One thing the show consciously tried to do is not tilt too far to one side. I mean obviously Leslie was an extreme progressive, Ron Swanson was an extreme libertarian, but we tried to have them see each other's points of view whenever they could, and part of doing that was- you know, I mentioned that Leslie had Hillary Clinton framed on her wall but she also had Condoleezza Rice and we tried to mix in Republican role models with Democratic role models. And the idea was in an ideal world this is not what defines your actions, your party affiliation. You choose country over party. Not happening so much these days, I would say, but that was the idea. And the McCain thing, we talked about a lot. That was, to me, a high-water mark of GOP politics in the last thirty years was this guy being on this bus saying 'come ask me anything. Ask me anything you want.' Rest in peace, John McCain. That kind of maneuver, that kind of transparency, and that kind of honesty and self-reflection is very rare for politicians of either party, frankly. But that was definitely the inspiration. The 'Straight Talk Express' was the straight inspiration for that story move.

JOSH: And Senator McCain made an appearance on the show.

MIKE: Two.

JOSH: -Interacts with Leslie. I know the moment when she doesn't even realize that he's trying to get his jacket out of the coat room or something.

MIKE: That was the beginning of season five when Ben was working in Washington. And then, he made a return appearance in the episode in season seven, I guess it was, when she was lobbying people in Congress, and he was a delight both times. He loved the show. He loved Amy. He had hosted *SNL* when Amy and I were both there, so we both knew him a little bit, and he stormed onto the set and I said, "Senator, how are you?" And he said, "Well it's another [expletive deleted] [expletive deleted] day of glory in the [expletive deleted] U.S. Senate." And, I was like, "Is everything alright?" And he said, "We're really [expletive deleted] covering ourselves in glory today, I'll tell you that much." And, it was so funny. And, by the way, there were two hundred people around and they all had microphones, and it was like he just didn't care. He always knew his lines and he did them really well, but after we did one take, he was like, "We got it, right? Ok, bye." And we were like, "Could we just do one more just for safety?" And he was like, "Alright." But his attitude was like, 'I nailed it, I don't care, if you guys want another one I'll give you another one'. But yeah, he was so funny and fun on the set.

ADAM: Yeah, he was cool. Meeting him on the set was a really big deal. He couldn't have been cooler.

HRISHI: We hear a lot from other *West Wing* cast members that they would talk politics all the time, you know, while the cameras weren't shooting. They would have the news sometimes on. During the 2000 election, they had the news in the background to get results and stuff. Was there a feeling among the cast that you were on a show about politics? Did you talk about politics as a group in that context?

ADAM: Yeah, well, I do remember during the 2012 election, we were right in the midst of making the show and I remember in particular, Brad Hall guested on a couple episodes and that was right before the first debate in 2012, right before the debate where Obama kind of blew it. And I remember all of us discussing it, because it was pretty neck and neck there.

JOSH: Yeah, that was a bad moment in time, I remember.

ADAM: So, I remember that, and I don't think it was a particularly political set, but during the election, there was certainly a lot of discussion. What do you think?

MIKE: Yeah, that's right. I mean, we consciously tried not to be too overtly nationally political. We didn't want the show to feel like the characters were reflecting the national tenor, because the national tenor's awful. And the point of the show was supposed to be like whatever's happening over there, being Washington and whatever the giant big picture macro stuff is, for a lot of people in America, your local government is more important. They affect your lives more specifically.

JOSH: That's an important lesson these days, actually. That's really relevant.

MIKE: It is. Yeah, so we tried not to have it infect the writer's room. Like, we would talk about politics like any other group of people but we tried not to let it seep into the show too much because it just felt like we were going to start, you know, being too obvious in terms of like 'this is a metaphor for this', and we didn't want to do that.

JOSH: Brad touched on some of the differences between shooting a scene for *The West Wing* as opposed to *Parks and Rec*, and I think Rob mentioned when he talked to Hrishi that once you've got what you needed in the can that you'd take a fun run at it, and I like that idea. That's completely antithetical to working on *The West Wing* and sounds great. So, can you tell us about that?

ADAM: It was really great and really fun, and right when I started, it was particularly striking and generous of the show to just sort of let everyone loose. And whatever you might get from those takes, and sometimes there was absolutely nothing [laughter]. Most of the time it was absolutely nothing, but just the feeling among the actors that it fosters that we're all making this together, and we're all a big part of this, and the generosity of Mike and all the writers and producers just letting everyone kind of jump in. It was nothing ever short of kind of joyful, getting to do that at the end of a scene. And as the show went on, I found that scenes would start scripted and then slowly get less and less scripted as the takes went on and just sort of deteriorate and then the fun run would happen and it would all come out. Is that kind of what you found? Like, it would start scripted and loosen up, loosen up, loosen up and then the fun run was just all bets are off.

MIKE: Yeah, that's exactly it. And we would often tell directors. We would say things like, "Look there's this moment where Aziz has a joke about some rapper" and what we would say is like

'He'll do this joke the first two times and then he's going to start changing it every time and it's fine. That's a modular interchangeable thing. We don't care what the specific reference is." And by the way, Aziz is like cooler than we are so if we've written a joke about like P. Diddy, he's going to change it to some rapper that's better and more appropriate and funnier.

[Parks and Recreation Episode 2.02 excerpt]

LESLIE: And Tom is our master horticulturist. He knows all the scientific names for everything. Right, Tom?

TOM: Yup.

LESLIE: Like this. What's this, Tom?

TOM: Those are, of course, tomatoes. Or 'Soulja Boy Tell'ems'. Whenever Leslie asks me for the Latin names of any of our plants, I just give her the names of rappers.

LESLIE: And those over there?

TOM: Um, those are some 'Diddies', those are some 'Bone Thugs-n-Harmonyums' right here.

LESLIE: Growing beautifully.

TOM: Those 'Ludacris'es' are coming in great.

[end excerpt]

MIKE: So, there was that version of it, but then the fun run thing was like after we're sure we had it. We would build in ten or fifteen minutes into the timing of our scenes to say like, just [expletive deleted] around, just do whatever you want, and 99% of the time, it was just for fun. The reason you would do this is because you have Amy Poehler, frankly, because Amy is the greatest point guard in the history of ensemble comedy who herself is a genius level comedian, but loves setting other people up and loves dishing the ball and loves it when like she would set Pratt up to do something insane and she would get as much joy out of whatever he did as anyone else would. And so, we created this situation where a lot of times when it did work is when she was running a scene, like a conference room scene, and they would be like "It's fun run time," and she would start asking people crazy questions or like completely changing the premise of the scene and then everyone just got to do whatever they wanted to do. It was pure fun, but also sometimes, something really magical would happen and you'd be like, 'Well, Christ, if we hadn't done this, if we hadn't built in this system where everybody got to do whatever they wanted, we never would have gotten this joke.' I mean, I've said this before, but there's twenty-five great jokes that ended up on the show only because we told actors do whatever you want at a certain moment and then they did and it was amazing.

JOSH: Oh, God that sounds like fun. It really does.

ADAM: It really was. It was great.

HRISHI: As a result, did you feel like you got to be part of the invention of Ben Wyatt more so than you would on another show?

ADAM: Absolutely. Yeah, I mean the framework was certainly there, but as time went on, I felt Mike and the writers sort of writing to me a bit, as well as all the other cast members, and I think that's part of the special thing about being on a series, especially one like *Parks* where everyone is sort of contributing and a part of it, is the writers are writing to you. And Mike is particularly adept at sort of picking up on people's individual idiosyncrasies and just things about them personally and their tastes. I think you guys ended up throwing a couple of R.E.M. jokes in there eventually.

MIKE: Well, "Stand" was the [cross talk] song for your claymation. Your 'claymaysh'.

ADAM: [cross talk] Yeah, that's right, that's right.

[Parks and Recreation Episode 4.11 excerpt]

Stand by R.E.M. plays

[end excerpt]

ADAM: Claymaysh. [laughter]

HRISHI: And were there things that you felt like you were bringing in as influences, things that shaped the way that you played that character?

ADAM: I mean, I will say that there is one Brad Whitford little thing that I did just sort of lift. I've never said this before, not that it's important or matters...

JOSH: It does here, Adam. It does here.

ADAM: But there is a thing that Brad does on *West Wing*, particularly that's a really effective, I won't call it a trick, but it's a thing that he does that can make a chunk of dialogue sound really real is starting a sentence- it makes the sentence sound like when he started it, he had no idea where it was going to end up- and it's when someone asks him a question and the first word, this is sounding a little too technical, but the first word of the response is- If someone says, "Why were you in the bathroom so long?" And his response could be "The... toilet wasn't working, so I had to jiggle it a few times." But the way he says 'the'-

JOSH: And then tries to remember the rest of the line? [laughter]

ADAM: Yes. That might be it.

JOSH: I think I can speak to that technique.

ADAM: That very well could be it, but it's something that is music to my ears, and so I think I probably lifted it and use it. Just because watching *The West Wing* kind of just feels right and so that's one of the things, kind of the music of it that I love, that I probably lifted and used in *Parks*.

HRISHI: I think that's brilliant. Because Ben is this wonky character, and *Parks* is all about the humanity of these characters, the lovability of them, and so it immediately makes him human. If you were to recite these facts or whatever, all his knowledge in a more assured way. That's really great.

MIKE: There were a lot of things we did with Ben that were intended to say 'this guy isn't just a nerd', which I think is like a meaningless word. It was like this is a specific kind of person and he is a person who loves R.E.M. and *Game of Thrones* and also is really into accounting. I remember saying, 'In his first episode he's going to drink a beer, because he's not like a 1980's *Revenge of the Nerds* nerd. He's like a human man that I recognize.' We also had you make a basketball reference, like a casual Michael Jordan reference because it was like the people that I know that are wonky about things aren't pencil neck geeks. It was a sort of mission statement to say he's going to wear indie rock t-shirts and he's going to know about basketball and drink beer, like most of the people I know, because that's the reality of this guy.

JOSH: The wonkiness is more of an admirable quality rather than a defining social problem.

MIKE: Yes, it's not the only thing about him. And, by the way, if he were only into accounting, he wouldn't be a good partner for Leslie Knope. She's not only into one thing. She's into a million things, and one of them is she's into people who are interesting and have rich lives, so he had to have that.

ADAM: Yeah, and that's another great thing about *The West Wing* as well was watching it makes you feel smarter and it makes you feel like you're one of those- It makes being smart- There's even bits of dialogue throughout the show of discovering Charlie- the amount of college credits he had by the time he finished high school.

HRISHI: Right.

[West Wing Episode 2.19 excerpt]

SAM: Charlie, just how smart are you?

CHARLIE: I've got some game.

[end excerpt]

ADAM: Being smart is something they measure each other by, smarts, and I just found that so refreshing and just terrific, to be less smart about my explanation why I like it.

JOSH: That was well put.

HRISHI: I want to turn back to the debate episode, specifically. At the end of the debate, Bobby Newport has pulled out this move where he says that if Leslie Knope wins, his father's going to move the Sweetums factory to Mexico and all these people will be out of work, and it seems like he's checkmated them in that moment. And maybe because of this conversation- knowing you were coming in, I was reading into this stuff, but even just this line:

[Parks and Recreation Episode 4.20 excerpt]

BEN: What. What's the matter with you?

LESLIE: I can do it. I can crush him. I promise.

BEN: Ah, screw it, go get him.

LESLIE: Really?

BEN: Kick his ass.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It felt like all the sort of ways *The West Wing* characters are revving up President Bartlet for his debate.

MIKE: Yeah, that's definitely in there. That moment though in the script, when Amy and I were talking about it, we just called it the Hoosiers moment, because the idea was like in the end of *Hoosiers*, they're running over their last second play and Gene Hackman lays out this complicated thing where Jimmy is gonna be a decoy and this other guy is going to take the shot and then he looks up and they're all just staring at him and Gene Hackman goes:

[*Hoosiers* excerpt]

COACH DALE: What's the matter with you guys? What's the matter with you?!

JIMMY: I'll make it.

[end excerpt]

MIKE: And so actually, if you rewind in that scene, there's a moment where Ben is like 'we're gonna do this and we're gonna play it safe and we're just gonna say this and we'll regroup or whatever', and then she's looking at him and he just goes, "What? What is it? What?" like he literally says the exact line, and then she goes, "I'm going to destroy him." There's a *West Wing* quality to it certainly, but there's also a sort of sports movie thing in it, which is like there's three seconds left, you're down by one, this is it, what do you do? Do you play it safe or do you ball out, man? That was Amy's idea was to say it's got a *Hoosiers* vibe to it. It's got an underdog, sometimes you just gotta take a shot, kinda thing.

HRISHI: I do think that some of our favorite stories from politics, and I think this gets injected into *The West Wing* a lot, are the ones where they do feel like sports stories. Where somebody comes up clutch.

MIKE: Sure, yeah. Well, Obama's whole story was that to me. Obama's whole story was underdog sports story thing of people kept saying like, "You'll be back, you're a rookie now."

ADAM: It's not your turn.

MIKE: It's not your turn, whatever. And he just kept being the best guy for the job. Like the Lloyd Bentsen moment, I always think of in a debate thing:

[1988 Vice-presidential debate excerpt]

BENTSEN: Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy. I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy.

[end excerpt]

MIKE: That was really risky. He was going to win that debate just because he was sixty-five and a senator and sort of stentorian and had a lot of gravitas and Dan Quayle was a moron, but that 'You're no Jack Kennedy' line, that's a risky line. It could have very badly backfired on him, but he had had enough. He was kind of like, 'I'm sorry man, you can't stand up here and compare yourself to John F. Kennedy.' That's a different kind of sports story, that's a sort of different kind of heroic moment. But, I think you're right. Part of the reason why politics can be so captivating is because politics stories follow the rise and fall of success and failure the way that sports teams do very often, and it's exciting. There's big moments and there's colossal failures and there's comebacks and there's collapses. It makes sense to use the terminology or the weapons of a sports movie to tell the story about politics at some level.

HRISHI: Yeah, and it makes sense why Ben would make a basketball reference and why there are so many sports metaphors in *The West Wing* too.

MIKE: That's right.

HRISHI: There's one part at the end of the fourth season that I wanted to talk about, after Leslie's won. Well, a couple things in this episode; Ben was supposed to have written two speeches- a very *West Wing* thing, there's one if you win and one if you lose. And she asks him, she says, 'Someday when I'm far from this emotional state, I want to read the speech you wrote for when I lost,' and then he reveals that he never wrote it, even though Toby would be very against it. He'd be tempting the wrath of the whatever.

MIKE: That's right. That was one of the first things that I knew about that finale. She was going to say she wanted two speeches and he was going to say I'm on it, and then at the end when she won, he was going to tell her he never wrote the other one.

JOSH: And then what you do with the victory speech is also fantastic.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Very *West Wing*.

JOSH: That Ben has written just a few lines and the rest of the page is blank and she realizes it at the moment and has to just speak from the heart.

MIKE: And just speaks from the heart, yeah. It's all very *West Wing-y* in there. But that was the first thing that I knew. Back then, people were really into spoilers. I think they're less into spoilers now, in TV generally, but back then people were really into spoilers.

JOSH: People would ruin a *Parks and Rec* episode?

MIKE: Well, when you make the whole season about an election and the finale is the election, we were like, 'Look, if it gets out what we did, then it's-' And I had a realization, this is the easiest thing in the world, you make the speech the last thing in the episode, and we just film her doing both speeches, and no one will ever know. So we just filmed her doing a concession speech. No one will ever see it.

JOSH: Why?

MIKE: Because it was just very boring and we just did it to trick extras.

ADAM: I forgot about that.

MIKE: Yeah. I was directing that episode and she did a take of it and I went up... So in "Bartlet for America" when Leo is being questioned, one of the congressmen says something and he covers the microphone:

[*West Wing* Episode 3.09 excerpt]

LEO: Listen, I'm gonna talk a little and you nod and talk a little bit back to me.

JORDON: What are you doing?

LEO: That's good.

JORDON: I'm really asking you.

LEO: I think Rathburn's being a little snotty, I think he's gonna have to wait, and I think he's gonna have to wait with the camera on me.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And then he hits on her.

MIKE: Yeah he does. He asks her out to dinner, which is totally inappropriate. [laughter]

ADAM: Does not play well right now.

MIKE: But I did my version of that in that episode. So, Amy did a take of the concession speech and I went up to her, and there's a room of 250 background performers, and I was like, "Listen, we're never going to use this, this is totally for show, but part of the show is I'm going to act like I'm giving you notes right now that are about your performance." And she nodded and then she said, "I'm going to act like I'm asking you a question right now about which way you want me to do it." And I was like, "That's great. I'm going to act like I'm telling you which way I want you to do it." And she was like, "Ok, I think I understand what you didn't say." And then we did like four takes of it and it was remarkably effective, like leak whatever you want, we covered our bases.

HRISHI: Wow. I want to play that moment, because it really is one of my favorite moments from the series and it hits on a lot of what I love about *The West Wing*, too.

[Parks and Recreation Episode 4.22 excerpt]

LESLIE: The idea behind this campaign was a simple one, that with hard work and positivity a group of people can make a difference. During my term as your city councilor, [crowd cheers] I want to focus on your hopes and not your fears. I want to solve problems instead of creating friction. And I will work hard every hour of every day to make Pawnee a better place to live, because I love this city.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And the speech ends there on the page.

[Parks and Recreation Episode 4.22 excerpt]

LESLIE: And I... know firsthand how very special the people of this city are. I owe this victory, all of it, to my friends and my supporters. No one achieves anything alone. So, let's embark on a new journey together. Let's break out a map. Not the old, out of date one that shows where we've been, but a crisp new one that shows where we might go. Let's embark on a new journey together and see where it takes us. [crowd cheers]

[end excerpt]

ADAM: Yeah, yeah.

JOSH: Fantastic.

MIKE: There's a couple things going on there that I'd forgotten about. One is that the actual speech was intended to evoke a bunch of different speeches from politicians in the past. The 'hopes and not fears' thing was a Reagan speech, and I can't remember what the other ones were. But I found two Republican speeches and two Democratic speeches and pieced it together.

JOSH: Look at you, right down the middle.

MIKE: But you know what, it's hilarious. In most acceptance speeches, you could put the words of Republicans in the mouths of Democrats and vice versa and no one would be the wiser. Everyone's at their best when accepting an office, well not everyone. There's one person I can think off hand right now who maybe wasn't at his best. But generally speaking, that's the case. And then the other thing was the whole theme of the show is that second part. What was happening at the time was Obama had given that speech where he said like if you have a small business, that's great, but you also drove on a road that was paved by your town and you used water and electricity. And so he was trying to say, you specifically owe stuff to other people and so the end of the speech was trying to evoke that idea. No one gets anywhere by him or herself. You're on the backs of like 500,000 other people in big and small ways, and so the idea was when she spoke from the heart, that was what she was trying to get across. I'd forgotten. I haven't heard that since it aired.

ADAM: Me neither.

JOSH: Do you ever go back and re-watch?

MIKE: I went back and re-watched "Live Ammo" in preparation for this podcast.

JOSH: And previous to that, when would have been the last time you saw it?

MIKE: It's a little tricky because my wife has insomnia and in order to get to sleep, she has to put on a show that she is familiar with, so I've watched every episode of *Friends* like thirty times and every episode of *Will and Grace* like thirty times, but now she's watched them so much that

she's like I'm going to do '*Parks and Rec* now'. So now, this is fairly recent, she's started putting on *Parks and Rec* and I end up staying up and being like, "This show's really good! [laughter] [cross talk] I remember this. This is funny!"

JOSH: [cross talk] It really is.

JOSH: "It's my greatest hits."

HRISHI: Mike, you came up through *SNL* and *The Office*, obviously, but have you always had an interest in politics? So many of the folks from *The West Wing*, they had a mix of people with political backgrounds on the show. Obviously, you're working really hard to try and have this even-handed approach to the politics of the show. Is this something that's been part of your life?

MIKE: Yeah, it was. I've always been interested in it. I was at *SNL* in the year 2000, which was, until recently, the craziest political time in recent American history. I hadn't really written political stuff at the show until the election, and I wrote a cold open during the Florida recount right after it happened, right after the election happened. I wrote a cold open where Will Ferrell as George Bush and Darrell Hammond as Al Gore made a joint statement and they said that they were going to run the country together and then it was like *The Odd Couple* where Bush was a slob.

[*Saturday Night Live* Episode 26.06 excerpt]

GORE: Governor Bush, why have you consistently refused to meet with me so we can end this political infighting?

BUSH: Cuz.

[end excerpt]

MIKE: First of all, keeping with what I just said, it wasn't just me, I wrote it with a bunch of other people. But also, it was fine. It was perfectly funny and perfectly ok of an idea, but because the country was in this kind of insane mania at the time, it was shown on CNN and the *CBS Nightly News*. The country was so insane and so riveted by politics that I'm sure to this day more people have seen that sketch than every other thing I've written combined. But that was interesting, that when this matters, it really matters. And so a couple other friends and I wrote a bunch of sketches, parodies of that show *Hardball* with Chris Matthews, and I enjoyed it. And so then, when *Parks and Rec* happened then it was like the next wave of caring, and just saying 'if you can find a way to make these issues funny, it's really enjoyable and fun'. That's what Ron Swanson was. To me that was 'let's take what is a true libertarian point of view, like a 19th century live-off-the-land libertarian, and really say this is the position of a true libertarian, not a like a fake, Rand Paul libertarian'. There are a lot of people who say they are libertarians, Ted Cruz says he's a libertarian, but then also it's like, "Well can gay people get married?" and they're like, "No, sorry." In that case we're going to legislate your decision-making tree. And so I was like, 'let's take an actual libertarian and find what that person would actually believe and

present it just straight up, like this is what a true libertarian position is'. Greg and I got nervous when we were designing the character that it would be unrealistic that you would have a person in a government job who is a libertarian. And we went and we were meeting with some local government people to bounce ideas off of them and just learn about their jobs, and we were meeting with this woman, and I said, "I have a question for you. We have this idea for a character who is the head of the parks department but he's like a true libertarian, like an actual libertarian, wants government to be dismantled, doesn't want there to be stoplights, doesn't want there to be a post office, literally doesn't want anything. Is that realistic, is that absurd?" And she was like, "Well, I'm a libertarian." And I was like, "Really?" And she was like, "Yeah, I'm a libertarian." And then there was an awkward pause and she was like, "I understand the irony here. I get it. But, I am a libertarian who works in government with the express purpose of limiting government." And so we were like, 'alright, there you go'. And so suddenly, there was no thing that you can present that's too absurd or too unlikely or something.

JOSH: There's a great moment when Ben first arrives planning to slash the budget. Leslie's obviously distraught, and Ron is gleefully delighted.

MIKE: Pumping his fist, yeah.

[Parks and Recreation Episode 2.23 excerpt]

RON: What exactly will you be cutting and how much of it, and can I watch you do it while eating Pork Cracklins?

[end excerpt]

[laughter]

ADAM: "Is there a not gay way of asking him to go camping?" I think is what he says. [laughter]

MIKE: Yeah, and in the "Live Ammo" episode I think there's a thing where Chris Traeger's going to take him on a meditation retreat or whatever and he has a talking head and he says:

[Parks and Recreation Episode 4.19 excerpt]

RON: Some are simple like take down traffic lights and eliminate the post office. The bigger ones will be tougher like bring all of this crumbling to the ground.

[end excerpt]

[laughter]

MIKE: But yeah, there are real libertarians who are really in local government.

JOSH: The enemy within.

HRISHI: Did the fact that Nick Offerman appeared on *The West Wing* have anything to do with this?

MIKE: It really didn't. I wish I could say it did, but no, it did not at all. When I was on *The Office*, I wrote an episode where there were a bunch of branch managers from different branches, like Michael Scott's other counterparts in Syracuse and Rochester or whatever, and the storyline was that many of them were more incompetent than Michael Scott was, and the idea was 'let's try to explain how it's possible that this dingdong has had his job for so long'. And so Nick auditioned for one of the other guys and was amazing, was so funny and great, and I was like 'that's the guy. This guy's amazing. Who the hell-' I remember thinking how did this guy get to be, whatever he was, 35 without being world famous. It was so obvious that he was so funny. And, we tried to book him but word came back that he can't do it because he's doing *Will and Grace* that week, and I was like 'what the hell man, come on, this is cooler than *Will and Grace*', and then someone was like, 'he's married to Megan Mullally', and I was like 'alright, fair enough, fair enough'. But I wrote Nick Offerman on a post-it note and stuck it to my computer, and then like three years later when we were casting I was like, 'oh that guy. Let's bring that guy back.' And then in a very "Bartlet for America" kind of way, when the show ended, I kept that post-it note and I framed it [cross talk] and I gave it to Nick. And it had like a dirty footprint on it. It had clearly fallen off my computer and I had stepped on it and stuff, but yeah, I gave it to him as a thank you.

JOSH: [cross talk] Oh that's sweet. That's awesome.

JOSH: *Parks and Rec* has a flawless cast.

MIKE: It's pretty amazing, yeah. I remember saying a lot at the time, even at the beginning, before I had any real leg to stand on, I remember saying in interviews in 10 years or 20 years, people won't be able to believe that all these people were on the same show. And I feel like that is now true. [cross talk] It didn't take 10 years for it to happen. It's pretty amazing.

JOSH: [cross talk] Indeed, yeah, how did this happen.

HRISHI: There are a couple other *West Wing* crossover points I wanted to ask you about.

MIKE: Hit me.

HRISHI: We had Helen Slayton-Hughes on our podcast the other day to talk about playing Marion Cotesworth-Haye and she had very fond things to say about Ethel Beavers.

MIKE: Oh, good. I mean, that to me is one of my favorite characters from the show, I would say, Ethel Beavers.

ADAM: Oh yeah.

MIKE: Ethel Beavers was amazing. And she was so funny.

[Parks and Recreation Episode 5.14 excerpt]

ANDY: Miss Beavers, this is official police business, I hope we didn't wake you up.

ETHEL: It's after 10 o'clock, I've been asleep for four hours. What do you want?

APRIL: We need you to sign this. It's a marriage license.

MAN: Ethel, is it robbers?

ETHEL: No, go back to bed.

ANDY: Aww, is that your husband?

ETHEL: I'm not married, I was on a date tonight, it went well. He's sleeping over.

[end excerpt]

MIKE: There was a guy named Greg Levine who was a writer's assistant on *Parks and Rec* for a long time and then became a writer towards the end, and he'd actually worked on *The West Wing*, I think he was a PA on *The West Wing*, and he was so excited when we cast her because he loved Marion Cotesworth-Haye so much. Every time she showed up and played Ethel Beavers, everyone was so excited. It was like seeing a celebrity at a restaurant or something [laughter]. And in fact, she became such an important part of the show in our minds that the way that Ben and Leslie say 'I love you' for the first time is through her.

[Parks and Recreation Episode 4.09 excerpt]

ETHEL: Because I love Leslie, I want to be with her and I don't want to hide the way I feel about her any more. So yeah it was worth it, because I'm in love with Leslie Knope. Mr. Traeger: That was beautiful. I'm literally crying and jumping. Crying noise, crying noise, nose blow.

LESLIE: Ethel, could you please read page 132 of the official testimony?

ETHEL: Ethel Beavers: The official record has now annoyingly been reopened so that Leslie Knope can make a statement. Leslie Knope: Let the record state that I, Leslie Knope, love Ben Wyatt. I love him with all of my heart. Did you get that? Ethel Beavers: Yes, I got it.

[end excerpt]

MIKE: She was a huge part of that show. She also marries Ron and Diane, [cross talk] or is there at least.

ADAM: [cross talk] That's right.

ADAM: Also as Marion Cotesworth-Haye, I reference that sometimes as the clip as kind of a masterclass in losing control of your laughter, because that's such a difficult thing to do acting-wise, it's like more difficult than crying.

JOSH: No, I watched her in disbelief, Allison Janney, it's unreal.

ADAM: Me too.

[West Wing Episode 4.18 excerpt]

MARION: I'm Marion Cotesworth-Haye.

C.J.: [Laughing] Sorry. I was thinking of this thing from, this thing that just happened with the deficit. I'm sorry.

AMY: Oh God, excuse me, please. Is this a hazing?

C.J.: I swear it's not a hazing, it's real. It's real. I'm just laughing because of the name. You gotta fix it.

[end excerpt]

ADAM: It's unreal.

MIKE: Yeah, it's a wonderful scene. It's so great because it's not cruel. There really are DAR women like this who are just absurd and have this sort of crazy speaking voice and in the right circumstances, that will make you laugh.

ADAM: Yes. But it going through Ethel Beavers, them saying 'I love you' to each other is so incredibly romantic. It's such a special part of the show. I would say also going back to that scene where Ben says, "I didn't write the concession speech," I remember getting the script and reading that and being like, 'I can't believe I get to say this', and I think as soon as that script came in, texting Amy and being like, 'we get to do this'. Like, there was never a moment where we weren't aware of how lucky we were to have this relationship on the show and how special it was and how real it really felt, just on the page, it just felt like a real thing and it was always just so special getting to play those scenes. Just looking back, I'm so glad that it was never for once taken for granted.

MIKE: For a while we called that episode 21 Votes, because that's the margin of the loss and then the victory, and I don't want to make too much of a big deal over this, but that was also sort of a *West Wing*-y thing to do, like there's the "17 People" episode. I remember when you would come up with a title for an episode that seemed *West Wing*-y it felt like, 'ooh, that's a good one'. The actual title was "Win, Lose, or Draw", which isn't super *West Wing*-y, but it has the same sense of, I don't know, the titles of the episodes very frequently- they made you feel like 'oh, this is meaty, like there's something meaty going on here'. That was always the goal.

JOSH: I'm curious, just quickly: favorite episodes? If you had to pick one- we may have done it already, but- that stands out for you guys...

MIKE: I have many. I mean, "Bartlet for America" was always a favorite of mine for obvious reasons. "Two Cathedrals", which I'm sure is what everybody says when asked this question.

JOSH: Mhm, frequent.

MIKE: But I have this crazy thing where the episodes that I've watched the most are probably now the second half of season six and season seven, because when we were doing the election stuff, the campaign season, those were the seasons that we went to more. I don't remember the episode title, but the one where Josh shows up at Santos' house and says, "Let's do this" at Christmas, from that moment on, I feel like the show recaptured its glory. Oh, and let me tell you one more story. By the way, I made a mental note to tell you this. So, *Parks and Rec* ended and the whole cast and I went on Seth Meyers' show the night the finale aired, and it was very fun. And the cast hadn't seen it, so after we taped the show, we rented this bar and I screened it for them. And it was very emotional and very lovely and great, and it was just the cast and a couple producers and me. And then people stood up and made speeches and the speeches were predictably heartfelt and moving and lovely. But the speech that I made ended by me saying, and this is no joke, by telling the story, for people who hadn't heard it, of what happens when your character joins the team and the shibboleth of that moment is the note that says 'He's one of us'. And I told that story and I basically said this is 'the guiding principle of the show from the beginning has been that an idea or a person added to the cast or crew or writing staff or whatever, I don't know how to explain how we made all of these choices except that in every one of those cases it was like, that person is one of us. That's, I think, how we kept the show feeling so special, is just to say you're either one of us or you're not.' So you factored very heavily into the show.

JOSH: Without actually being one of you. That's a fantastic story. That's beautiful.

MIKE: I'm saying it now very level headedly and clearly. At the time, I was a weeping mess. I did not make it half the way through that speech without crying.

ADAM: That was a hard night. I mean, it was lovely, but it was hard. And I don't go back and watch *Parks*, or haven't really, because it makes me too sad. Because I miss it and it was so fun and I miss all those people. But when I have caught bits and pieces, similar to Mike, I am kind of

blown back by how good it is, and I think my kids are going to start watching it, so I'll watch it again.

JOSH: I watched it in its entirety on Netflix with my entire family. We would watch and re-watch, and it was a beautiful show in a sense that you could watch it with your kids.

ADAM: [cross talk] With kids. Yeah.

MIKE: My son is ten and he doesn't care. He only watches basketball YouTube videos, but his friends are starting to watch it and he's starting to be like, 'wait, you did a TV show?'

JOSH: We recently sat down, my daughter's in college now, but with my son, and said, "Wanna watch a half-hour?" so we'd throw on a *Parks and Rec*, and it was one I hadn't seen before. We had this strong commitment to never watch it without each other and I realized they watched one without me. I was like, 'wait a minute, I haven't seen this!' [laughter]

MIKE: I mean, I wish that there were a *West Wing* episode I'd never seen before.

ADAM: I know, me too.

MIKE: So, you have not seen past where this podcast is?

HRISHI: Yeah.

MIKE: Wow.

ADAM: So where are you right now?

HRISHI: We're in the middle of season five.

ADAM: Ok, alright.

HRISHI: So, I have not seen the Santos stuff yet.

MIKE: I mean, you have a couple rough patches.

JOSH: We're working through them now.

ADAM: Are you? Is that season five?

MIKE: Season five is 'You want a piece of me?' right?

[*The West Wing* episode 5.06 excerpt]

JOSH: Hey! You want a piece of me?! I'm right here. Standing right here! Come on! Come on!

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Well, we did a smart thing. When there's something really vile, like a moment like that, we try to get on the people who wrote the show so that we can't talk about it.

MIKE: Oh, ok.

ADAM: Oh, interesting.

HRISHI: Or at least we'll hear about what was behind the decision. Adam, what about you? When you go back to *The West Wing* now, what are the episodes that you go to?

JOSH: [cross talk] Go-to episodes?

ADAM: Like Mike said, I have so many but I've been thinking about it coming on the show, and I would have to say "Shadow of Two Gunmen" one and two.

HRISHI: Solid.

JOSH: Very solid.

ADAM: I mean, terrific episodes. That was such a great cliffhanger. I mean good god, that's a great cliffhanger end of season one. All the flashbacks, anytime there's a flashback. "Shadow of Two Gunmen" is great because it's their origin stories. Watching Allison Janney as a Hollywood publicist is incredible. But then also Sam at his law firm, Josh coming to visit him there, and then seeing the beginnings of the campaign. That's "Shadow of Two Gunmen," correct? With President Bartlet talking to that small group of people in that basement and it's just so juicy and great.

MIKE: She's a Hollywood publicist, but isn't there a moment later where she's at a party and she's like geeking out about something?

ADAM: Yes, yes.

JOSH: About development. There's a moment that we talked about.

HRISHI: Yeah.

MIKE: Like, did Sorkin forget that she was a publicist? It doesn't make any sense.

HRISHI: In season one, she gets offered a development deal and she doesn't know what that means.

JOSH: She's asking what it is, exactly.

ADAM: But there's a lot of that. Haven't you guys made a point of saying that Sorkin's not a big proponent of really serialized strains going through the show? Like, he'll forget stuff.

HRISHI: Yeah, he'll reuse character names...

JOSH: Yeah, in terms of there being a 'show bible', not so much.

MIKE: That's so interesting for a guy who's so meticulous about language. You would assume that it carried over to backstory [cross talk] and stuff, but apparently not.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah, continuity.

MIKE: "17 People," by the way, is the other one. I don't know if I mentioned that before, but the only thing that episode gets dinged for to me is the B-story of the Correspondents' Dinner stuff uses the phrase 'Bring the funny' which is one of my least favorite, and they use it a lot.

JOSH: Well, should we launch into the *Studio 60* podcast now? [laughter] Or, should we save that for another day?

MIKE: I know Adam and I were talking before we came here, because you know we live together. We're life partners, [laughter] and we were talking about how the best acting on the show to me is Richard Schiff and Martin Sheen in those scenes where they're both barely whispering and the palpable tension between the two of them is the best acting that can happen.

JOSH: [cross talk] It's fantastic.

ADAM: And some of the best acting, too, is when Toby's in the oval office dealing with the news of the MS and the President says twice in a matter of like 45 seconds:

[West Wing Episode 2.18 excerpt]

BARTLET: I feel fine by the way, thanks for asking.

LEO: Sir.

BARTLET: No, Leo, Toby's concern for my health is moving me in ways...

TOBY: Mr. President.

BARTLET: Shut up! You know your indignation would be a lot more interesting to me if it weren't quite so covered in crap.

CHARLIE: Sir.

BARTLET: Yeah?

CHARLIE: Mr. Gareth.

BARTLET: Thanks. Are you pissed because I didn't say anything or are you pissed because there were fifteen people who knew before you did? I feel fine by the way, thanks for asking.

[end excerpt]

ADAM: Like, just a prick. And it's just, it's amazing.

MIKE: And the walls came tumbling down.

JOSH: That's a great scene.

ADAM: I again said to Mike earlier, because we live together and we're life partners, that I do think that Martin Sheen is the greatest living actor, because of what he did on *The West Wing*, which, by the way, never an Emmy award.

JOSH: How did that happen?

ADAM: Crazy.

HRISHI: Speaking of the note that Sam gives to Toby, the 'one of us' note, I can't tell you how happy it makes me and other people I know like me who just love *The West Wing* and love *Parks and Rec* to know that it's a meaningful show for you guys too.

MIKE: Oh, man, the most meaningful. I would say there's more *West Wing* in the DNA of *Parks and Rec* than any other single TV show, I would say. I mean, right? I mean, maybe *The Office*, just because that's where Greg and I had come from, but that's at a technical level. I think the spirit of the show is much more about *The West Wing* than anything else.

ADAM: I know we talked about it all the time, and I know I re-watched the first four seasons while shooting the show and I got to just ask Rob questions. Every day, I would come in and I would ask him a series of questions, and he loved talking about it. I even emailed him after watching "Someone's Going to Emergency, Someone's Going to Jail" just telling him how wonderful he was in the episode and how much I loved the episode and he forwarded it to Aaron Sorkin and got a response and forwarded that to me, so it was great to have that resource while re-watching the show.

HRISHI: That's awesome.

JOSH: That's very cool.

HRISHI: Gentlemen, thank you so much.

JOSH: What a great conversation.

ADAM: Yeah, thank you.

MIKE: This was so fun.

HRISHI: We've been dreaming of this for years, actually from the beginning of when we first started the podcast.

JOSH: Well, we thought, are we really going to be able to talk to each other for this long? We'll get people who are involved... and we never did it, but this one we really wanted to make sure got you guys.

MIKE: Thank you.

JOSH: And that does it for this episode. Have a great Thanksgiving break. We're off next week but we will be back after that with our discussion of the premiere of season six of *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: Thanks so much to Zach McNeese, Margaret Miller, and Nick Song for helping us make this episode.

JOSH: And thanks to Radiotopia for allowing us to be part of their fabulous collection of the world's finest podcasts. If you want to know more about Radiotopia, visit radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: If you're doing any Black Friday shopping, feel free to support this podcast at thewestwingweekly.com/merch. You'll make *The West Wing* fans in your life happy, maybe even yourself.

JOSH: That's right. And remember, when you buy West Wing Weekly merch, you give us money.

HRISHI: We'll be back soon with "NSF Thurmont".

JOSH: Ok.

HRISHI: Ok.

MIKE & ADAM: What's next?

[Outro music- *Parks and Rec* Remix]