

The West Wing Weekly
0.10: "In the Writers' Room"
Guest: Paul Redford

[Intro Music]

HRISHI: You're listening to *The West Wing Weekly*. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway.

JOSH: And I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: This episode is a special episode. It's not specific to just one episode of *The West Wing*, but instead it covers a lot of *West Wing* territory.

JOSH: That's right. Because today, we're talking to Paul Redford, who wrote for the show for the first five seasons.

HRISHI: His credits include some classic episodes, and we'll get into all of that coming up. But our interview with Paul starts before the pilot episode was even made.

JOSH: I know your Sorkin story begins pre-*West Wing*.

PAUL: Oh, way pre-*West Wing*. I was coming off of the tenth season of *Coach*, and looking forward to a career in half-hour comedy, but also starting a family and realizing I couldn't do the, you know, "it's not funny til it's 4 a.m." kind of half-hour world. So I was asking my agents, "Is there anything else out there?" And they said, "Well, there's this new single-camera comedy that nobody knows how it's going to go at ABC, by this playwright-screenwriter Aaron Sorkin. Go in and meet on that." And Aaron, I remember, didn't do much talking, it was all Aaron's agent, who was his producer, and Tommy, wearing very cool kind of Blind Lemon Jefferson blackout sunglasses.

[Hrishi and Josh laugh]

PAUL: And everybody kind of looked at the ceiling and wouldn't really look at me, and I thought, "Well, this is a disaster." But it did come out that I had spent ten years as an actor before becoming a writer, and that I'd worked in theatre, and I think that caught Aaron's attention. And then he may have actually read some of my writing, I don't know. But I was invited onto the set for *Sports Night*.

HRISHI: How big of a writing staff was that?

PAUL: That was, I think, one of the biggest staffs I've ever been on. I think, in total, at least for the first couple of weeks, it was about seventeen people, including every kind of comic genius on the ABC studio payroll at the time, who were all coming off of shows like *Roseanne*, *Grace Under Fire*, *Ellen*. So, Aaron didn't know what to do with any of us, particularly the old pros. So it was two weeks of sitting down, just doing what writers do, which is trade stories and anecdotes, and stuff that can't leave the room. *West Wing* was just a gleam in Aaron and Tommy's eye at that point. He had written the script. It was this sort of legendary... pilot that will, of course, never get produced because political shows never work. So, his first show to actually get produced was his second pilot for television, which is *Sports Night*.

JOSH: Was the staff--the writing staff--comprised entirely of sitcom writers? Was there nobody from a drama, hour-long background?

PAUL: Just the youngsters who were also comedy writers, of which I number myself. I started in writing pretty late, 'cause like I said, I was an actor for ten years. But yeah, everybody was old comedy pros. And multi-camera comedy pros. The single-camera comedy, you know, in those bygone days, was really an art form that had died with, like, *Bewitched*.

JOSH: You were busy reinventing it, you guys.

PAUL: Yes we were. But we all came in on the model of, "Here's five jokes per page, everybody rewrites in the room, everyone sits down, and, you know, the roomrunner, the showrunner, says 'We can do better on this joke,' and you pitch on *that* for ten minutes, and whoever the loudest and the funniest get their joke in." And whoever name is on the script really had nothing to do with the final script. It was a very collective operation. But not *Sports Night*. Aaron didn't know how you did this; Aaron was a screenwriter.

JOSH: [crosstalk] Right.

PAUL: And playwright. And you sit alone in a room, and torture yourself, and lie on the couch, and do everything but, and then you sit down and write it. So, it was always like opening a Christmas present, when we'd get the actual script.

[Laughter]

JOSH: So, did that make it ultimately less than satisfying to be on *that* staff? How did you guys –

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Or did it feel like easy money?

PAUL: Well, both. I mean, it was really hard in a way, because he was so hard to please, and the old pros were all gone after about two weeks. Because in two weeks he wrote the first script after the pilot. And it was absolutely terrific, but it didn't look anything like, you know, a traditional sitcom script. And I remember there was kind of one joke where he kind of asked all the pros in the room, "You know, I can do better than this." And so we spent a whole day of–

[Laughter]

PAUL: – Just fixing –

JOSH: [crosstalk] One gag.

PAUL: And then, you know, the kind of triumvirate group that was kind of running the room at the time walked in, sat on Aaron's couch, pitched him all seventeen, and he sat there and said, "All these are much better than what's in the script right now, but you know what? Just for the rhythm and things, I think I'm gonna stick with this..."

[Laughter]

PAUL: [cross talk] "...Old joke."

JOSH: [crosstalk] Classic Sorkin.

PAUL: That was the one time he, you know...conceded to the process.

HRISHI: And then everybody left.

PAUL: And then everybody left.

JOSH: And so it whittled down to what size staff?

PAUL: So it was really down--I want to say it was like four kind of dorky males, of which I number myself one, though I was the senior--and then there were two incredibly cool women. Tracey Stern, who then went on to write *Desperate Housewives*, and a bunch of other stuff, and Rachel Sweet.

JOSH: You're reminding me, when you're talking about the writers--I don't want to say who it was, but I guess it was one of the two women--I was in an elevator with one of the two female writers, because we had--the stage was downstairs and there were elevators up to, I guess, the offices and the writers' room and all that--and I happened to be on an elevator with one of them, and she had a kind of big sweater on, and the sleeves were pulled down over her hands, past her hands, and I said, "Oh, you have no hands." And she held them up, and she said, "I don't need them for this job."

[Laughter]

JOSH: And I thought, "Hmmm, there might be some tension in the writers' room." It might be frustrating to be on this thing.

PAUL: Well...our first assignment, all seventeen people in the writers' room was, Aaron came in kind of looked around.

[Laughter]

PAUL: With that WTF expression, and said, "All right, here's how we're gonna do this." And I think he'd been advised by Tommy or somebody. "Everybody write their ideal *Sports Night* script. Everybody just write a *Sports Night* script. You don't have to pitch me the story. You don't have to do anything." And it's like, okay, why not? So, we had something to do for the next two weeks. Every one of us wrote our own, like, *Sports Night* script, which was really interesting reading, because all we had was the pilot to go on.

JOSH: I'd love to read those now. Wow that's --

PAUL: [crosstalk] That's something -- they must be in the archives somewhere.

JOSH: Did any of these scripts furnish plots? Materials?

PAUL: No, there was [laughter] The basic premise was...I think it's the Josh character gets locked in the pipe rooms of Yankee Stadium. And he meets a fanatic fan who, of course, turns out to be a psycho. It's what we in the sitcom business call a "stuck-in-a".

JOSH: [crosstalk] Right.

PAUL: Usually you're "stuck-in-a" elevator. This time you're "stuck-in-a" steampipe room.

JOSH: [laughs] So, it's a bottle episode, right?

PAUL: Well, yeah, it's the perfect bottle episode, except we kept cutting back to the studio, where Dan had to kind of...was in danger of having to do the show himself. And Aaron just took that basic idea. There was no going to Yankee Stadium. There was nothing of that. The Josh Charles character has to stay back and co-anchor with the Lisa Edelstein character, who swears they slept together, and he doesn't remember.

JOSH: Bobbi Bernstein.

[Sports Night Episode 1.13 "Small Town" excerpt]

NATALIE: What's the problem?

DAN: Bobbi's a lunatic.

NATALIE: Dan.

DAN: She's an off the charts lunatic.

NATALIE: Why don't you like her?

DAN: I like her fine. Talented, smart, very professional.

NATALIE: But?

DAN: Total nut ball.

[end excerpt]

PAUL: I think it's called "Small Town" or something. I don't know what –

JOSH: [crosstalk] Yeah, that sounds right.

HRISHI: "Small Town" is an episode of *Sports Night* that you have a "written by" credit on.

PAUL: Yes! Because it was based on a simple idea that one of them has to anchor the show while the other one is away.

HRISHI: There's another episode from season one of *Sports Night* that you have a credit on, which is "Ordinance Tactics," which people might remember as the one where there's a bomb scare.

PAUL: Yes, I actually did pitch that story. So, rightly, I [laughs] have my name on that, and I pitched that story in every subsequent show I've been on, including...*Newsroom*.

JOSH: [laughs] So I guess you and Aaron must have clicked? When did you go with him, and how did that happen, to start working on *The West Wing*?

PAUL: Well this is the one smart thing I think I've ever done in my career, which was about two-thirds of the way through *Sports Night*'s first year, Aaron called us all into his office and said, "Tommy and I are producing this pilot, *West Wing*." Now, he wouldn't let us read the script, but he did ask us what we thought of Rob Lowe. They said, "Well, believe it or not," you know, "he's up for a role, and he's so good" [laughter] "we need to cast him." What they didn't tell me is that in order to cast Rob Lowe--I know you've covered this on the show--they had to break the favored nation thing and give Rob, you know, kind of, a little more than everybody else.

JOSH: Setting future resentments in motion.

PAUL: Mm hmm. Yeah. And so, we were aware that there was this other show going on, but we were happily, or unhappily, we were just--I was personally having a great time--I mean, the show was right downstairs, the greatest cast, the greatest writing, you know, who wouldn't love it? So, this is my comedy half, and my tragedy mask, I started with *West Wing*, I guess.

HRISHI: What was the process from that point to your transition over to *The West Wing*?

PAUL: It was a very unorthodox one, because, I think I had the choice to stay on *Sports Night*, but I'd also been offered a pretty good job and title on this brand new future hit show, *Secret Agent Man* [laughs] which, they had the theme song and pretty much not much else.

JOSH: That was it.

[*Secret Agent Man* theme song excerpt plays]

PAUL: No knock on *Secret Agent Man*. You know, there's a lot of great ideas that just don't hit the *zeitgeist* the way some do. So, I kinda went over there just to write, like, one script for them. It was a strange deal. But in the meantime, Aaron had showed some of us the first cut of *West Wing*, and I was a big *Sports Night* fan, but that was seriously...*West Wing* was the best pilot I'd ever seen, and the best cast I'd ever seen.

JOSH: You asked for a transfer.

PAUL: Yeah, I applied for a transfer. And my agent said, "What?" [laughs] You never do that, not if you have a job on a returning show, do you offer to jump it for this *total* bird in the bush, which was *West Wing* at the time.

HRISHI: Did anybody else who watched that rough cut with you make a similar offer?

PAUL: No, and I think it's 'cause they were all younger than me, but they all had a longer career in comedy at that point. And in those days, there was no future in hour drama. You wouldn't leave a lucrative...a sitcom career was so lucrative, and I think still is. Writers have never made as much money as they made writing a half-hour for Thursday night NBC, back in the '90s. But I was unaware of that.

JOSH: [crosstalk] Or you wouldn't have asked to transfer.

[Laughter]

PAUL: Yes, for this political show with a lot of speeches. That...who's going to get this? But yeah, the call came out of the blue. It was Aaron, he said, "Well, you know, the show was picked up. I've gotta find a writing staff. You wanna come on board?" And it was the usual Island of Misfit Toys, which Aaron assembles when he first assembles a writing staff. It's just, you know, whoever sparks him in the room. Some people with political experience. I'd already known Lawrence O'Donnell from my days at Harvard, on the Harvard Lampoon, where he was this legendary... I will say, he's much older than me.

[Laughter]

PAUL: But he would still come back to Lampoon, and he was never Lawrence O'Donnell, he was "Larry [expletive] O'Donnell". It was only--it was like an honorific--that's the only way you could refer to him. So, it was kind of cool. "Oh, I get to work with *him*." And just a bunch...just a disparate bunch of writers.

JOSH: Any notable differences in dynamic in the *West Wing* writers room as compared to the *Sports Night* room?

PAUL: Oh, totally different. I mean, once, you know, the old masters had left *Sports Night*, it was that core group of the four guys and the two women. We kind of sat around a pitched Aaron stories, but Aaron was totally doing, you know, every script there, and we were basically contributing the stories, but it was nothing like *West Wing*, where the need for research, and we needed seven times the amount of stories we had on *Sports Night*, because had seven characters to service, and he was very dedicated to making sure every one of them got a story every week, which I now realize, it doesn't have to be that way. It's not how any other show works, but that was his sort of vision, of, you know, he had this rep company, and he had to give them something every week. Which was great, 'cause then there was every writer in the room. And this really started second year more than first year. First year was so frantic, and half the time he was at *Sports Night*, and so we would be adrift in the room, wondering, "How the hell do you get a weekly show out of signing a bill?" Which is – you know, I tell everyone who tries to do a political show, "Listen–"

[Laughter]

PAUL: "The magic ingredient is not the stories, in *West Wing*, as great as they are. *Really*, every police show, your object is to catch the killer, is to pull a gun and arrest somebody at the end of it. Every medical show you save a life, and change a lot of lives at the end of every episode. At the end of every *West Wing* episode, you get a man in an Oval Office to sign something. It's really the only thing all those characters are trying to do, is get the president to sign something. To make a decision."

[West Wing Episode 5.08 excerpt]

ANGELA BLAKE: *If I go back and hammer out a deal at two percent, he has to sign it.*

[end excerpt]

[West Wing Episode 6.12 excerpt]

TREASURY SECRETARY KAREN BROWNING: It would substantially increase the deficit, and I can guarantee the president won't sign it.

[end excerpt]

[West Wing Episode 2.07 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: If I'm going to sign it in January, why am I vetoing it now?

[end excerpt]

[West Wing Episode 3.03 excerpt]

JOSH: You just sign it. You don't do it with a stamp.

DOUG: I thought it was a stamp.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Actually, you stamp it, then sign it.

[end excerpt]

PAUL: Every other political show I think, since then, has learned the hard way. And I've been on some of them. But what Aaron figured out, very early on, is he would walk into the writers' room, and say, "I just need a debate. I just need an argument." So... me and Lawrence would debate, and Lawrence would always win. But we would get some good stuff going. First year of *West Wing* was, like, chaos, and benign despotism, and... but somehow or other we managed to get it written. And that's when Aaron came up with this system of memos, because he was always so pressed for the script, and he was devoting half of his brain to *Sports Night*, that he needed to walk in, and he needed it laid out for him what the seven stories were going to be, and the most efficient delivery system was to write a memo. So we would write what the first scene would be, we would write who was in it, we would suggest what they would say, and he would get the story that way. And it got to a point when we were sort of throwing the memos over the transom for every new scene, every new act, and he was writing just ahead of us. And that's a system that pretty much prevailed. It kind of stabilized second year when the great Kevin Falls came in, and I think Eli Attie came in second year, and then we finally had a system going. And it seemed to work from then on. Also, first year was when--and this also would continue--John Wells would come in and say, "Well, in case Aaron's head ever explodes, or something happens, we need to have some script in the hopper, in reserve, on deck, if the magic doesn't happen. So, two or three of us were always assigned to write a script independent of Aaron, and, of course, the worst never happened. He was always able to write the next script, and then we would wind up giving him that script, which he would then rewrite, as opposed to a bunch of memos.

HRISHI: Let me ask you one last *Sports Night* question. When you announced that you were leaving for *The West Wing*--of course, Tommy and Aaron were associated with both shows, they're executive producers on both shows--but was there anybody at *Sports Night* who said, "Hey, what are you doing? Why are you leaving us?"

PAUL: [laughs]

HRISHI: Was there any kind of resentment or surprise on that side, that you were leaving a renewed show, or sense of betrayal or anything like that?

PAUL: Oh, Hrishi, you so flatter me with the idea that anyone would care or notice.

[Laughter]

PAUL: That a junior – like, I think I was just above staff writer level, was going to another show. I think only Aaron kind of said, “The more the merrier.” And then, for whatever reason, maybe because I knew how a bill became law or something, I mean... it seemed to be a very good fit on *West Wing*. So, I stuck around and outlasted, even outlasted Aaron into year five.

JOSH: Indeed.

HRISHI: Well, let’s start with “The State Dinner”, that’s the first episode that has a Paul Redford credit on it, I believe. How did that one come about?

PAUL: Well, isn’t that a good idea, to do a state dinner? It’s a bottle show, we get to see another part of the building, Tommy didn’t know where they were going to find the version of the East Wing. I don’t know what we used. Anyway, we did a lot of locations. We did a lot of locations in Washington, by the way, first year and all the way through the fourth year.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Did you travel with the show?

PAUL: Yes, sometimes. That was always fun. The most fun was the Correspondents’ Dinner. Has anyone told you about that?

JOSH: No, I don’t think so.

PAUL: That was the equivalent of our big state dinner party, but in real life. And that’s when the Correspondents’ Dinner really meant something.

JOSH: Right. That’s when the president used to go to it.

PAUL: Yeah. And we were invited by, I think, Bloomberg. You know, all these high profile guests get to invite some celebrity. The celebrities he decided to invite were the cast of *The West Wing*. We shoot this new show, and just kind of taking off, but at that point we were getting something which was, like, invaluable, which is actual respect from the people the show’s about.

HRISHI: Hmm.

PAUL: Which no other political show, I think, does this. Most of the Washington insiders always look at what we do, and say, “Oh, it’s some standard thriller, the Chief of Staff is the villain...”

JOSH: [cross talk] Right.

PAUL: But I think after those first few episodes, it was like, "Oh, they're actually trying to make it about what the thing really is." And, ever after, then we could get anyone on the phone. Before that, they wouldn't return our calls. And they didn't really care. We had Lawrence, and we had Pat Caddell, but those were the pros.

JOSH: Who just recently passed away. That'd be Mark.

PAUL: Yeah.

JOSH: Who was the host of the Correspondents' Dinner that year?

PAUL: The host was Jay Leno. It was Clinton's last year, and all due respect to Jay, Clinton killed. I mean, he was so good. Aaron wrote a short movie about too many people walking in the halls of the *West Wing*, and the press secretary getting run over, and it was very funny.

[White House Correspondents' Dinner 2000 - *The West Wing* Clip excerpt]

JOE: To be honest, the president would prefer if you guys didn't come to the dinner.

ALLISON: Why?

JOE: The president has a problem with the show.

ALLISON: What?

JOE: People walking too quickly through the hallways.

ALLISON: The president doesn't have a problem with our show. The president has never heard of our show. This is all you, and your niggling little complaints.

DULÉ: Allison.

ALLISON: Hey Dulé.

DULÉ: What's going on?

ALLISON: Joe Lockhart says that we can't do the Correspondents' Dinner because he doesn't like the people walking in the hallways.

DULÉ: You want me to kick his ass?

JOE: Look.

DULÉ: I'll do it. I'll kick his ass, Allison.

ALLISON: It's okay.

JOHN: Hey, Allison, what's going on?

ALLISON: Joe says we can't go.

JOHN: Want me to kick his ass?

JOE: Hey.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Was it Mike McCurry who did the bit with C.J.?

PAUL: No, though Mike McCurry came up a lot, because Mike McCurry's the model press secretary for pretty much everybody in Washington. Mike McCurry came up with the greatest line, which we always quote, which is, "It is the Press Secretary's job to tell the truth *slowly*."

[Laughter]

PAUL: 'Cause he was Press Secretary during the Monica Lewinsky scandal. So, he did have the hardest job in Washington. And he acquitted himself beautifully. We did have Dee Dee Meyers as a consultant on the staff [cross talk] first year and all the way through the fourth year. And she's just one of my favorite people. And she was so useful in connecting us to the other Washington insiders who came on board. And I tell everyone that was one of my favorite things about the show, which I have never experienced since, is the research. It's to actually have to do a show about a summit with the Russian president. And Aaron, you know, and I had written sort of the first draft, and Aaron said, "This is all good, but I don't want to see everything you can see on CNN. I want to know what a president and a Russian president talk about behind closed doors." Now, don't we all, right now?

JOSH: [Cross talk] Right.

JOSH: Indeed.

PAUL: And he gave me that assignment, and I was totally at a loss, until our researcher that year--she was lovely, but she sort of came and went for years--she was just kind of slumming, because she was from the actual press office of the White House. She knocked on my office door, and said, "Oh, well, I know you have that summit story. Do you want to talk to Strobe Talbott?" Who was the National Security Advisor. [laughs] "Yeah, I'd like to talk to Strobe Talbott." "Okay. He said okay," and then kind of out of the blue, 'cause I guess you're not suppose to have a warning, or it's a security issue. There's a ring on my landline, "Hold for Mr. Talbott." And he said, "Yeah, what do you want to know?"

[Laughter]

PAUL: And in ten minutes he pitched me the entire script, basically.

JOSH: No kidding?

PAUL: Remember, this was about twelve or thirteen years ago. He said, "The number one worry we have is that Iran will go nuclear. No one else knows about this, no one *knows* that Iran wants to build a bomb. But we do, and the Russians do, and the Russians are building them a heavy

water reactor just so they can do it. That's what an American president would talk about with a Russian president."

JOSH: Hmm. Wow.

PAUL: Is, "Don't build that reactor." And I didn't even know what a heavy water reactor was. Neither did Aaron. We had to do all this research, but I think we were maybe giving away state secrets or something.

JOSH: Sounds like it.

[Laughter]

JOSH: You probably should have known better. He *certainly* should have known better.

PAUL: Well, Strobe was later caught out, you know, taking stuff home from the office.

JOSH: There you go.

PAUL: Talk about a steel trap mind. And I thought, "Well this is how you get these jobs in the White House. You lay out all the policy issues, all the facts, and you do it in ten minutes, point by point. You're this human PowerPoint presentation."

HRISH: Hmm.

PAUL: And you tell the story in ten minutes, and then you get off the phone, and then you leave the Oval Office, which is what we found with our best consultants, like him, and Dee Dee, and Gene Sperling, and, later, Ken Duberstein. Is, those guys pitch for a living. Those guys are naturally kind of great narrators, writers. 'Cause they have to talk across, you know, the Enterprise desk, to the man at the top, and tell them just what the scenario will be. They are always gaming out stories. "This will happen if you do this, Mr. President." "This will happen if the Russians do this, Mr. President." "This will happen if the Republicans do this, Mr. President." And you have to tell him a story, in the amount of the time we would have to tell Aaron a story, which was between five and ten minutes, before he'd say...he'd slam his hand down on the table, "That's great. Write a memo." And then leave.

[Laughter]

PAUL: He stuck around the room a little longer during *Newsroom*, but I think that was just 'cause he was having a better time.

JOSH: Why do you think he had a better time at HBO, and with *Newsroom*?

PAUL: You know, there is nothing more brutal than a twenty-two episode network order, particularly if it's an hour drama. Particularly if you're writing it all yourself. *Newsroom* was nine or ten, they put it on whenever HBO felt like putting it on, and whenever Aaron said he was finished. And maybe, you know, everyone performs better under pressure. Maybe you can argue that *Newsroom* is a more formless show, more personal show. I don't think that's bad.

HRISHI: On that note, let's take a quick break.

[Ad break]

HRISHI: Okay, so back to “The State Dinner.” You pitched the idea of a state dinner, and you had all these locations. You ended up with an episode that got an Emmy nomination for Lyn Paolo, for the costumes.

PAUL: Yeah. What an initiation.

HRISHI: And this is Episode Seven, from Season One.

PAUL: Right. We were all...again, Aaron said, “Go write me a *West Wing* script. So, that was my first shot at it. Just based on seeing the pilot. He hadn’t written any other episodes. He liked the idea, I think he liked the writing, though, you know, he never really... he has to have his own story. The First Lady was not in my draft. There were a few things he used, and he used all the research, which was really interesting. You know, it’s only a state dinner if it’s an actual head of state. So, trivia: If the British Prime Minister comes, and is a guest of the White House, it’s not a state dinner. It’s only a state dinner if it’s Queen Elizabeth II.

JOSH and HRISHI: [cross talk] Huh.

PAUL: Who is the actual head of state of Great Britain. But all that wonderful stuff, the translating scene, the introduction of the first lady, the ships at sea, which still chokes people up, that’s all him.

HRISHI: Hmm.

PAUL: Yeah.

HRISHI: And then the next episode you have a credit on is “Take This Sabbath Day”, one of my all time favorite *West Wing* episodes.

JOSH: Major.

PAUL: Thank you. I have a Humanitis Award for that one.

[All laugh]

JOSH: “Humanitis.” That’s how comedy writers pronounce it.

PAUL: John wells said, “This is a great story, get this in front of Aaron as soon as you can. Write an outline.” So, Lawrence and I wrote an outline, which got our names on it, and then Aaron, you know, in a burst of inspiration, wrote this, just *great* episode. I mean, I’m so moved and proud of that one. Also very proud that we were able to, you know, shine a light on something that nobody had known before, which there hadn’t been a capital federal case in years.

JOSH: Right.

PAUL: And had only been reintroduced by a Supreme Court ruling, I think, just the year or two before. And then, for our fictional Bartlet, would be the first president to sign a death warrant, or

I'm not sure what the term is, probably an executive order, since... maybe Eisenhower. I don't know. But it was very powerful. And Aaron did such a great job with Bartlet's Catholicism, and he had Lawrence to help him out there, because Lawrence is a good, you know, Boston Catholic.

JOSH: Right.

PAUL: It was great to hear Debora on your show talking about "The Supremes" because every once in a while you get that script, where everything was just a gift. You were in this, where everything clicked. The writing, the directing, you'd inspire Aaron to be at his best. It was just great. I'm most proud of that one, I guess, and there's a few others, but "Somebody's Going to Emergency, Somebody's Going to Jail." That one I got to bring into the room when I read an actual article, about...that they were opening the KGB archives now, and it turns out, guess what? Alger Hiss, this hero for liberals for generations, victim of the witch hunts of the Red Scare, was, actually, very likely a spy.

JOSH and HRISHI: Right.

PAUL: And how that would have been shattering to a character like Rob, who I think, in the script, I don't know if it made it into the script, but part of the story was he had done his thesis on this fictional Alger Hiss.

HRISHI: Yeah.

PAUL: As a, you know, wrongful conviction. And then Aaron tied that to the big block of cheese and everything. I think Rob would keep giving me hugs in the Warner Brothers gym, and I think it might be because –

JOSH: [laughs]

PAUL: – he saw my name was on that episode.

JOSH: Is it awkward when Rob Lowe hugs you at the gym? That feels awkward.

PAUL: Ummm....

JOSH: Pre- or post-workout?

PAUL: Yeah. [laughs] It depends on how sweaty he was.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: I was just thinking about that detail, about Sam writing the essay about the Alger Hiss figure, and then having to deal with this, because I just interviewed Pete Buttigieg, who, when he was he in high school, won an award for an essay that he wrote about Bernie Sanders, who he now might have to run against in the primary.

PAUL: [laughs]

JOSH: Wow.

PAUL: One never knows, do one?

JOSH: And the essay was about, "My God, that guy is old."

[Laughter]

HRISHI: It was a "Profile in Courage"-style essay, that he found to be someone he admired, and it just felt like a very *West Wing* kind of thing.

PAUL: [cross talk] Yeah.

HRISHI: To imagine these two people in the same primary fight, and one of them getting to say, "I wrote about you in high school."

PAUL: I stole the whole thing again when I wrote "Separation of Powers" when Toby talks about the justice he's trying to get to resign. And he gives that speech about when he saw him when he was a college student.

[West Wing Episode 5.07 excerpt]

TOBY: You know when you go out West, how they say, "Don't miss the Grand Canyon, it's one of the few things in life when you actually see it, it doesn't disappoint." That's Roy Ashland."

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It was a great line.

JOSH: Fantastic.

PAUL: Yeah, well, you had the actors to do that. You know? Just seeing it on Rob's face, when he's throwing the sugar packets into the...whatever that kitchen appliance is [laughs].

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

PAUL: Down in the mess, and he's about to go up and tell her who her grandfather really was. That's just great acting. So, you can tell those emotional stories, and then see them pay off, whereas so often in television, you're in the writers' room, you write it, with tears in your eyes, at the keyboards, and then it gets to the stage, and they just don't get it. Or it turns into something else. So, you just move on. But in *West Wing* you could count on the cast, all--a tribute to you, Josh--would get everything. They wouldn't miss anything, and they would also bring so much more.

HRISHI: Can I ask you about another favorite moment, in terms of performance, on one of your episodes? Allison Janney's laugh, in "Privateers."

[West Wing Episode 4.18 excerpt]

C.J.: [cries laughing] Sorry, I was – I was thinking of this thing. From – this thing that just happened. With the deficit. I'm – I'm so –

AMY: Oh God.

[end excerpt]

PAUL: Well, that I'm also proud of. That was also my first experience writing with Deb Cahn, and it was, like, my favorite collaboration on the show. 'Cause she was new to the show, it was just, "Here comes John Wells again, saying, 'Ah, you gotta write a script. It'll never make it on, but, you know, we gotta have one in reserve.'" And that was the year we had a whole bunch of new staff writers, one of them being Debora, and John said, "Well, you don't have to write it all yourself, just pick somebody." And, I said...well, it was so clear that she was the rookie of the year, so I asked her. And we came up with that story together, and we both share a sense of humor, which you can see in "The Supremes" that we share with Aaron. Looking back now, it's hard to figure out which were our jokes and which were Aaron's jokes, but we had such a good time with that story.

HRISHI: And that one subplot is just a riot.

PAUL: [laughs] Yeah.

HRISHI: I mean, everything about that. I don't think that I've ever laughed at an episode of TV as hard as I have, watching C.J. try and stifle her own laugh, in that I cried laughing the first time I saw it.

PAUL: Well, imagine, yeah, just having your name on that episode, and getting to watch it. It was such a joy.

HRISHI: Yeah.

PAUL: But that's the thing, the whole cast could do both. There is a very specialized skill set, being a Sorkin performer, and it's a very narrow band who can do it. And, Josh, you're right there.

JOSH: Thank you, Paul.

PAUL: There is you, there's Allison, there's Brad, there's, I mean, all of them. John, Richard, Janel, Dulé. Those are the cast of *The West Wing*, by the way.

[Laughter]

JOSH: Most people listening do not know that. So that was helpful.

PAUL: [cross talk] The ability to do the comedy and the drama at the same time, and bring the values to both of them, Aaron so knows how to write to both in the same speech. And you kind of get used to that, so when you try and do it, you know, in a different context, in, like, a much more traditional soap, or procedural, or something like that, you'll drive yourself crazy. And that's happened to me a few times.

JOSH: You've gone on to write for... you've written for *Madam Secretary* and *Designated Survivor*, yes?

PAUL: Oh, Great shows, yeah, but much more, you know, straight down, you know, tell a good story. You know, *Designated Survivor* had a thriller dimension to it, which I loved, but you just have to learn pretty quickly that those are not character driven, kind of family love stories the way *West Wing* was.

HRISHI: What did you feel about *Designated Survivor* when it first came your way? Did you feel, like, "Wait a second, this is part of an episode that we wrote in Season One. They've turned an entire series into it.

[Designated Survivor Episode 1.01 excerpt]

FEMALE VOICE: *Guy's never been elected to anything...*

MALE VOICE: *Did you know President Richmond fired him this morning? Now he's the President...*

SECOND MALE VOICE: *Maybe he'll realize he has no business running the country.*

[end excerpt]

PAUL: I said, "Good for you." I mean, there was so many episodes of *West Wing*, we said, "You know what? We should just steal this from Aaron, spin it off, and make it a series." I mean, Lawrence and I talked all the time about, "Well, what happens, what do we do after *West Wing*?" And we said, "Well, you know, there is this fantastic British series that's political, really based on Richard III, where the hero talks straight to the camera, and it's all about this guy who becomes prime minister and a murderer at the same time. We gotta do *House of Cards*."

JOSH: Hah.

PAUL: And then we kept calling, and all the rights are tied up. So, more power to 'em. I was delighted. I kind of had to be the, little bit the skeleton at the feast, though, because I kept telling them, "Look, *Designated Survivor* is not set up to be *West Wing*. You want it to be *West Wing*. You want him to sign a bill every week." It's not *that*. It is, you know, an airport thriller, based in the White House, who blew up the government? And if you deviate from that, you're not gonna succeed, though we tried every which way to make that show work. *West Wing* itself, I mean, in some of my favorite episodes, had a thriller aspect. The end of Season Four, into Season One, Aaron has done thrillers. He does it very well, he knows the rules. But, you know, the great thing about *West Wing* is we could devote a few thriller episodes to assassinating the chief of intelligence of Kumar, and then we could go back to, you know, "Privateers" and just do a straight out, drawing room farce.

HRISHI: Can I ask you, what lead to your eventual departure from *The West Wing*?

PAUL: It was time. I wanted to stay around through year five, 'cause I had such admiration for John, and that was a huge lesson. That was great, but it was also, it was time to do my own thing. And, you know, at that point, the show was such a hit, that I had my pick. And so, there was this new show *House*, with Hugh Laurie, "Oh, that looks good, but it's a medical show on Fox, it'll never work." "Oh, there's this show *Grey's Anatomy*. No, they don't need another AR. I

know, what's going to be the big hit that's going to take me through my career, is *LAX* with Heather Locklear."

[Laughter]

PAUL: "It's *Love Boat* in an airport. It's time for just pure fun." And, I think it lasted, maybe it lasted thirteen episodes, but that was it.

JOSH: It's a crap shoot, this business we're in.

PAUL: It's a crap shoot.

JOSH: What are you working on these days?

PAUL: My own stuff.

JOSH: Nice.

PAUL: I'm about to embark on a medical thriller. I'll finally get to do one of those.

JOSH: Fantastic.

HRISHI: Paul, can you tell us a story about starting on *The Newsroom* while we have you? I mean, that's interesting that you and Aaron then came back together for that show.

PAUL: It was delightful. You know, after *West Wing*, and after Aaron left to go, you know, waste his time on things like *Social Network*, we would still get together for drinks about twice a year. Me, and Kevin Falls, and Eli, and sometimes Alex Graves, sometimes Brad, we would just kind of coax Aaron out of hiding to find out what he was working on. And he sat down, and he said, "No, no, this is – this is real, I've got to do this show about a newsroom, and I just don't know. And it's supposed to be about real headlines. I don't know how you do that." He was genuinely asking. It was me, and Eli, and Kevin Falls. And I think our consensus was, "Well, you better not do that." But he said, "Well, okay, if you have any ideas, I will – whatever you want, I will pay any of you any amount of money to come help me on this show."

JOSH: That's a good offer.

PAUL: [cross talk] And I learned at that point never to believe Aaron. The next thing I know, he wanted me as kind of the old hand, to run the writers' room, which otherwise consisted of a group of writers, all of whom had worked in actual newsrooms, but really hadn't done much television. And a lot of, like, brilliant people, but I had to quickly tell them this was...he doesn't write a show like anybody else, and I think the smartest thing I said is, "Really, consider yourself producers. We're all here to get in front of Aaron what Aaron needs to write the show himself, every episode. And please do not try and get any kind of writing credit or story credit. It's just not worth it, and it creates a weird tension.

JOSH: [cross talk] Tension.

PAUL: Oedipal, some kind of neurotic dynamic, that you just don't want to wade into.

HRISHI: That's so interesting. You know, I always wondered about that. That writers are credited as producers. And when you put it that way, in the context of a Sorkin show, you're right, that is actually the perfect title, for someone in the writers' room.

PAUL: Yes. Doesn't mean that you don't write. You do a hell of a lot of writing, but writing in the sense of story breaking, which... as Dave Mamet taught us is the hardest thing.

JOSH: Mm hmm.

PAUL: He was so delighted when he could finally sit in a room full of writers and do the hardest part, which is break a story. "So, I've been doing this alone in a room."

[Laughter]

PAUL: Delighted. It is the hardest part.

JOSH: [cross talk] That's fantastic.

PAUL: So that's really what we were there for in *The West Wing*, and that's what we were there for in *Newsroom*. Also, we were under this weird, kind of Kabuki... restriction, that it had to be an actual news story. And out of that, we had to create a fictional story in the newsroom, encompassing whatever that news story was. So that was a challenge I don't think you'd see on any other show, unless you're doing, like – it was a historical drama, I guess, when you come down to it.

JOSH: Yeah.

PAUL: But the history was one years old.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: [cross talk] Right. Well said.

PAUL: But you still had the historical facts of Obama in the White House, and the rise of the Tea Party, and all that. It was an interesting time to be covering that. But we had a blast. A lot of, like, really cool research, a lot of getting on the phones with the actual anchors. The best experience, the one that does compare to *West Wing* is when we did the night Obama went to the East Room and announced that we had gotten Osama bin Laden.

[Obama Speech, May 1, 2011 excerpt]

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Good evening. Tonight, I can report to the American people, and to the world, the United States has conducted an operation that killed Osama bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaeda.

[end excerpt]

PAUL: It was a gift, that story, because--I forget who was the C.J. at the time in the real White House--but he had texted all the anchors of the five major news networks, including CNN, MSNBC, and Fox, and said, "President to speak at 10:30. Be in your chairs." Basically.

[laughter]

PAUL: And wouldn't say what it was. And so, for the next two hours, all the best minds in the news business were frantically trying to figure out what it could be. Now, in retrospect, it's obvious. It's obvious, but it wasn't to anybody then. And, you know, what came out later, the whole...meeting in the Sit Room. It's a very *West Wing* episode, was going on at the White House. Including the Correspondent's Dinner. I mean –

JOSH: [cross talk] Right. That's right.

PAUL: The Correspondents' Dinner was happening, and Obama was cracking these great jokes, while sixty percent of his mind was going, "My presidency could end tomorrow, if this thing goes south. I could be Jimmy Carter tomorrow."

JOSH: Right.

PAUL: But he had made the decision, you know, they were in the air, it was tremendous. But what was great is we got to tell it from the news people's point of view.

[The Newsroom Episode 1.07 excerpt]

CHARLIE: The President's speaking in ninety minutes on a matter of national security. That's all we know right now. Thirty minutes from now, I want to know a lot more than that.

MAC: Four people to a cab, let's go!

WILL: What do you think it is?

CHARLIE: It could be Gaddafi, it could be Iran. He could've fired on a ship in the Gulf.

MAC: Jimmy Carter just got back from North Korea.

CHARLIE: We could've learned something. We could be under attack.

WILL: But what do you think it is?

CHARLIE: I think we got bin Laden.

[end excerpt]

PAUL: We talked to the real ones, Stephanopoulos, and Williams, and Wolf Blitzer, and we learned all these smart things, like there's guys who watch certain parking lots at the Pentagon, and if this parking lot is full, that's, "Oh, those are the generals and admirals who run CENTCOM."

JOSH: Huh.

PAUL: "CENTCOM is the Middle East, it must be something in the Middle East." Is, you know, is it an alien invasion? Is it an act of terrorism? "Well, he's not speaking from the Oval Office. If he

were speaking from the Oval Office it would be bad news. It would be another 9/11. He's speaking from the East Room. East Room's only good news." All this really smart stuff. And that was a gift. Everything else was a lot harder.

HRISHI: Eli, by the way, had this to say about you, Paul. He said that you're a very smart guy, and that you have an almost savant-like sense of story, which Aaron really relied on.

PAUL: Well, thank you, Eli. I could say the same for him. I mean, Eli and Lawrence brought so many good stories. You know? And that's, to me, a little bit of the irony of *West Wing*, is we rotated story credit, you know, "Story by" that you see at the beginning of every episode.

HRISHI: Yeah.

PAUL: *Sometimes* it has something to do with who came up with who actually came up with the story. The great inspiration in the room, the great pitch, the great memo, which you'll never see, was somebody else. Though Aaron always knew. 'Cause I'd heard the story that the British ambassador couldn't come to the White House if they'd invited the... Gerry Adams, the former head of the IRA, to a meeting at the White House. And we needed another story for Marbury, "Well, why don't we do this story?" And so he goes out and gets drunk with Toby, and they have, you know, one of those great Aaron bar room scenes where they just start swapping their opinion of Irish-American writers and Irish writers.

[West Wing Episode 3.16 excerpt]

TOBY: Wasn't it James Joyce who said, "History is a nightmare from which I'm trying to awake"?

LORD MARBURY: Yes, but it was your own great Irish master Eugene O'Neill, who said, "There is no present or future, only the past happening over and over again."

[end excerpt]

PAUL: Aaron used it all, like, word for word. And then, came into the writers' room, and said, "Paul, we don't do this anymore. But I think we should really do a shared credit on this one.

[Laughter]

PAUL: And I said, "Bless you, Aaron, but, you know, it's your script, these are your words, please just give me a story credit, and that's fine. And that's how it happened.

JOSH: Dude, you blew it.

PAUL: No, I turned around, and Kevin Falls was smiling and shaking his head, and saying, "You just saved your job."

JOSH: [laughs] Ah. Okay, well, it may have been three-dimensional chess, there.

PAUL: Yeah. I'm glad you have your show, though, to show what kind of, 'cause these are heroes to me, are Kevin, and Eli, and Deb, and Lawrence. And some of the consultants. It was just the best group of people. Year one, we were given this flurry of awards, and it got to the

point when they just didn't have enough of the cast or writers to go accept them all, so they would send me out.

[Laughter]

PAUL: To get whatever, you know, the Mackie –

JOSH: [cross talk] Go pick that up.

PAUL: – Award for Reproductive Rights, or something. And I started coming up with this boiler-plate speech, but I really meant it. It's – the show cured me of my cynicism.

JOSH: Beautiful.

PAUL: Knowing the people, they really were doing it to make a difference. And working tremendously. And that's the drug for all of them, is you get to affect people's lives. And, you know, hopefully for the better. And it was just tremendously inspiring. And, you know, I never got over that. I got to go back a couple of years ago, to speak on a panel about copyright rights, and Google, and everything else, and the whole new universe. And one of the moderators said, "Oh, you're wanting to talk to the speechwriting staff." This was Obama's last year. And so I walked into this room, and they were all twenty-something, they were all as fresh-faced as you were, Josh, and it was the real life, you know, Will. And Brad. And they had just been having a debate about whether Donna was a good assistant or not.

[Laughter]

PAUL: In the real world. And all of them said, "Oh, yeah. I got into this 'cause of *West Wing*."

JOSH: Isn't that remarkable?

PAUL: Yeah.

HRISHI: Paul, thanks so much.

JOSH: Thanks for a fantastic interview.

PAUL: Well, you guys are fantastic. Keep it up.

JOSH: Alright. Big thanks to Paul Redford. That interview was a long time in the making.

HRISHI: Yeah. I'm so glad we're doing these, because it lets us go back and catch up with people. I mean, we should have, really, there were so many episodes we could have had Paul on for.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: And I'm glad we got him. Even though we're past his tenure. Thanks all of you for listening. We'll be back next week to discuss Episode 6.10, "Faith-Based Initiative."

JOSH: With special guest, *boooooo*, Bradley Whitford.

HRISHI: A new writer to *The West Wing*.

JOSH: That's right, actually. It'll be interesting to talk to him about wearing a new hat.

HRISHI: Until then, you can follow us at all of the places. Thewestwingweekly.com. And thanks to Margaret Miller, Zach McNeese, and Nick Song, for helping us make this show, including this episode.

JOSH: *The West Wing Weekly* remains a proud member of Radiotopia, a fabulous collection of cutting-edge podcasts. You can find out more about the other shows at radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

PAUL: What's next?

[Outro Music]