

The West Wing Weekly
1.15: Celestial Navigation
Guest: Jay Carney

[Intro Music]

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

JOSH: And I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: Today we're talking about "Celestial Navigation." It's season one, episode 15.

JOSH: It first aired on February ... I hate saying "February." I really I can't wait until we're out of I think we've got two more episodes, and then we'll get into the episodes that aired in March of 2000. But this one aired in February on February 16th, 2000. Do you not pronounce the first R? Is that the secret? You just call it Febuary?

HRISHI: Exactly.

JOSH: Really? I can't bring myself to do that. It first aired on February that doesn't sound right. February 16th, 2000. In any event, it was written by Aaron Sorkin, and the story was by Dee Dee Myers and Lawrence O'Donnell. And it was directed by the fabulous Christopher Misiano.

HRISHI: And this episode was submitted as one of two for Allison Janney's Emmy win for the season. And coming up later, we're going to be talking to former real life White House Press Secretary Jay Karny. But first, let's talk about the episode. Josh, what'd you think?

JOSH: The first thing I noticed was the "previously" on this episode.

HRISHI: Right? It's a who's who.

JOSH: Exactly. It's all the characters have we had this before and I've just not noticed it?

HRISHI: We've never had this before, but we are going to have it again.

JOSH: Okay. It is really just everyone saying, "Hi, I'm Sam." "Hi, I'm CJ." "Hi, I'm" I mean, it's it's crazy. And most of them are also saying what their titles are. Obviously it's meant to it's like saying, "Hi, viewers. You may not have watched previously, but here's our cast of characters." "I'm LeoLeobobeobananafanafefeo." It's weird. Really weird.

HRISHI: I like when that happens, because it's an indication that, for the most part, this is going to be a good stand alone episode.

JOSH: Ah, good point.

HRISHI: They aren't referencing a lot of previous plot points.

JOSH: Right. They're saying you don't need to know a lot of plot, you just need to know who the characters are.

HRISHI: This is also a first besides the who's who, they're we get the first example of "The West Wing" playing with time.

JOSH: Ah, yes.

HRISHI: It's the first nonlinearly told episode.

JOSH: Well that was going to be my first question. Well, first, I usually go with the general, how did you like this episode?

HRISHI: Oh, right.

JOSH: Are we going to read the NBC

HRISHI: I I should

JOSH: Do you want to read the NBC synopsis?

HRISHI: I'll I'll yeah, I'll do the NBC synopsis so you can make fun of me.

JOSH: Well, this is the secret that the that the home listener does not know. It all seems like you get it beautifully in one go, and they have no idea how many stops and starts and what great difficulty you seem to have reading the NBC synopsis week after week. The secrets of editing.

HRISHI: I'm terrible at speaking. I'm pretty good at editing.

JOSH: No, I think they're strangely written. They're weirdly dense and sometimes oddly worded.

HRISHI: Right. Yeah. They don't feel like they're meant to be read out loud. Here's the NBC synopsis "Sam and Toby are dispatched to Connecticut for some damage control, and to secure the secret release of President Bartlet's choice for Supreme Court, who's been jailed for alleged drunk driving and resisting arrest. Meanwhile, Josh is a guest lecturer at a college class to talk about working for the president, and he recounts the previous week's flurries, which include his feeble attempt to fill in as the White House Spokesman at a press conference where he promises that the President has a, quote, 'secret plan to fight inflation,' and the media glare that engulfs the African American HUD secretary, who publicly labeled a prominent Republican as a racist."

JOSH: Nicely done. I counted maybe two and a half stops and restarts. Okay, what do you think of this episode?

HRISHI: You know, on IMDB, you can actually vote for individual episodes of a show?

JOSH: You mean rate them?

HRISHI: Rate them. Yeah, sorry. The rating for this episode on IMDB: 9.0. This is a fan favorite.

JOSH: 9.0? I'd be I'd be curious to know what the average rating of a WW episode is.

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: That could be relevant data.

HRISHI: There was a chart I saw that actually mapped out the IMBD ratings over the seasons so I'll find that and I'll post it on the wet site.

JOSH: I actually I really like this episode. There are a lot of things I like about it. But canvassing the internet, as I like to do, it seems to be universally beloved. I'm not surprised to hear that it's a 9.0 on IMDB. It seems to be a huge fan favorite, no?

HRISHI: I think that's true. Absolutely. A lot of people have mentioned to us in comments and Tweets that "Celestial Navigation" is one of their alltime favorite episodes. So let's get into it.

JOSH: Okay.

HRISHI: It starts off with Josh speaking at the Marjorie DuPont Lecture Series. And as far as I can tell, Marjorie DuPont is not a real person. I thought maybe she was.

JOSH: But Margaret Dumont am I making this up? Wait a second. Who's the who's the woman who was always on the in the Marx Brothers' movies?

HRISHI: Yeah, that's that's very good.

JOSH: I'm telling you, that's either conscious or subconsciously what Aaron was thinking.

HRISHI: That's pretty great.

JOSH: I took it as possibly a real person. As soon as you just said, "that's not a real person," I thought, "oh, my god, it's Margaret Dumont." He's a he's a Marx Brothers, fan is Aaron Sorkin. And there is some wacky humor in this episode, so it might have been a little subtle call out.

HRISHI: Even right away, Josh sits down and he puts his mic on and he pulls on his tie and does a little overbite in a supremely goofy bit of physical comedy.

JOSH: Oh, Brad Whitford. Oh, Brad Whitford. I think that's his subtle way of signaling to the audience that he is white. In case we missed it. That is a white man's overbite. Most white men save that for when they're dancing. He does that a lot. I shouldn't probably point out someone else's acting tricks, because I'm sure I've got my own less effective ones. But he does do a little "I'm cute" overbite.

HRISHI: Actually, let me correct myself. The first thing that we see is not Josh speaking, it's actually him on a phone call with Sam. And we find out that Roberto Mendoza has been arrested for drunk driving, and then from that more high-stakes start, it's then revealed that Josh is actually backstage at this lecture series. And then he goes and gets into what becomes the sort of Greek chorus version of narrating the episode.

JOSH: Yeah. And let me ask you this, as long as we're starting we're talking about the framework. And I don't know, I may have ruined myself. This podcast may be ruining my ability to I have a very, what I think is a lovely quality. I can watch things and enjoy them really setting aside my critical faculties and get whatever there is to enjoy out of something. If I go to a movie or whatever, you know, I'm not always sitting and nitpicking. I've now turned myself into a nitpicker because I'm watching and I'm looking for things to discuss, both good and maybe things that I enjoyed less. And so maybe now I've just turned myself into a person who's noticing things he wouldn't normally. But what did you think of this framework and the choice to use the present day and the with flash backs to what happened just previously?

HRISHI: You know, we recently asked the audience to give us a name for what to call it when Josh sets up the whole premise by explaining what's happening to Donna, my favorite of which I think is TellaDonna.

JOSH: Telladonna is good.

HRISHI: It's really good?

JOSH: Do we know whom to credit?

HRISHI: There's several people who actually suggested that simultaneously, which is

JOSH: Okay? So group

HRISHI: A great example of the high find.

JOSH: Back pat to to everyone who came up with telladonna.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: That's pretty damn clever. That's really good.

HRISHI: It's really good. In this episode I was thinking instead of Josh having this conversation with Donna, he's instead doing it with an entire room of people standing in for Donna.

JOSH: Ah, interesting, yes. It's an interesting framework, and it's very well executed, but I was left wondering what the net positive is for telling the story in this way. That there are very dramatic aspects of the story, and why not have them happening as we see them? Particularly and this is where I think maybe I'm picking up on stuff I just shouldn't like, ah, dude, why look for trouble? But the nagging thing the whole time I watched this episode is that the events that Josh is describing are so recent.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: It's the previous, like, 36 hours, so that there are even elements of it where I would think he'd still be in the middle of crisis. You know, he's had this disastrous press conference, and now there are all these things unfolding, and all this damage control. And I think they would still be in it. Not only would they still be in it, but I think the audience he's talking to would know about it. You know, you said the President has a secret plan to fight inflation. I would think this would all be unfolding in the news and in papers, and he'd be still with his feet to the fire. And now he's telling it kind of like, oh, let me tell you about a crazy week from the administration that happened six years ago. But he's talking about stuff, like, that just happened. He'd still be right in the middle of it. That's why I don't quite it almost didn't quite work to have this framework given the timeframe of the events of the episode.

HRISHI: My only theory is that it gives a chance to have Sam and Toby in the middle of the crisis management part of trying to rescue Roberto Mendoza throughout the whole episode. We get to dip into that scene every few moments, which is kind of, like, the most suspenseful part, I guess, while also still telling the things that led up to that moment. You know, you get to have them both in the White House and then in the car.

JOSH: But couldn't you still be cutting back and forth while it's happening? I think the question the moderator asks him and mind you, Josh spends the entire episode answering the first question of this chat for the students, which to me would be weird. You'd think the guy would be like, "I really was looking for a twominute answer." But.

HRISHI: Right?

JOSH: The question he asks him is "what's a typical day like?" And then it sounds like he should be telling this story from the safe remove of these are no longer events that the White House is dealing with. But in fact he's talking about something everything that's breaking as it happens.

HRISHI: Yeah, it is kind of a dangerous route to take, especially when you've got a year and a half to work off of. Talk about one of those days.

JOSH: Right. Right. That's what I would have thought. There's there are much safer areas to discuss. And he's really I think also at several times, he's making light of, and getting laughs from the audience, the stuff that has to do with major [BLEEP] ups of his, and stuff that he should be still still dealing with the fallout from. But all of a sudden, you know, it's almost as if this is something that's all taken care of and, like, now it's just something he can make light of and like: "Oh, phew, boy things were tough for me then." But it's just it's happening now, basically.

HRISHI: Yeah. Well let's get into that then.

JOSH: Okay.

HRISHI: So "a secret plan to fight inflation" is a little catch phrase that comes out of this episode that people love to say.

[West Wing Episode 1.15 excerpt]

JOSH LYMAN: The President will do everything in his power to maintain the robust economy that has created millions of new jobs, improved productivity, and kept a lid on inflation.

KATIE: But he has no plan to address inflation specifically?

JOSH LYMAN: 24 Ph.D.s on the Counsel of Economic Advisors, Katie? They have a plan to fight inflation.

DANNY CONCANNON: Is the reason you won't tell us about it that it's a secret?

JOSH LYMAN: Yeah, Danny, we have a secret inflation plan.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And that comes out of this really funny sequence of Josh Lyman stepping up to the plate cocky and full of hubris, and then taking a big swing and a miss. And it's played for laughs, but you felt like it was a more serious thing that he shouldn't be joking about?

JOSH: Well, he gets called to task, right? I think there's a scene in the Oval where President Bartlet lays into him pretty seriously about his missteps. He pretty clearly, to me, seems to be sarcastic at the moment. He's talking to Danny Concannon.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: I don't know if I would necessarily buy the oh, no he's created a huge thing.

HRISHI: Right?

JOSH: And I think he even does say

[West Wing Episode 1.15 excerpt]

JOSH LYMAN: I was talking to Danny. I was kidding.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah?

JOSH: But it doesn't go away.

HRISHI: Yeah. They're also getting revenge on him for being so condescending to them when he first walks out. I mean, he's just a dick from the first minute.

JOSH: Yeah. He tells someone his question is stupid.

HRISHI: Oh, yeah. Let's talk about that question actually. So the first question that comes is about the President smoking, and the question Josh gets was, "When was the last time the President had a cigarette?" And a follow-up of, "If the President's going to be so adamantly anti-tobacco, why is it unreasonable to ask if he's a smoker?" And sometimes we talk about the parallels between the West Wing and things that they're drawing upon from a real world, usually, like, the Clinton administration or previous stories from Presidential history, but this reminded me a lot of President Obama who was notoriously a smoker and tried to quit. And when he signed an anti-smoking law, he also got a question sort of like this.

[audio]

REPORTER: How many cigarettes a day do you now smoke? Do you smoke alone or in the presence of other people? And do you believe the new law would help you to quit? If so, why?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Well, first of all, the new law that was put in place is not about me. It's about the next generation of kids coming up. So I think it's fair, Margaret, to just say that you just think it's neat to ask me about my smoking as opposed to it being relevant to my new law. But that's fine. I understand it's it's it's an interesting human it's an interesting human interest story. Look, I have said before that, as a former smoker, I constantly struggle with it. Have I fallen off the wagon sometimes? Yes. The am I a daily smoker? A constant smoker? No. I don't do it in front of my kids. I don't do it in front of my family. And you know, I I would say that I am 95% cured, but there are times where there are times where I mess up. And, I mean, I've said this before. I get this question about once every month or so, and you know, I I don't know what to tell you other than the fact that, like folks who go to AA, you know, once you've gone down this path, then, you know, it's something you continually struggle with, which is precisely why the legislation we signed was so important, because what we don't want is kids going down that path in the first place.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Good answer, right? Refreshing candor.

HRISHI: Yeah. That would have been a great answer. President Bartlet, yeah, he bummed a cigarette off you. He's antismoking because he knows exactly how bad the effects are.

JOSH: Yeah. Yeah. Well, one of the nice things about this episode and of course, about that scene in particular is we've been discussing in the episodes leading up to this one that there seems to be an undervaluing, and sometimes a questioning, of CJ's abilities and the extent to which she fulfills her job duties well. And then we get "Celestial Navigation," which in many ways is a love letter to CJ and how good she really is at her job. And nobody learns that lesson more than Josh, having to do it for five minutes.

HRISHI: I was wondering if this is a byproduct of having Dee Dee Myers on your writing staff you get to have a little wish fulfillment of, like, a moment of revenge of like, oh, you think anybody can do this job?

JOSH: Why don't you try it? Yeah. Yeah.

HRISHI: Before we even get to that part, I'm going to jump backwards to another Josh thing where the HUD Secretary has gotten into trouble because she called a senator racist. And at one point, Toby asks Josh, he says, "why are you so good humored about this?" Josh says, "she was baited." And she was baited, and she was right. He didn't also add, just like I was in episode one.

JOSH: Oh, about with Mary Marsh.

HRISHI: Even though it's not said, it feels like a call back to Josh being like, this is what happened to

me. And I was right then, and she's right now. But, of course, she ends up having to do the same thing that Josh did, which is to make an apology despite the fact that everybody agrees with her that, yeah, Wooden is a racist. And she has to eat crow.

JOSH: And Josh's circumstance in the first episode the general consensus among the senior staff and the President and Leo is that he should and must apologize yes?

HRISHI: Yeah. I think that he has to apologize in order to save face for the administration and for him to save his job.

JOSH: Right. Here it seems that given some time, and maybe having CJ in the picture, it might not have ended up with O'Leary having to apologize. But what ends up happening is President Bartlet, on the spot with the question put to him, speaks off the cuff and says, "she really owes him an apology." And that leads regardless of what they might what conclusion they might have come to had they had a little more breathing room and no public aspect of their reaction in the mix, they might not have forced her. But the way it plays out, she just has to because now the President has come out

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: publicly and said, "she owes him an apology." So now whether or not they would have come to that conclusion on their own, she has to cover the President in a way, and issue the apology.

HRISHI: Yeah. Yeah. She might have lit the match, but they poured gasoline on it.

[West Wing Episode 1.15 excerpt]

DEBBIE: Oh, for crying out loud, Leo, when are you guys going to stop running for President?

LEO: When angels stand on pinheads, Debbie. We need their votes on a number of issues, including, by the way, the budget for the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

DEBBIE: Attacking HUD is code for attacking blacks.

LEO: Thanks, having been born yesterday on a turnip truck.

DEBBIE: Do you not think it is my role as the highest ranking African American woman in government to point it out?

LEO: I think, Debbie, your role, first and foremost, is to serve the President, a task today at which you failed spectacularly.

DEBBIE: Leo

LEO: You're going to apologize.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Nice performance in one scene, and never seen again as HUD Secretary, CCH Pounder. Or do we see her again?

HRISHI: This is her only appearance on the show. Did you know that she was the other person who was up for the role of CJ Cregg? She was the other major

JOSH: Contender for the role.

HRISHI: Contender. Yeah.

JOSH: I think I did know that. Did you know that I roundly beat her and Jeff Probst on "Celebrity Jeopardy"?

HRISHI: Was it just one game or was it, like, a whole tournament?

JOSH: That was one game. Just one episode.

HRISHI: Hm. Do you remember the Final Jeopardy question?

JOSH: It had something to do with

HRISHI: I should say, the Final Jeopardy answer.

JOSH: Right, yes. Very good point. I can't remember. It had something to do with Joe DiMaggio leaving this baseball to this woman in his will, and it was Marilyn Monroe. Playing that game I was very, very nervous about it, because especially in "Celebrity Jeopardy". No matter how well you do, you still seem stupid. So the questions are so easy that if you get anything wrong, you seem like an idiot.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: But I wanted to be so far ahead that I couldn't blow it on Final Jeopardy, because I know that just the pressure and my mind could just completely shut down. And luckily I did I was able I was so far ahead that I was able to bet a mere \$18 on Final Jeopardy as a shoutout to the Jews in the audience, because 18 is a propitious number in Judaism because the letters for the word Chai, or "life" in Hebrew, add up to 18.

HRISHI: Huh.

JOSH: So I got a little shoutout to the Jews. I would, years later, play again on a Tournament of Champions and in a in very poor judgment, take two Ativan to calm my nerves

HRISHI: Oh, no.

JOSH: and lose horribly to Harry Shearer after wing the practice game by a huge margin. I did not do too well on the final so.

HRISHI: Okay well after this I'm going to scour the internet for both of those?

JOSH: I'd rather you didn't. It was a really poor showing. But where were we?

HRISHI: CCH Pounder.

JOSH: Yeah, she was pretty great. She is fired up in that. It's actually sad because it's you almost you see the fire go out of her in this scene. At the top of the scene, she is worked up. She's righteously angry. She does not like being called to task for simply saying what she thinks is the truth. And by the end of this scene, Leo has laid it out for her in the starkest terms. If you want to keep your job, you're going to apologize. And you see sort of the air go out of her, and, you know, she keeps her dignity, but she makes the decision that most of us would make.

HRISHI: Yeah. I love the exchange that they have where she says

[West Wing Episode 1.15 excerpt]

DEBBIE: I can't.

LEO: *You can.*

DEBBIE: *I won't.*

LEO: *You. Will.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: it's a couple syllables sort of iambic pentameter, but it really sounds like it's out of a play.

JOSH: Hm.

HRISHI: And a great scene. I, I wish she came back. I would love to hang out more with this character.

JOSH: Yeah. Well, maybe this is a good time to launch into a discussion of there is clearly an underlying current in this episode of racism, or potential racism.

HRISHI: Mmhm.

JOSH: This coupled with Mendoza's arrest. You know, the whole thing with O'Leary and Wooden. It's clear to me at least Leo makes it clear that he thinks she's right, that Wooden probably is a racist. And Leo may even agree with the broader brush painting of the Republican party, but Leo gives us reason to believe that what O'Leary said about Wooden is probably right on the nose. And we understand that the pragmatic politics of it, especially after President Bartlet says what he says, dictates that she's going to have to apologize nonetheless.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: I thought there was a slight weakness in the episode in that the Mendoza story line, he's been stopped, he's coming from Nova Scotia is that right?

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Which is kind of funny. He decides he's a oneofakind guy who does things the way he wants to do them. And so the he's been called to the White House, but he's going to take several days to do it, because he's on vacation. He thinks he'd like to drive and take the scenic route. He wants to stop in Connecticut to do a little antiquing with his family. He gets pulled over, we learn, for a DUI. It's clear from Sam's initial reaction he knows he can't possibly have been drunk. And then we will later find out that, in fact, Mendoza has a medical condition and he there's no way he can't be drinking alcohol. If he had had enough to be impaired, he'd be dead. And this bothered it bothered me a little bit that we are meant to just assume that Mendoza being pulled over and booked was racial profiling and it was racist cops. And I want to be careful here. I'm not saying that that's not a possibility, maybe even a probability, but I felt like one little weakness in the episode is that we're given nothing to go on other than Mendoza feels it was racial profiling. And that's significant. That's his take on it. And all our heroes just immediately assume that that's the case, too. But we don't see the incident. It's not really discussed with any of the main players other than Mendoza. We don't get the cop's side.

HRISHI: Sam is the first person to articulate it when he introduces this thing to CJ. She's like, what was he pulled over for? And Sam says

[West Wing Episode 1.15 excerpt]

SAM: Driving while being Hispanic.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Right. So and that's based on what? In terms of what we're given, it's based on the fact that Mendoza was pulled over and he wasn't drunk. Those are the facts that we know.

HRISHI: Right. We don't know if Sam is stating a fact or his opinion in that moment?

JOSH: Right. Well, I mean, it can only be his opinion, right? He wasn't there. What he knows is that Mendoza wasn't drinking and was pulled over for drinking. But that happens. I myself was pulled over once. I was driving home from a dinner or something, and it was late and maybe I was tired. And I was being followed. And all of a sudden this was not a pleasant experience. I heard, like, the a cop saying, you're not maintaining your lane. They didn't ask me to do a Breathalyzer, and they I was not arrested. But it is conceivable that he was driving erratically, or they had some reason to pull him over other than the fact that he's he was Hispanic and driving through Connecticut.

HRISHI: Hm.

JOSH: I would rather have either seen the incident so that I could decide for myself, yeah, this is these guys have a problem with him because of his race, or have heard gotten a little bit more from the cops. I mean, when we finally see the cops, I don't know, they strike me as cowed by the whole thing. And I don't know. I felt it was almost like there was a bully pulpit of, like, well, all our hero characters, all the regulars, are saying this is racial profiling, and that's why we should just all assume like, I don't think we were as the viewer, I don't think we were meant to wonder whether there was a racial element to the arrest or not.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: We're just supposed to assume it. And I felt like the way the reason we were supposed to assume it is because our heroes are telling us that's the case, even though they don't really know either. Am I wrong?

HRISHI: Well, I think you're right that we're not meant to wonder as an audience if it is or is not racial profiling. I certainly never did in all the times I've seen this episode. I always took them at their word that, yeah, there's no unreliable narrator here in this episode. And the way that Sam sees it, and Mendoza sees it, and everybody else, that's how it happened. And we have the cops the cops who, by the way, aren't portrayed as villains or anything. They apologize in the end. They say, "we sincerely apologize for our mistake."

JOSH: Well, but even when they're forced to apologize, they don't apologize for being racist. I mean, they did make a mistake. Whatever went into it, they stopped a guy for drunk driving who wasn't drunk. I guess ultimately I felt like the first of all, the scene where Toby and Sam come into the police station, I love everything that led up to it. Funny, funny getting lost. I love them together.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: This is the episode, I think, where I fully fall in love with Sam.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: He's just he's really funny. And there's just a certain cuteness about his earnestness about lots of things, including his just utter delight when they finally find the police station.

[West Wing Episode 1.15 excerpt]

SAM: There's a store open up there. I'm going to pull over and ask them if they know where the Wesley Police Station is.

TOBY: Or you can just pull in there at the Wesley Police Station and ask them.

SAM: Hey.

TOBY: Yeah.

SAM: Look.

TOBY: Yeah.

SAM: We found it.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: He's so happy.

HRISHI: He's so sweet, I know.

JOSH: There's a sweetness to Sam.

HRISHI: This is the birth of his character on "Parks and Recreation," Chris Trager, who shares so many of the, like. Most earnest qualities of Sam Seaborn. Sam later becomes one of my favorite characters, and as we've I've mentioned a couple times as we've been watching so far, so far I hadn't felt it. But in this episode I really do.

JOSH: Yeah, but then there's a real, to me, contrast. They walk into the police station, and they're real [Expletive deleted]holes to the two officers. Now, I know they're walking in assuming that these are two racist cops who pulled them over although, again, Toby and Sam weren't there. They don't exactly know what transpired. They don't ask them. They don't say, hey, look, let me explain what happened, and can I hear your side of the story. They just walk in like, we're really important people. Oh, look, I just happen to be on the front page of the newspaper in your town today, too. Like, it's like the start of I don't know. And I feel like we're meant to go, yeah, get 'em, get 'em. But I felt like, god, you guys are full of yourselves. How about, hello, here's my name. Let me explain something what the situation is. Instead it's like, I'm Superman or, no, it's more like Sam's like, I'm Robin and that's Batman over there. Oh, you don't believe us? Take a I don't know. There's something to me they're so full of themselves.

HRISHI: Oh, I don't know about that. I mean, Sam comes in and he just says

[West Wing Episode 1.15 excerpt]

SAM: My name is Sam Seaborn. I work for the President of the United States. Is your watch commander around?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: That doesn't seem so bad as an opening line.

JOSH: Well, or then maybe it's a couple lines later, but it's something about, you have no idea how much trouble you're about to be in.

[West Wing Episode 1.15 excerpt]

SAM: Officer Peter, we're in a certain amount of trouble tonight, and the only thing I've got going for me is that you're in more trouble than we are. My name is Sam Seaborn, and I work for the President,

and the sooner you reach the conclusion that I'm telling you the truth, the better off we're all going to be. Why don't you go get your watch commander.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I mean, these guys never have a chance. They're just beat down. And I feel like we're supposed to be like, yeah, go get 'em. Woo.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And I did not feel that way. There was no "woo" for me. I'm like, god, you guys are obnoxious.

HRISHI: Well, I'll tell you this. I didn't question the veracity of the racial profiling part of it, but one thing that did occur to me is how risky it seems to be. They're all playing a risky game: Mendoza, Sam, and Toby and everybody. Like, they even talk about it. They're like

[West Wing Episode 1.15 excerpt]

LEO: CJ, Sam sees one reporter when he gets off that plane, I'm going to blame you.

[End excerpt]

HRISHI: Toby is so upset because this is going to screw up his confirmation process, but a much bigger deal is them trying to potentially skirt around the law to get the judge out. You know, he's been arrested. He's been booked. Now they're going to expunge the record or something like that and pretend it never happened? That's actually that's a cover up. That's really sketchy.

JOSH: That hadn't really occurred to me. That's a very, very good point, particularly if there's nothing there on the arrest.

HRISHI: By the way, I was looking for some backup on this idea, and I found an interview with Marlin Fitzwater, a former Press Secretary. He was talking to "PBS News Hour," and they asked him about "The West Wing." And he said I'm going to read a quote from him from that. "There's only one episode that I thought was so far off the mark that it was really a mistake, and that's when they had a Supreme Court nominee arrested for speeding and two members of the White House staff went and broke him out of jail, which is an impeachable offense. And for any White House to really try that, it would have been stupid. First of all, everybody in the White House would have been gotten fired. The President would have been gotten impeached, and the Supreme Court nominee would have to be dumber than an owl to ever break the law by getting out of a speeding ticket. So that was the one only one that I thought was really off the mark."It's not a speeding ticket, it's drunk driving, but still, his but I felt like that was back up for my theory.

JOSH: No, very good find. That's really interesting. Aren't owls known for being wise?

HRISHI: Yeah?

JOSH: But any way. Small point. No, that is really interesting. It's not like they're on the horns of a dilemma here where it's going to look if well, you know, I understand this is not something you'd necessarily want to play out publicly, but the end result was going to be that he was sober, so why do an end run around the law to get him out? And by the way, also, I want to make sure I'm expressing myself well. I don't think we are meant to question the veracity of the incident being an example of racial profiling, but to me that was the flaw.

HRISHI: Oh, because they didn't back it up with some scene on screen?

JOSH: Yeah. It felt a little unearned.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: I didn't see the incident so that I could be entirely sure. Or the incident wasn't provided to us in a way that maybe to me, the best of all scenarios would have been we see the incident, and it could go either way. That would be the most interesting to me. Or

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: second best choice would be we see the incident and, you know, they're muttering something racial epithets are clear to us. That would be less subtle, but even that would be preferable to what I think is presented to us which is we're not showing you; there's no data given to you; you're just supposed to assume it because the two guys we're accusing, this is the only episode we'll ever see them in, and they each have a couple lines; and because our heroes are assuming it was.

HRISHI: What I think is the most interesting part of the whole thing is how Mendoza feels about his son witnessing it. You know, that he makes this great argument about how he doesn't understand what a judge is, but he gets cops because that's on TV.

[West Wing Episode 1.15 excerpt]

MENDOZA: So America just got another pissed off guy with dark skin.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And then and Toby also counters with this idea that the judge's pride is stung, and he's hanging out in the cell because he can't go back and face his wife and child because of the humiliation. And that I like this we're doing our own fan fic here where we get to see the arrest and there's some ambiguity about the racial profiling or not. But for me, I would have loved to have seen it be able to because I would have loved to see see him wrestle in the moment with that. The anger of if you ever feel like you're being racially profiled and for me, you know, it's like, oh, I'm getting flagged for a random security check at the airport again. You get angry about that so quickly, but then knowing that underneath that there's this other kind of pain, I would have loved to see somebody like Edward James Olmos wrestle with that on screen in the moment.

JOSH: Mmhm. It's a very well written and beautifully acted scene. And I think it may have first occurred to me when I realized in that scene with Toby and Mendoza that there's an element of pride here. I think that's maybe where it first occurred to me that it would have been interesting to then wonder if maybe maybe this wasn't a black and white situation of racial profiling and it was some of it was this element of getting arrested in front of his kid that made the whole incident more emotionally complicated for Mendoza.

HRISHI: Right. Right. Here's I think maybe this is one of the reasons why I also took for granted the fact that it was actually racial profiling. Toby has this threat when they're leaving. He says

[West Wing Episode 1.15 excerpt]

TOBY: It's your lucky night, officers. There isn't going to be a report. There isn't going to be an investigation. No one's getting suspended. And no one's filing a \$100 million lawsuit against the county that they would almost surely win.

[End excerpt]

JOSH: I'm glad you mentioned that line, too. I thought that was a little much. Like, what? What \$100 million lawsuit that's a slam dunk?

HRISHI: Oh, I have the feeling you're breaking the heart of all the people for whom this is their favorite episode.

JOSH: Oh, I'm sure people will jump on me, and they'll say I don't understand how much racial that's not I get that there's racial profiling. It's just that in this episode there are three people, I guess, right? Both those cops were there, and Mendoza

HRISHI: And his family.

JOSH: And his family, right, although we don't meet them in the episode. In terms of the people involved, the only information we get is that Mendoza thinks it's racial profiling, and so do all our heroes who weren't there.

HRISHI: Well, I believe it, but I take your point?

JOSH: No, I do, too

HRISHI: I take your point.

JOSH: Because I'm supposed to.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I just want I'd rather be somehow more convinced of it rather than meant to just take it on faith.

HRISHI: Did you watch with the closed captioning on again this time?

JOSH: I always do. Yes.

HRISHI: You always do? Did you notice that they misspelled Merritt Parkway?

JOSH: I did not notice that.

HRISHI: Merritt like, Bartlet has two Ts, although, unlike Bartlet, it has two Ts at the end. It's funny, by the way, how many people wrote in to us to correct us after your comment about the 15 pens versus 16 pens crossing the Ts in Bartlet. We got so many comments from people saying, oh, you said Bartlet has two Ts, but Bartlet only has one T.

JOSH: That was really that was weird that was, like, weird mass hysteria/psychosis.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Bartlet has only one T? What are you talking about?

HRISHI: Are you mistaking him for President Barlet?

JOSH: Apparently. Or the President Bartle.

HRISHI: Mhm.

JOSH: Here's another thing. Here is something actually a couple people wrote in to explain to me, and this seems entirely credible, that the occasional discrepancies between what's being said on screen and the closed captioning are most likely the result of the fact that Aaron is such a chronic rewriter up until the last minute. And that I guess the way closed captioning works is that you provide the script to the closed captioning people, at a certain point ahead of time, and then it all gets entered. And then if changes are subsequently made, there's going to be a discrepancy.

HRISHI: Oh, interesting.

JOSH: So that whole Atlantic Oil/Standard Oil may have just been a change. Which actually is quite interesting, because a lot of times I know in every script, before it's fully produced, goes through legal network legal people have to make sure the names are okay.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: This name clears. The name of that company clears, all that. So it seems to me that the scripts were sometimes going to closed captioning before they were fully vetted, because then sometimes I guess they would subsequently make some changes, or Aaron would make just artistic changes, and they would not get back to closed captioning in time. So something like Standard Oil/Atlantic Oil might have been a legal change and still wound up in the closed captioning. No doubt the basis for a \$100 million lawsuit that could be won easily.

HRISHI: Still doesn't explain Merritt Parkway missing a T though.

JOSH: That's true.

HRISHI: Merritt Parkway, my favorite stretch of highway in America.

JOSH: Really? Why is that?

HRISHI: It's so pretty.

JOSH: "Pretty" has two Ts.

HRISHI: I'm sure you've driven on the Merritt.

JOSH: I have. Of course. Many, many times. I don't remember it, much like I don't remember the previous episodes of "The West Wing" that we've discussed. I have a very limited I need multiple external hard drives, if you know what I mean.

HRISHI: Uhhuh.

JOSH: There's only so much I can carry around with me in my skull.

HRISHI: Okay.

JOSH: And so any appreciation of long stretches of the Merritt Parkway and their beauty has long since been purged so that I can remember where I'm having lunch today.

HRISHI: Well, it's really beautiful in an old New England kind of way. I think it's the oldest scenic parkway in America.

JOSH: Really?

HRISHI: It's really nice. Yeah. It's one of I just whenever I have to drive, I would take that instead of the 95. Also, I love how many times Sam Seaborn talks about the Merritt. And it's another Chris Trager aspect to him that you've got the dental hygiene line

[West Wing Episode 1.15 excerpt]

SAM: I'm nuts for dental hygiene.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: You have the when he's talking going on and on about, like, the intricacies of how somebody might get to DC

[West Wing Episode 1.15 excerpt]

SAM: Oh, my guess is he'll take the transCanada highway to New Brunswick, then maybe catch the 1 and take the scenic route along the coast of Maine. 95 through New Hampshire to the Mass. Pike, and then cut over to the Merritt Parkway around Milford.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And then you have yeah, when they find the police station. It's so good.

JOSH: I'm clearly going to have to start watching "Parks and Rec," which somehow I haven't avoided it for any reason. I know it's supposed to be great. It's just one of those things I I haven't done. But

HRISHI: Oh, you have to.

JOSH: I should start. And now, you have told me that I have your blessing to skip the first season is that correct and start with the second season?

HRISHI: Yeah. The first season only has six episodes.

JOSH: Oh.

HRISHI: And it's a totally different tone. Like, they hadn't figured out the show yet at all. And you can definitely skip ahead and go right into season two.

JOSH: I'm going to do that. And when does Rob Lowe join the cast?

HRISHI: He he comes in season two, episode 23. And there's a great thing I'm going to spoil for you, which is that his title card, when it comes up at the beginning, he gets "introducing Rob Lowe."

JOSH: Oh, that's hilarious.

HRISHI: So good.

JOSH: That's very funny. And is it weird or cute that you know off the top of your head what season and what episode Rob Lowe makes his first entrance on "Parks and Rec"?

HRISHI: It's probably neither. It's just that I happened to watch it again in preparation for this episode.

[Parks and Rec Episode 2.23 excerpt]

CHRIS: I take care of my body above all else diet, exercise, supplements, positive thinking. Scientists believe that the first human being who will live 150 years has already been born. I believe I am that human being.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Ha ha. Very funny.

HRISHI: It's Chris Trager. Goes along with his dental high again.

JOSH: Ha ha.

HRISHI: And this is his sheer positivity.

JOSH: It's very funny. There's a moment in this episode when Josh is on the phone and he's continuing conversation then realizes he's the only person on the phone. The other person has hung up. And he then comments on the fact that he's basically talking to himself.

[West Wing Episode 1.15 excerpt]

JOSH: You're not there anymore, are you? I'm talking to no one at all right now.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I had a moment, I couldn't tell you what episode, but in "Sports Night" when I realized Jeremy realizes that he's talking to himself.

[Sports Night Excerpt]

JEREMY: Yevgeny Kafelnikov. I did it no problem. Talking to myself, no particular reason.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: So I just want to point out I did it first.

HRISHI: I just wrote, "Josh talking to himself and not realizing it. Classic Sorkin."

JOSH: It's very Sorkinesque.

HRISHI: Yep. You know, throughout this episode they keep making fun of how Secretary O'Leary used the phrase "if the shoe fits"? And, you know, Toby makes a comment. The President makes a comment. Leo makes a comment

JOSH: I actually love that, because when I first heard it I thought, ugh, what a hacky way to word it. And I love that then the characters were unhappy with her use of cliché.

HRISHI: Well, apparently this is because that bit of story line came from Dee Dee Meyers. And she used the phrase "if the shoe fits," and so Aaron, inside the episode, is making fun of her by having all the characters making fun of that line.

JOSH: That is a nice piece of meta trivia.

HRISHI: Another thing that's this is not a piece of trivia, but one thing that I noticed is that the President is wearing a threepiece suit, which is an unusual sartorial choice for a President.

JOSH: Wow. I didn't notice that. Maybe it was his bar mitzvah day. And that's covered in another episode.

HRISHI: Or his Bartle mitzvah day.

JOSH: Boom. To me, threepiece suits are, yeah, a bit from my bar mitzvah days. That's very 1979, and we all wore them and, man, we felt good in that vest.

HRISHI: The only person I could think of politically who's worn a threepiece suit is our real life Sam Seaborn, Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada when he visited the US for his state dinner, he wore a three piece suit.

JOSH: We know what's involved in getting a jacket onto President Bartlet. I can't even imagine how long it would take to get him into a little vest. Probably a whole technique. He does a head stand. Whatever. He walks on his hands [INAUDIBLE] things, then he drops never mind. Bad it's a bad image.

HRISHI: You know, one thing we haven't done in a little while is note when somebody does a little resume recap, and we get one here because in classic Josh cocksure fashion he tells Danny

[West Wing Episode 1.15 excerpt]

JOSH: I'm a graduate of Harvard and Yale, and I believe that my powers of debate can rise to meet the Socratic wonder that is the White House press corps.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: You know things are going to go badly after a character announces that he attended both Harvard and Yale.

HRISHI: Yeah. He's just asking for it. Okay, can I give you my one serious thought about the episode?

JOSH: Please.

HRISHI: I was thinking about the title, "Celestial Navigation," and, you know, what it might mean for the rest of the episode. And then I was just thinking about the rest of this show. You know, in the episode, the direct reference is that Sam is trying to find the Wesley Police station using celestial navigation, but, of course, he's terribly lost. And I thought that that was, like, a nice metaphor for commenting on what the White House is trying to do, what the senior staff are trying to do. They know they're being guided by something. We've even used the term "moral compass." They have something guiding them, but, you know, when they actually go to look for it, they have no idea where it is. And a lot of times, they end up getting lost.

JOSH: Nice.

HRISHI: What do you think?. Is that cheesy? That's pretty cheesy.

JOSH: No, I like that. I think that's lovely.

HRISHI: Okay, thank you.

JOSH: I think there's got to be also more of a reason to pick it as your title than just that one quick mention in the dialogue, so that's good.

HRISHI: Yeah. Exactly. They say "secret plan to fight inflation" seven times in this episode.

JOSH: And do you think that was formulated as a terrific thing to make CJ say after dental surgery?

[West Wing Episode 1.15 excerpt]

CJ: A secret pwan to fight infwation?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Allison, very very funny in this episode.

HRISHI: Yeah doing a great Elmer Fudd.

JOSH: Yes yes that is true. That stuff is all very funny. Although, for me, again, I'll be Grinch like here, five times? Funny. 25 times? Maybe a little less funny. And I know the fans out there. They're going to say I would watch an entire episode of Allison Janney after dental surgery speaking like that. But it's just me. Here's a weird thing. During one of the funny interchanges that involve CJ's inability to speak coherently, she says something to Josh that we cannot make out. And his response is

[West Wing Episode 1.15 excerpt]

JOSH: You shouldn't say that, CJ. You've got a great body.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Right? That that was

HRISHI: A little weird, right?.

JOSH: Why did he have to go there.

HRISHI: I don't know?

JOSH: Oh, Josh.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I want to know what technique that was. Allison is so good at playing that droopy numb half a face thing.

HRISHI: Uhhuh.

JOSH: Does she just have cotton stuffed in there?

HRISHI: What I read was that those are just cotton balls.

JOSH: Yeah. That's a very, very well executed piece of comedy.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It looks to me like half her face a falling down. She looks like she's been shot up with Novocain.

HRISHI: Exactly.

JOSH: Now along the lines of my earlier comments, it's an odd choice of framework, I think, given the timeframe. Josh Lyman, late in the episode, still addressing the group of students during his hourlong answer to the moderator's first question, he actually bad mouths Mendoza.

HRISHI: Does he bad mouth him or kind of lovingly rib him?

JOSH: Well, he's talking about the liability of having a nominee for the Supreme Court who is constantly saying things that they have to do damage control around.

[West Wing Episode 1.15 excerpt]

JOSH: In the eight weeks since the President named his nominee, Judge Mendoza has, on various occasions, publicly criticized the American Bar Association, the AFL-CIO, and the New York State Legislature, three organizations without which this President would not have been elected.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I don't think he'd be talking about this kind of thing publicly while the White House is still trying to get Mendoza confirmed. Just it doesn't make sense to me that he'd be saying these things in the timeframe that we're presented with.

HRISHI: No. But he even says

[West Wing Episode 1.15 excerpt]

JOSH: Supreme Court nominees don't speak before their confirmation. They let the White House speak for them.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Something that we learned when I was trying to get Merrick Garland to come talk to us for an episode, and we were told in no uncertain terms that that was never going to happen.

JOSH: This isn't necessarily even a criticism of the episode, I guess. It's more just character development for Josh. He cannot get out of his own way.

HRISHI: Right?

JOSH: So having been recently upbraided by the President himself for his public missteps, here he is again, that night even, misspeaking in public.

HRISHI: Yeah. Well, also the other thing that's crazy is at the very end, before we get to the "flentl," Josh says, he says -

JOSH: You know who loves these clean final moments more than anyone?

HRISHI: Who?

JOSH: Sam Seaborn, because he's just nuts about "flentl" hygiene.

HRISHI: Geez, that was a long walk you took me on?

JOSH: That was a long way to go for a small payoff, but

HRISHI: I'll take it.

JOSH: That's my style.

HRISHI: "Flentl" hygiene, come on.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: Um, anyway, before we get to the "flentl", Josh says

[West Wing Episode 1.15 excerpt]

JOSH: There is a part of the story I didn't tell you. I can't. Trust me it doesn't involve - I, I, I just can't right now. Ask me back again after the senate confirms Mendoza. You really should hear it; it's a good story.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I'm thinking, the good story is you're going to talk about how you guys, like, skirted around the law in order to get your guy confirmed without any it's a great story, guys.

JOSH: Yeah, right. We're going to come back after the statute of limitations has passed and tell you a doozy.

HRISHI: And in the meantime, ask me a second question.

JOSH: And as we go into the eighth hour of our presentation, I'm prepared to take a second question. Oh, here's something and we'll have to put a still up on our website years, I think, before the term would even be coined, Brad Whitford as Josh Lyman

HRISHI: Oh, I know what you're going to say.

JOSH: Provides a grotesque example of man spreading as he sits in his seat on stage and literally spreads his legs as wide as humanly possible in order to, I guess, present his package to the young coeds in the auditorium. Sort of really, really gross.

HRISHI: We okay, I'm going to have to ask you for a clarification of terms, because I thought that man spreading is only something that happens when you are affecting people on either side of you. Like, you're on the subway and everybody's sorting of sitting normally in their own space, and then man spreading means that you kind of go and invade other people's space by spreading your legs.

JOSH: I see. So so you're saying if Brad Whitford is alone in a forest and spreads his legs with preposterous and lurid results

HRISHI: It shall not count as man spreading.

JOSH: So it's a potential Lyman spread, but there would technically need to be a second person who, inexplicably, wants to sit close to Brad Whitford?

HRISHI: Yes. It's a questionable case, because he's doing it in a public setting, just without people sitting on either side.

JOSH: Okay. I grant you the point.

HRISHI: This is called Sharon Stoning.

JOSH: Great. Thanks for that image.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I believe there's a podium in Gail's fish bowl

HRISHI: Oh, is there?

JOSH: Shining a nice light on the importance of the press secretary. There's another great Sorkinism in addition to that whole thing of realizing that you're speaking to yourself and then speaking to yourself about it. Melissa Fitzgerald, as Carol, says

[West Wing Episode 1.15 excerpt]

CJ: Carol, let's move the briefing to 1:00.

CAROL: You can't.

CJ: Why not?

CAROL: You have the thing.

CJ: Yes, and this is a perfect excuse to postpone the thing.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: The "thing." That's very Aaron.

HRISHI: There was a great bit of nonverbal acting from Melissa Fitzgerald after the disastrous press conference when when she has to open the door to let Josh out, and she just she slams open the door, can barely look at him she's so furious.

JOSH: I love that, too.

HRISHI: Let's take a quick break to thank our sponsors.

[ad break]

JOSH: Hrishi and I are very pleased to welcome as a guest to our show Jay Carney. After stints as Washington Bureau Chief for "Time Magazine" and as Director of Communications for Vice President Joe Biden, Mr. Carney became the 29th White House Press Secretary, serving President Barack Obama in that capacity for over three years. Currently he serves as a Senior VP for Corporate Affairs for Amazon. And, of course, most notably, he acted with me in the White House's first ever virtual Big Block of Cheese Day. Welcome welcome, Jay Carney..

JAY: Thanks for having me, guys.

HRISHI: Thanks so much for joining us?

JOSH: Yeah, how has your acting career gone since then?

JAY: You know, oddly, every time I try to get a little further, they say that that performance basically meant that I had no future in Hollywood. So I don't know if it was because of, you know, the actors I was with, or just my own poor skills.

JOSH: Yeah, I do tend to drag down those who are on screen with me.

HRISHI: Did you watch "The West Wing" before you ever got into politics?

JAY: I did. I did. I was loved the show, watched it as often as I could way back, you know, in the days when you actually, for the most part, had to watch it when it was broadcast. And then, as you guys know, a very close friend of mine, Eli Attie, after he left Washington in the wake of the 2000 election when he was Al Gore's speech writer and headed out to LA and went to work as a writer for "The West Wing," so I then, of course, was bound through friendship to have to watch every episode. It was a great show. I know that people ask me all the time when I ask me when I was Press Secretary and since, what show is the most like being in the White House and that experience? You know, because we have "House of Cards" and "Scandal" and "The West Wing" and a variety of others. And obviously there was aspects of "The West Wing" that were make believe, but for the most part, that was the most accurate. The one advantage that the "House of Cards" had over "The West Wing," or has over the "The West Wing," is they "House of Cards" people have the Air Force One set up down to the coffee cups and the cup holders. It's amazing. They don't miss anything on Air Force

One. And some of the spaces on "West Wing's" Air Force One don't exist.

JOSH: Interesting.

HRISHI: That's disappointing.

JAY: Yeah, yeah. So whoever you know, go find out who is responsible for that. It's a major failure. But when it comes to the stuff that matters, like how it feels to work in the West Wing and the sort of rush of issues and how frenetic it can be, and even the the kind of discussion you have with your colleagues, "The West Wing" really captured it. We none of us were as articulate for as many hours a day as everyone on the show was, but it had the right feel. And, you know, I know a lot of my colleagues from the Obama White House felt the same way.

HRISHI: So speaking of feel, we're talking about "Celestial Navigation" today, and I was wondering, as a former Press Secretary, how did it feel for you to watch Josh Lyman try and step in and do CJ's job and then get humiliated?

JAY: As a press secretary you say, I know exactly what that feels like, because even trained professional Press Secretaries screw up and have bad days and sometimes let their frustration with reporters show. And sometimes it shows as contempt, which is never helpful for the President or the White House. But also knowing that you know it's a unique job, and, you know, not every you know, there are a lot of incredibly smart people around a President who bring a lot of skills to the table, but they may not make great briefers, because you have to remember that you're not trying to win the room. You're not trying to win a debate with just one reporter who's sitting in the front row, but you're trying to do the best you can in conveying a message for the President and not making yourself a news story. And what Josh does in that episode is, you know, he does all the wrong things essentially. But you know where the instincts come from.

HRISHI: Did you ever have a moment like that where someone else in the administration thought, I can do what you do?

JAY: Well, sure. Now, as Press Secretary, you know, one sort of miss in that episode is that White Houses that I've known, including the one I worked in, always had a Deputy Press Secretary who could fill in, and usually was rehearsed enough and skilled enough to not have that kind of experience. But we also would have guest briefers or, you know, stars at the briefing where I would co-brief with a cabinet secretary or a White House senior official on a policy matter. And you know, it was a mixed bag honestly. Some went well, and some went, you know, less well. And, you know, some cabinet secretaries, you know, were extremely comfortable bantering with the press, but sometimes too comfortable. And others were stiff as a board and made no mistakes, but kind of put the press corps to sleep. And it just depended on the personality. We never had a disaster, but I remember walking away a few times and saying to my colleagues, let's not do that again.

JOSH: Is that a situation where you can step in if something starts to derail and help?

JAY: Yeah. What you try to do is when you have a cabinet secretary or somebody on who's a policy person, but not a person who does a lot of press interactions live, is curtail the or circumscribe the kinds of questions that that person will get. Like, you know, she's here to talk about this policy issue. And she'll take your questions on that issue. Of course, you can't control what the press asks, but if you're standing there and, you know, the guest briefer gets asked about a political question or just something that is obviously hard, or you anticipate he or she might screw up, you sort of jump in and answer it yourself or call on somebody you know is going to ask a different question. You know, whatever you can to redirect and prevent, you know, something bad from happening.

HRISHI: You ever have to shove anybody away from the podium so you can

JAY: You know, I've I've I've been pretty skilled at, you know, deftly cutting in. And there is a sense,

especially from folks who don't work in the White House, but even those who do, that that space is unique within any West Wing. The space is controlled by the press corps, not by the White House in many ways, in terms of who gets access to it, who gets credentialed. That's the White House Correspondents Association and not the White House. And it's that space that's shared between the press and the administration, and, you know, so you have to be mindful of that. I would sit in my office with a cabinet secretary and say, okay, here's how it's going to go. I'll introduce you. You'll do a topper, and then take questions. Any tough questions, you know, take a step back, I'll step in. And if there were a time when, either deliberately or not, the briefer, the guest, would not step away or not really realize that he or she was heading down a bad road, I would just start talking and then start moving towards the microphone so that that would send the signal. And I never really I never had to, like, push somebody out of the way. That would have been awkward.

JOSH: Can you share with us some of the things Josh might have done better, and specifically I was thinking moments like he explains that the President hasn't smoked, I think, in years. And then a journalist says, well, a couple days ago, he bummed a cigarette from me. What do you do when you're caught offguard with a piece of information like that?

JAY: So the key thing that I learned early on and I learned this when I asked all of all of the former living White House Press Secretaries when I took office as Press Secretary and they were pretty consistent in this advice, which is, obviously, everyone said never lie. Which seems really obvious but really important advice because your credibility's on the line, and the President's credibility. And when you're talking about international affairs, the country's credibility is on the line. But also, never guess. The real trouble you get in as Press Secretary, or somebody filling in as Press Secretary, happens when you speculate or when you give a glib answer that you think will be fine, but you haven't really thought through all the followups. And that's a perfect example. If you know, and Josh knew cause he was close to President Bartlet, that, in fact, his President hadn't 100% quit and occasionally bummed a cigarette, he would never say that. I mean, it's just treacherous territory. And, you know, I worked for a President who had given up smoking, and I could say with great confidence because I had, years before he did, gone through the same thing where I had to quit smoking and chewed Nicorette like a fiend. You know, I had spent a lot of time with the President, and a lot of private time, too, and never saw him have a cigarette in my time, because he had quit after health care passed. And I would have felt very confident saying that. But you never never just put something out there if you don't know it's locked down.

HRISHI: There have actually been a lot of instances so far up to where we've watched where CJ seems to speak with a degree of confidence that she shouldn't have. Where she's like, that's definitely not happening. Only to, you know, get caught in it later?

JAY: Yeah, I think that's those things happen. And I certainly had occasion to have to walk back something I said, and I said it honestly believing it to be true. And sometimes it was just that I got bad information or I made assumptions about what was happening or what decision had been made and had to eat my words. It was certainly nothing I ever did deliberately. But that's that's the kind of lesson you learn: Don't assume. You know, you have that's why you have to prep. That's why it's so important for a Press Secretary to be in all the meetings that he or she can be with senior officials and the President. Just spend a lot of time with the President. For me, being in the meetings that I was with President Obama every day, was the value I got from it was hearing him discuss issues in private so you saw often in ways that I wouldn't be able to talk about them in public, but I could hear his thinking. And I could hear sort of hearing him describe his thinking and where he was headed on an issue, gave me the boundaries of how I could speak about something and know I could speak about it in a way that was true to him. There have been occasions in the past when Press Secretaries haven't had that kind of inside access to the President and senior officials and aren't in the all the meetings that they get caught saying something they think is true that turns out not to be.

HRISHI: You said that the job is unique that besides talking to other past press secretaries, how do you learn how to do the job?

JAY: Well, I think there are two requirements for someone to be successful at the job, or at least to enjoy it. One is you have to have you have to take some masochistic pleasure in being, you know, pummeled daily in front of the public, and I did. Some of the briefings that people would say afterwards were the toughest, were the ones I enjoyed the most because it was a challenge. It was a challenge to get through to them. It was a challenge to perform under pressure. I mean, maybe it's similar in some ways, despite my so far failed acting career, to being, like, in live performance and theater. You have to love that, and I really did. And then you have to be willing to work hard and study hard so that you have a firm grasp on all of these issues on any given day that you could be asked about. And a lot of that is kind of dreary heavy reading, heavy being briefed by policy staff, doublechecking with the Chief of Staff or the President and just realizing that winging it is a ticket to disaster. And if you have those two qualities and an interest in serving a specific President or the country, then I think you could probably succeed.

JOSH: I'm always impressed by anybody who would be willing to take on the challenge of being the Press Secretary. I would think there must be a lot of, even as you're speaking, second guessing or saying, wait, can I share this.

JAY: It's really hard. That what you've just mentioned is really hard, because you do have to divide your brain between what you know you can talk about publicly and what you know. And that's the flip side or the other edge of the sword when you have access. I always felt, for the reasons I talked about before, that knowing was better than not knowing, and that whatever consequences came from knowing down the road were worth enduring rather than going out there unaware of what was really happening or what decisions were being made. But that meant that you had to be very careful about not blurting out something that you had heard in, you know, an internal meeting and got confused with something that you had heard when you were prepping for the briefing with the press. I, you know it's funny, my current job at Amazon, you know Amazon's this amazing company that's constantly innovating and creating different services and device, and I often have to pause when I'm talking to somebody externally and go through my mind and remember, okay, is that public yet or is that still, you know, in the works? And that that's something that reminds me of being in the White House.

JOSH: But when we're when we're done with this interview I am a Prime member. Really what I want to know is when is the day going to come when I can have a single green M & M delivered by drone?

JAY: Oh, it's sooner than you think. Sooner than you think.

HRISHI: There is something you said that made it sound like being Press Secretary was almost like being engaged in a chess match. Okay, if I say this, these are the five questions that I'll get, and then I'll say this. You know, running through the entire scenario

JAY: Absolutely.

HRISHI: Play by play before you ever go out there?

JAY: Absolutely. We would have a session in my office before the briefing, and when I was early days, you know, I would be over an hour of prep. But as I got more comfortable in the job, it would sometimes be a half an hour, 45 minutes. But if there were tough issues, it could go longer. And that's a lot of what we did. On the issues that we knew were at the top of reporters' minds and were difficult, we would go over what the questions would be that at least as we expected them, and what the followups would be and how a response from me would probably generate another kind of question, and that was always helpful. My then deputy, Josh Earnest, who's my successor, was very good at sensing in the room in my office when we were prepping what issues really required a little a little test back and forth, and he would, you know, initiate a quick back and forth on a number of questions just to give me a run through. And it helped a lot. And I'm sure he practices that now.

HRISHI: Even in this episode, Josh is going out there not to address the anti-tobacco bill or anything

like that, he's going to get a job done. He needs to, you know, clear through the docket of things they need to brief. And none of the questions that he gets are related to any of those issues?

JAY: Right. Right. Well, that happens a lot. You often open a briefing with an announcement or just something that you hope will get some attention. And, you know, some days, I had more useful material than others. And often the press just wasn't interested in going down the road you had pointed it towards. So then you just you know, you got back to where you knew you would end up pretty quickly, which was whatever the controversy there was in the news that day or that week.

JOSH: I had a question about a specific moment. So Josh Lyman sardonically refers to a the President's secret plan to fight inflation and seems unable to accomplish an instantaneous buyback. Are you ever able to misspeak and just take it back before it becomes a snowballing headache for the administration? Does that kind of thing happen?

JAY: You know, I can't think of a specific instance, but yes. And it's best to fall on your sword as quickly as possible. And because even now, even more than when that episode was filmed, you know everything is instantaneous and put out over every media right away, speed is essential when you have to make a correction or say, I didn't mean that, you know, let me be clear. And you could sense, just as in that in the episode, when the press hears something that suddenly you just the mood in the room changes and they think they've got something that was you know, any time it's unexpected, because the briefing, you know, is in some ways an effort for the administration to put out information that it wants to put out and the press to get information that the administration doesn't want to put out. And so there's that tension, and sometimes it can seem like a just a fairly dull back and forth. And then when something happens that's unexpected, you can see it in their eyes. You can see it in the hear it in the way the tone of their questions changes, and -

JOSH: They smell blood.

JAY: - You know you have to move quickly. And now more than ever, because the reporters in the briefing room are tweeting instantaneously. Twitter, you know, it seems like we've had it forever, but it was really you know, it's so new. And when I was Press Secretary, it was driving the news in a way that it does know, but for the first time. And we could spend all the time in the world in the morning prepping for the briefing and anticipating all the questions we thought might come, but what we couldn't know was what news item would flash across people's phones during the briefing that they would then ask me about in real time. And that was always risky, right, that a reporter's asking you about it, you didn't know it because it didn't hadn't even happened before you went out there, and you have to somehow give an answer that you don't have to back out of, that isn't wrong. And you have to have some sense of whether or not the report that you're hearing is even accurate. And, you know, sometimes even if it doesn't look great, the best thing to do is say, look I wasn't aware of that when I came out. I'm going to have to get back to you. If you know that you're going to take a big risk by giving an answer, you should just eat it and take your lumps and come back later.

JOSH: Sure. That makes sense. And is there there's, I guess then, a competition among the press corps as they're also getting information from you to disseminate it before the others do. And would you find that things would go out publicly before they had been fully processed by the journalists or -

JAY: Oh, completely. I mean

JOSH: - even gotten to the bottom of an answer?

JAY: It's yeah. That happened all the time just because the instantaneousness of the news cycle. So folks would Tweet as the briefing went on. Sometimes the cable news correspondents would stand up during the briefing and leave because they were going to go do a hit based on something that had been said. You know so there was a lot of there was always a lot of movement and didn't always know what it was about. And you just had to pay attention but not look like you were paying attention. Just sort of go with the flow.

HRISHI: If CJ were to come to you, as a former Press Secretary, and ask for advice the way that you went to other press secretaries, what advice would you give her?

JAY: So I would say, as everyone I spoke to said, you know, never lie. I would say never guess, even if you think the answer is obvious. And then I would say don't take the bait. What's what's really different about the experience is in the room the West Wing is smaller than you would expect. It's smaller than in the show. Much more intimate. And the briefing room is really small. They have 49 seats. It looks much bigger on television, but it's a tight space. And, you know, there are 49 seats, seven rows of seven, and yet on my first day of briefing as Press Secretary when the new Press Secretary comes on, it's still early in Obama's presidency, so it's a big deal there were over 200 people in the room, so it was packed. There's a sense when you're on when you're on the podium behind the lectern and you're engaging with a reporter and that reporter pisses you off, you have control of the room and you have control of that dynamic and you can win that conversation. And there were times when I did that when I you know, Ed Henry from Fox News or John Carl from ABC, or anybody got under my skin about something, and if I didn't internally take a breath and just roll with it, and I let my emotions get the better of me, I could I could win the exchange and it would feel great; right? I would put that reporter back in his place. Then I would go back and see that Fox was playing the loop all day long, because it looked terrible on TV. It looked like I was being a jerk. And I had that happen once with John Carl when he was asking a question in a really annoying way, and I answered by mimicking him. Oh, man, it felt great. It felt great at the time. And, boy, did I look bad afterwards. And, you know, I had similar exchanges. It's inevitable. But that's what you got to realize is that even when it feels like you're winning, you're probably not. Like, I was all for pushing back and challenging reporters, but doing it, like, from a controlled place; right? Don't do it emotionally, just come back because there was always a time for that, and I was a proponent of that. I didn't believe you should just let everything roll off your shoulders. But never do it emotionally.

HRISHI: Do you go through and in your mind rank press secretaries, you know this one was the greatest of all time. This one was my my personal favorite. This was the underdog that I rooted for?

JAY: It's a short list: 29 with me, 30 with Josh. So there aren't that many. And there's certainly the job was completely different pretelevision. And -

HRISHI: Sure.

JAY: - so having said that, I look at my predecessors, and Marlin Fitzwater and Mike McCurry were excellent in the way that they were both informative but also disarming. And so they would they were very good at lowering the tension in the room. Now, they both lived in a different, and worked in a different, century, literally, but in a different time entirely when it came to news cycles. They would gather in the Press Secretary's office at 6:30, you know, usually over drinks to watch the evening news, which is so such a think of the past. I never once watched the evening news as Press Secretary. Not because it was irrelevant it had become less relevant but because you could always find out what was on it. And the day had not ended, and the day had ended for Press Secretaries in the past by the time the evening news was over. The next thing you had to worry about was the morning papers, and for the most part and that obviously is just not the case now. But those guys were great. I think Dee Dee Myers was excellent. I think Robert Gibbs was excellent.

HRISHI: Where does CJ fall in the pantheon?

JAY: I thought I think CJ, if she had been a real Press Secretary, would be very, very close to the top. I think she had a great charm and sense of humor, which is essential, but also a toughness that you have to have.

HRISHI: Awesome.

JOSH: All right. Thank you so much.

JAY: Guys, it's my pleasure. Thanks for having me.

HRISHI: And that's it for our episode. This episode was produced by me and Josh and edited by Zach McNees. We hope you'll join us next week as we discuss episode 1.16.

In real life, I will be in Philadelphia for the Democratic National Convention and for Political Fest at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. If you're in Philadelphia, if you're going to be there, please try and find me on Wednesday at 1:30 at the National Constitution Center. We're going to be doing a "West Wing" trivia game, looks like, with Melissa Fitzgerald and some other cool people. So come find me. You can Tweet at me. I'm @HrishiHirway, Josh is @JoshMalina, "The West Wing Weekly" is @WestWingWeekly, and our guest, Jay Carney, is @JayCarney. You can leave a comment about this episode for us on our Facebook page at Facebook.com/TheWestWingWeekly or on our website, TheWestWingWeekly.com.

JOSH: Ok.

HRISHI: Ok.

JAY: What's next?

[OUTRO MUSIC]