

The West Wing Weekly
2.03: The Midterms

[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 season two, episode three of the *West Wing*. Its called "The Midterms."

JOSH: It first aired on October 18, 2000. It was written by Aaron Sorkin and it was directed by the fabulex--by the fabulex?--by the fabulous Alex Graves. He's fabulex [laughter]. Aaron's fabulous too, I should say. I enjoy his work.

HRISHI: For this episode, I'm going to use *TV Guide's* synopsis. I discovered *TV Guide* has a synopsis and it seems pretty good. Here we go:

"In the aftermath of the shooting, the administration is polling at 81 percent. But those numbers are soft, Sam cautions, and no one disagrees. Moreover, they probably won't hold up for the midterm elections in 12 weeks. Still, Toby wants to use this honeymoon as leverage for a domestic terrorism initiative. In fact, he's obsessed with it. The President also seems obsessed: with thwarting an old foe who's running for a school board seat in New Hampshire. Meanwhile, Sam enlists an old law school classmate to run for an open House seat."

JOSH: That sounds like a good episode.

HRISHI: Pretty good synopsis, *TV Guide*.

JOSH: Yes. And I would say with one notable exception, I really, really like this episode. There's just, there's one scene that I didn't particularly dig--we'll get to that later--but I actually really like this episode. It first aired a little bit less than a year before 9/11 and about a year and a week before the passing of the Patriot Act. And, to me, I feel like Toby's obsession or his focus on pursuing these extremist groups, these hate groups, possibly without the aid of the Constitution, that to me really foreshadowed the passing of the Patriot Act, so soon after 9/11.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Right. In like the aftermath of a devastating event and in the psychological turmoil and the PTSD from that, how that can lead you to overreach.

HRISHI: Yeah. If Toby can suddenly find the First Amendment dispensable, then people who are less principled and less conscience-laden than he, you could see how they could get around it, or want to get around it.

[West Wing Episode 2.03 excerpt]

SAM: He wants everyone to have to register affiliation with the FBI.

C.J.: Any problems with the First Amendment?

TOBY: I'll get around them.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Right. And in reality the Patriot Act would be passed in 2001 and six years later, parts of it would be found unconstitutional as violations of the Fourth Amendment, illegal search and seizure. And watching this episode reminded me of the foresight that Aaron can have on issues like this and the way he frames them.

HRISHI: Yeah. It's a little eerie how prescient it was, but it also reminded me of the past. Like Toby's story line made me think of the Benjamin Franklin quote "That those who give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."

JOSH: Nice. He put things well.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Very articulate.

HRISHI: He's a little pretentious, maybe.

JOSH: Nah, it's kitchen magnenty. It's a good fridge magnet.

HRISHI: Ok. I have a question about this episode. Maybe this is a theme, but I actually found this frustrating. So the whole premise of the episode is based around the fight in the House for the Midterms. They're talking about a lot of different Midterm elections, but specifically, they're geared on House seats and potentially reclaiming the House. Ok. So one thing that's interesting is in this episode they start off with the President asking about 'acalculia'.

[West Wing Episode 2.03 excerpt]

BARTLET: Good morning, everybody. Anybody know what the word 'acalculia' means?

SAM: It's the inability to form arithmetic functions.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Is the math indeed wonky?

HRISHI: Yeah. The math doesn't make any sense. Let me put it to you the way it's put in the episode.

JOSH: Oh, please put it to me, Hrishi. Put it to me.

HRISHI: Ok. So we know the house is controlled by Republicans. There's no mention of third party candidates, so let's assume it's all divided between Republicans and Democrats. At the end of the episode Sam Seaborn says,

[West Wing Episode 2.03 excerpt]

SAM: Twelve races, in none of them did the incumbent win. In none of them, did the party that previously held the seat win. You know how it went? Seven-five.

JOSH: You're kidding.

C.J.: Seven republicans and five democrats?

SAM: Yeah.

JOSH: The house stayed the same?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: That doesn't make any sense.

JOSH: No.

HRISHI: If you have seven Republicans winning, seven Democrats lost. That's a net gain of two seats for Republicans. So everything could not have stayed the same.

JOSH: That's a very good point. I'm not sure why I didn't catch that.

HRISHI: Well, I was hoping that maybe that was, you know, a little 'Easter Egg' about 'acalculia'?

JOSH: A nod to 'acalculia'.

HRISHI: Yeah, I mean, I'm hoping that's why that was in there, just - it was a little test to see, are you following along with the math?

JOSH: And the answer for me was no. But for you it was yes. I also, I liked the fact that Sam took the time to define incumbent for his friends. He actually defines the word for them.

HRISHI: In none of them, did the party that previously held the seat win.

JOSH: Right. It was nice of the rest of them not to say "Hey, you know we're senior staffers at the White House, we actually know what the word incumbent means." [laughter] So they really should have just done six and six. And it would have been even -

HRISHI: - Yeah. Exactly. Anyway, the 'acalculia' of the episode was annoying to me. Or maybe it was really clever.

JOSH: Yeah. Well, that's a very good point. And that speaks to the fact that every now and then there is some sort of enormous whopper of a mistake in an episode like that. And it makes you wonder with this incredible brain trust of major intellects that were on the staff of this show, how did they miss that? Like, random math problem.

HRISHI: Well, hopefully it's just a little inside joke. And we are just now revealing it for everybody.

JOSH: I guess so. In any event, nothing changed overall. They didn't gain control of the House, the greater point remains.

HRISHI: Sure. Yeah. And also, while I'm looking at that and thinking about the math of it, all I can do is hear C.J. saying to Danny,

[West Wing Episode 1.13 excerpt]

C.J.: You know you were the only one in the room doing the math on that, right?

DANNY: I, I just-

C.J.: Only one in the room.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: [laughter] Very good. Alright. Do we back up now and work our way through the episode?

HRISHI: Sure. The whole episode is full of 'Walk and Talks'.

JOSH: That is true. All the 'Walk and Talks' make me think: one, that we should have David Chameides, King of the 'Walk and Talk' on soon, so that he can talk us through... You know when you watch these 'Walk and Talks' it's very impressive what the actors are doing: they're moving, they're speaking, and they're handing off papers and they are creating the whole world - but more impressive is that the camera crew is doing similar stuff, but they're moving backwards. There's a guy with the harness, with the camera on him, someone else with a remote control who is focusing while the cameraman frames everything properly. It would be interesting to get the viewpoint of the camera crew on the 'Walk and Talks'.

HRISHI: Yeah, Ginger Rogers never had it so bad.

JOSH: Well said.

HRISHI: Just thinking about when we were talking to Tommy Schlamme about how they would do some edits by having people cross in front of the camera and that would be how you would kind of mask the technique of making it seem like it's this endless shot. Now I feel like I'm tuned into them. There is one I saw where C.J., when she goes into the briefing room, and there's a cross, like it goes to black, but you can see the cut - I don't feel like I noticed that before. And I wonder if it's because I'm looking for it more closely or now because I know about this from Tommy, but anyways, it's cleverly done, but now I see the cuts.

JOSH: Yes. But we should all go back and rewatch Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*, which is essentially one shot the entire film, but of course due to the limitations of the size of a mag of film you could only get a ten minute shot, so every ten minutes there is one of these kind of crosses that allow them to restart.

HRISHI: Yeah. Keep an eye out for that Alfred Hitchcock. He's, he's everywhere. Yeah. He's kinda clever.

JOSH: And like Alfred Hitchcock, we have the subtle reappearance of William Duffy and Peter James Smith as Ed and Larry.

[West Wing Episode 2.03 excerpt]

LEO: Where should we be looking?

ED: Indiana 6th, California 4th and 14th...

LARRY: Michigan 12th...

ED: Michigan 12th, Texas 12th...

LARRY: Florida 4, 5, and 9...

C.J.: They're not going to elect a Democrat in the Florida 9th.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: They do their thing very well. Another great little thing that added a little speecy-spicy to the episode, to me, was the fact that President Bartlet's use of the word 'acalculia' is actually kind of big news in the White House. It's like this quick moment when it actually happens in the Roosevelt room during that meeting, but then later, soon after, Margaret's talking about it to Charlie and she mentioned it to Zoey, Zoey's never heard of it. Its this great little detail that enhances our understanding of how insular this world is that we're dealing with - that the President's use of an arcane word is news. "Hey! Did you hear? The President said 'acalculia'!" I like that.

HRISHI: Yeah, and I like the three different reactions to him saying 'acalculia'. You've got Sam, who, like, ruins his good time by answering his question for him. And then Margaret, who I feel

like has the appropriate response, the desired response, who's like interested in it and is delighted by it and then repeats it. And then you have Zoey, who couldn't care less because she's lived through 20 years of this.

JOSH: Right, and she heard it at breakfast.

HRISHI: Yeah. It's like a relative you hear telling a joke at Thanksgiving and then later you hear that person telling the same joke to a different group of people.

JOSH: Exactly.

HRISHI: I get it. That's your one joke. So we start off with Josh and C.J. talking about the Theory of Everything, The Grand Unified Theory, and why this is lead off news in the briefing room is a bit confusing to me. It seems like it's confusing to C.J. too, though. She's like "Why do you want me to lead with this?" But Josh thinks it's going to be big news. My favorite part about it though is Sam's reaction the The Grand Unified Theory, which felt very familiar to me. C.J. says

[West Wing Episode 2.03 excerpt]

C.J.: You know anything about Theoretical Physics?

SAM: Ah... The Grand Unified Theory.

C.J.: You know anything about it?

SAM: No.

C.J.: Ok.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: That's me with so many things. Like, somebody brings up Proust, I'm like "Ah... *Swann's Way*, the madeleine," and then they ask, "Have you read it?" "No."

JOSH: That's very funny. Yeah, I do that too.

HRISHI: Ok, let's for a second talk about time. This episode is kind of crazy in terms of the amount of time that passes. Did you catch that?

JOSH: During the episode itself?

HRISHI: Yeah. The span of time, yeah, within the episode itself.

JOSH: Oh. No. Now that you're mentioning it we do get all the way to election night.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: So a lot of time passes.

HRISHI: Yeah, we start in mid-August.

JOSH: It didn't really occur to me at the time. Which probably has something to do with physics. But. I didn't really notice the passage of time.

HRISHI: Ah.... The Grand Midterms Theory.

JOSH: Yeah. That's it.

HRISHI: Yeah, there are twelve weeks that pass in this episode, which is kind of a clever way to get us from how the season premier of season two picks up right from where season one's finale leads off. You, immediately afterwards, you know there is some inclination to tie episodes with wherever you are, you know, on TV, like, in a real calendar. so your Christmas episode comes out around Christmas time and your Thanksgiving episode around Thanksgiving, et cetera. So if they had to catch up to that and they are starting right at the end of, you know, the summer episode from "What Kind Of Day Has It Been" then they have to do some make up - and they manage to make it all up in this one episode, by going from August to November,

JOSH: Mm-hm.

HRISHI: But it also makes you realize that a lot of the emotional beats that are happening this episode aren't happening in a short span of time, which I found a little bit confusing. Like Toby's whole thing and, you know, like, Charlie's attitude, all the things that those guys are feeling - that's happening over three months. It's not like it's all, this is just a bad week for everybody. It's a bad three months, the aftermath.

JOSH: That's a very good point. I'm realizing now that at the end of the episode, I did bump on it a bit, out on the stoop Josh says something about

[West Wing Episode 2.03 excerpt]

JOSH: Everybody should have to stay inside for three months so that they truly appreciate the outdoors.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I remember thinking at the time, "Wait a minute. Oh. It's been three months."

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: And I think that's what made me realize that more time had passed than I had experienced as it was happening.

HRISHI: Yeah, the one for me was when Charlie's talking about the reception for the radio hosts, he first introduces it to the President and he says

[West Wing 2.03 excerpt]

CHARLIE: It's three weeks away, you don't need to commit right now.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I know this episode, and I was like "Wait, that's three weeks? This whole thing all happens..." and then I started to pay attention to what was actually happening with time. And for the most part, except for little things like that, those moments, the passage of time is only noted by the title cards. And the way I watch, especially for the show now, I'm looking at notes and scribbling furiously, so I missed a lot of those.

JOSH: Yeah. As did I.

HRISHI: But, yeah. Three months in forty minutes. A record for a *West Wing* episode.

JOSH: Yeah. As the episode began with that big "Walk and Talk" with C.J., before it's revealed that it's only been a week, I actually thought more time had passed up front. Which, I think, probably, was a well employed misdirection. The episode begins for me, in a way that makes me feel like- oh, the gangs getting back to it, it's been a while and things are kind of ok now. There is a lot of cutesy name calling, C.J. is calling someone pal-o-mine, right? Feels like, the interaction felt to me like a tonal shift from the first two episodes of the season, and now like, things are going to be ok, things are fine, everything is back to normal. But the slowly, I realized as I watched that it hasn't been very long and that everyone's still, in very significant ways, dealing with the repercussions of the shooting. And I like that: the realization that not everything is ok.

HRISHI: There's this cloud of PTSD still there, even though we have the jokes. The Tom Jordan storyline, Sam's friend from Law School, everything about that story line is heartbreaking.

JOSH: Yeah, I agree with you. He's badly treated by the White House. You can kind of understand the political calculus of it, in that scene Leo is saying to Sam "This is done, it's over" and Sam is saying

[West Wing Episode 2.03 excerpt]

SAM: I told him we would stand by him. I told him he would have our full support. I was the one who asked him to run. I was asked to ask him.

LEO: I know.

SAM: We walk away now, that's it. He's a racist! The White House just said so!

LEO: We can't afford all the things we want, Sam. It's over.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I felt like I could both understand, given the stakes, why the White House has to cut him loose, but also why that's so appalling to Sam, having given him a kind of personal guarantee to stand behind him. And now they are not only *not* standing behind him, but he's going to have a rap as a racist for life. That's just it. Which made me - I liked Tom's wife's anger in the scene toward the end of the episode.

[West Wing Episode 2.03 excerpt]

TOM: Sarah.

SARAH: There's not going to be a next time! So, shut up! Not even a word from the White House. Not even a word.

SAM: That's how we do it.

SARAH: Sam, any time we have the opportunity in the future to screw you, count on getting screwed.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah, that scene is really rough. But I also wonder why Sam didn't act differently there. Like why doesn't he say to her "I know. This sucks. This is really awful and I wish I could have done something differently about it." And be a little more compassionate instead of just saying, you know, his line is "That's how we do it."

JOSH: Yeah. Also, why didn't Sam pick up the phone? There is this suggestion, or I guess it's explicitly stated, that there hasn't been a word from the White House.

HRISHI: Which includes Sam.

JOSH: Yeah, why didn't Sam, who sympathized with them, why didn't he try to smooth things over before this really late juncture on election night?

HRISHI: Yeah, it does feel like it's not just Tom Jordan who is badly treated, it's Sam too. Sam is made to look bad by Leo and whatever, this political strategy, I guess.

JOSH: True.

HRISHI: And the fact that it's Sam somehow makes it worse. His earnestness is getting damaged in the process.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: Although, speaking of earnestness getting damaged, or lost innocence, the Charlie storyline is really tremendous in this episode.

JOSH: Oh, I totally agree. One of the things that I noticed in a subtle way, I figure Charlie's the character who must be going through the worst psychological turmoil. He's reliving gun violence for the second time in his life, and he knows it was directed towards him, he knows that it endangered and actually injured people that he cares most about, and endangered the President of the United States, but to me he seems to be the one who's processing and dealing with it all the best. And maybe it's because he has dealt with this kind of trauma before. I mean, we get that there is some sort of tension going on in his romantic relationship with Zoey, but that seems to be pretty well resolved; or if not resolved it's being dealt with in the end of the episode, they have this sweet moment together... But of all the senior staff he seems to be processing the violence the best.

HRISHI: He does lose his temper with the President. That's a line he's never crossed before.

[West Wing Episode 2.03 excerpt]

CHARLIE: Mr. President, why don't you stay in your office and make the damn...

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, that's true. That's a very powerful moment. And I like that the two of them did not resolve it on the spot.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: That the scene ended with some tension. There's no apology from Charlie, and no "Hey, I get it" from President Bartlet. I like that, I thought that was a strong choice.

HRISHI: Yeah. I thought the way that it did end up getting resolved wasn't with the president at all. It was with Jeffrey Mackintosh, Andrew Mackintosh's son. I thought that character was a beautiful way of representing Charlie's lost innocence, or like his potential innocence - the past life that he might have had - representing that on-screen, through this kid.

JOSH: Well put.

HRISHI: He sees him and I think he sees something about himself. And I think the real resolution comes with Andrew Mackintosh telling Charlie

[West Wing Episode 2.03 excerpt]

ANDREW: Hey, Charlie... um... you know what I think she'd say if she was here right now?

CHARLIE: What?

ANDREW: Same thing my father would say, "If they're shooting at you, you know you're doing something right."

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, that's a very touching moment. Tell me this though. Is it odd that in the scene between Margaret and Charlie, when she mentions that the computer tech guy is coming in and that his name is Mackintosh, like the apple, that they don't make the connection to Apple computers and the Apple Macintosh?

HRISHI: Yeah, that is a little bit weird.

JOSH: Yeah, I was like, I was wondering if it was subtle product placement, a little shoutout to Apple.

HRISHI: One thing I thought was great about that piece of casting, was made more poignant and powerful by the fact that that was an African American actor playing that character, the son, Jeffrey Mackintosh. Because that made that moment of identification that much more palpable because we don't really get to see that many black characters on screen.

JOSH: I agree with you.

HRISHI: Also, black guy named Mackintosh? Ok.

JOSH: Blackintosh.

HRISHI: [laughter] No.

JOSH: Sorry. I had to.

HRISHI: Nooo. Send your hate mail to West Wing Weekly...

JOSH: It's just a word joke people. Wordplay. Frothy wordplay.

[Ad Break]

JOSH: One thing I noticed, not for the only time in this episode, but the first time: during that scene where Sam is pitching Tom and his wife on Tom's running for the congressional seat, we have that classic hero, that push in, that shot on Rob Lowe as Sam, and we do not have music accompanying it.

HRISHI: Right, the slow zoom.

JOSH: Right, exactly. And as we push in I was just waiting for the swell of music, and I think it speaks to what Tommy told us recently about dialing it down a little bit in the second season

and, at least for me, that really worked, I liked it. I thought the swell was coming and I was so pleased when it did not.

HRISHI: Yeah, yeah.

JOSH: In the first season, I think there would have been music there.

HRISHI: Yeah, there would have been music there for sure.

JOSH: And there's a similar moment later in the oval with President Bartlet, they push in, and...they resist. They resist what was probably the urge to score that moment.

HRISHI: Yeah. Let me correct myself. I said a slow zoom, but it probably wasn't a zoom, right? They use a dolly?

JOSH: Right, exactly. I think, I guess that would be the difference between a push and a zoom - meaning its not accomplished with the lens, the camera's actually getting closer to the subject, to the actor.

HRISHI: Yeah. For me I think the classic scene is the confrontation between the President and Dr. Jenna Jacobs

[West Wing Episode 2.03 excerpt]

BARTLET: I like how you call homosexuality an abomination.

JENNA: I don't say homosexuality is an abomination, Mr. President. The Bible does.

BARTLET: Yes, it does. Leviticus.

JENNA: 18:22

BARTLET: Chapter and verse. I wanted to ask you a couple of questions while I had you here. I'm interested in selling my youngest daughter into slavery as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. She's a Georgetown sophomore, speaks fluent Italian, always cleared the table when it was her turn. What would a good price for her be?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Ah, yes. It has arrived. And that is the one scene that I alluded to earlier that just does not work for me.

HRISHI: I was wondering if this was the one that didn't work for you. Ok, tell me why you didn't like it.

JOSH: I will tell you why. Here's the thing. I feel like most of this episode is very layered, and is well thought out, and things are alluded to and paid off later, and the pacing is great, all the execution is on point - but to me this scene is just a weird little set up and slam dunk that happens in a very compressed amount of time. Like it's a quick little straw man for Bartlet to utterly destroy. And even though my sympathies lie with him--I enjoy a good liberal smackdown as much as anyone else--and I like what he is saying, but I feel like the character has just been introduced and she's literally sitting. She's a sitting target. It felt to me too easy and it all happened too quickly.

HRISHI: Mm-hm.

JOSH: Right. Dr. Laura Schlessinger, on whom this character, the Jenna Jacobs character is clearly based, she was a huge talk show host back in the day and she would say horrendously reactionary things. She was homophobic. She deserved this kind of smackdown that her stand-in takes in this episode, but I would have liked to see a little more long ball. I don't know if I even buy that there is this weird talk radio get together on midterm election night. That whole thing just felt weird to me. I felt like something, like they should have taken this scene and saved it for another episode and maybe developed it better.

HRISHI: Right. It felt tacked on. Yeah.

JOSH: It did. It felt tacked on. You know, when our heroes have a great smack down, I want to be entirely with them and go "Yeah!!!" But I didn't feel a 'yeah' hear because it felt too easy.

HRISHI: Yeah. I mean, of course for so many people, including me, this scene has been so important, because even though I totally grant your premise that in the best episodes of the *West Wing*, in terms of the actual story, you do get to hear both sides. You have a smart person arguing one thing and then you have a smart person who disagrees with them. But the idea of presenting this kind of counter to any number of people who want to point to the Bible to support their hate-filled stance, like here was a chance to have an incredibly smart articulate biblical scholar, um, the President's a biblical scholar, to use those words and his knowledge of that text to prove how thin those arguments were, how meaningless they were... I totally get what you're saying, that it didn't work for you, but I still loved it. It's like an incredible thing to witness, I think, an incredible set of words to be put together in that way.

JOSH: Yeah. Well, it's funny, I guess I feel like for all the same reasons, it's a bit of a swing and a miss for me. So I feel the same way. It's why often as a left-leaning democrat, it's the excesses of the left that aggravate me more than the excesses of the right. Not that this is in excess, this scene, it's just that the way it's presented. it's too easy. Dr. Jacobs doesn't get to say anything. Not that there is a strong counter, and I'm wondering like, "where's the pro-homophobia argument..."

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: ...I'm just saying, dramatically, Aaron's giving what most of the audience, I mean there is a wide social and political spectrum that the audience falls along, but this is what most of us believe, I think - and Aaron knows this going into that, so it feels like he's just pandering to his audience a bit.

HRISHI: Yeah. She's not set up as a real character, for sure, so it is pandering, at least to a certain section of the audience.

JOSH: Right. So I feel like, just dramatize it better. People get annoyed with me sometimes, they feel that I'm nitpicking, but all I can do in the end is share my own honest opinion, so... To me it's one of those things about setting the bar too high. Aaron is so great, he's such an excellent writer, that the bar is set incredibly high - so when it feels to me as if, oh, normally you would have handled this better, I feel a little disappointed.

HRISHI: Yeah, she is given no voice. There is no version, even an attempt, of a smart person disagreeing,

JOSH: Yeah. She's just there to be mocked and ridiculed.

HRISHI: As he said in our interview, when it comes to questions of tolerance, it's a lot harder for him to present the smart argument, because he just doesn't think there is one that exists. But, at the same time, it would have been nice at the same to let her speak or say something that might articulate where those beliefs come from, a legitimate place.

JOSH: Yeah, no, I agree. There is no convincing argument to be made on her behalf, for homophobia. So it's not like, I don't want to see, like "Hey, I want to see both sides of this." The character was just introduced. So it's, I didn't even have a whole episode to grow to dislike her and to learn what her beliefs are, I only learn from President Bartlet who she is, what she believes and it's the moment I kind of know who she is, she is just kind of smacked down. And that made it feel a little artificial to me.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And I guess that is one of the risks you take when you are an *auteur*, it's all you. Lots of people went into the making of the *West Wing*, but ultimately it's Aaron's ball and he is going to do what he likes with it. So sometimes you run the risk, I think, of stacking the deck a little bit too handily in your favor.

HRISHI: It goes along a little bit with my issue from the pilot, the Deus ex Machina, sort of, of how neatly they wrap up the issue with the Christian right, the president comes in talking about the Lambs of God, and he says "oh, they sent a Raggedy Anne doll to my granddaughter," and its like, you can't argue against that. And of course, it's not like there are members of the Lambs of God there to disagree with him, they just present this straw man, like you said, this far right extremist group you've never heard of until he introduces them, only to hold them up as like a

perfect villain, and it just sews everything up. I think for Aaron, the fundamentalist Christian right is a bit of a bug bear.

JOSH: Yeah, I think you are exactly right, and that's the perfect comparison. Where he's just sent in a character in order to get the daylights knocked out of him.

HRISHI: Yeah. But this is some incredible Sorkin writing.

JOSH: True.

HRISHI: Like to have Martin Sheen be able to articulate that, it's so delicious. I think you're right that it doesn't necessarily serve some of his best story telling, but in terms of his performance and what is being said - I'll never not love that scene, even for all that.

JOSH: Fair enough. Big hat tip to Lyn Paolo, I assume it's Lyn Paolo, for that diamond encrusted crab brooch on the Dr. Laura character. Did you see that?

HRISHI: Ah, you noticed that? There's all this discussion about crab puffs, the Alaskan crab puffs, and then they tie it together with the crab brooch on Dr. Jenna Jacobs.

JOSH: Yeah, I like when Sam comes over and pilfers her crab puff. I want him to walk away and then come back two seconds later and say, "And I'll take the brooch, too!" and just rip it off of her.

HRISHI: I really wanted that to be an intentional tie in to the crab puffs. I asked Lyn Paolo if it was.

JOSH: Oh, did you actually?

HRISHI: Yeah. So now you've introduced me to all these people, I have like a relationship with them. I emailed her, I emailed her last night and I said "Was that crab brooch an intentional tie in to the crab puff discussion?" and she said "Yeah, we added it as a bit of an inside joke."

JOSH: Ah. Look at you.

HRISHI: I was hoping you didn't notice the crab brooch and I could surprise you with all of this.

JOSH: And I realize now I should be pulling people's personal email addresses off of our correspondence.

HRISHI: She emailed me her audio file when we interviewed her.

JOSH: I'm sure she was delighted to hear from you. I'm just kidding.

HRISHI: [laughter] Anyway. I'm happy you saw it. I'm sad I didn't get to surprise you with it.

JOSH: Heh. I noticed something!

HRISHI: [laughter] But let me talk a little bit more about this scene. When she is first introduced, I love how C.J. notices her and then Carol mentions her hair, and then C.J. kind of absent-mindedly touches her own hair... but then I love the way that she's looking at her throughout the President's confrontation, she's standing behind just giving Jenna Jacobs, like the coldest stare down. Just like "What. You want to [expletive deleted] with us?"

JOSH: That's funny. Let me--apropos of that--may I say, since you just went all potty mouth: every time we have an episode that includes bleeps, we will get a comment to two, or more, on our website saying "Hey, love the show, but I wish you wouldn't bleep out curse words." So I just want to mention again, something that we have discussed in the past, the reason that we have chosen to bleep out so called "swear words" is that to leave them in would limit our ability to release the podcast in certain areas of the world, certain countries. And we have decided that we want to be able to distribute this as widely as possible, so, for better or for worse, we need to bleep things out.

HRISHI: We have heard from several listeners who listen to this show with their kids. And the *West Wing* was something I watched with my parents, and whether or not I was fine with hearing swears, they would be uncomfortable. So anyway, I would rather everyone be able to listen to this all the time with their kids and just not have to feel like they have to do censoring for us.

JOSH: Absolutely. We want all those little [expletive deleted] to enjoy our podcast. [laughter] Also, I will say this. I think there is a subtle psychological trick being played in naming the character Jenna Jacobs, um, which to me is reminiscent of Jenna Jameson, a porn star, whose work I am only familiar with because she used to be on the Howard Stern show a lot back in the day... I think there is a subtle attempt, maybe it's subconscious on Aaron's part, to link the Dr. Laura Schlessinger character to pornography by naming her Jenna Jacobs. That's my theory.

HRISHI: All right. The other thing that I like is after the President says

[West Wing Episode 2.03 excerpt]

BARTLET: While you may be mistaking this for your monthly meeting of the Ignorant Tightass Club, in this building, when the President stands, nobody sits.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: That's amazing. That's what I'm saying, that's like, oh, that is A+. Can anybody write an insult better than Aaron Sorkin?

JOSH: He's good. I bet when he gets into an argument he's like "Stay right there" and he runs to his office and he comes back in 45 minutes, "Now. What were you saying? I've got my responses ready."

HRISHI: Well, here when the President says "When the President stands, nobody sits," and then it cuts back to Dr. Jenna Jacobs and then it cuts back to Martin Sheen and there's like a little close up on his eyes, and he gives this little, like, eye twitch, like it's a Western and it's high noon.

[Western high noon music]

JOSH: Very good. Very good.

HRISHI: Speaking of the President, Josh, I think I have had a change of heart. A little change of heart.

JOSH: In what way?

HRISHI: A change of Heartlet.

JOSH: President change of Heartlet.

HRISHI: A change of President Heartlet. Um, Ok, well I was thinking back to episode 14 of season 1, Take this Sabbath Day, when Father Cavanaugh says

[West Wing episode 1.14 excerpt]

CAVANAUGH: I don't know how to address you. Would you prefer Jed or Mr. President?

BARTLET: To be honest, I prefer Mr. President... It's helpful not to think of yourself as the man but as the office.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Now that we have done these interviews with Aaron and Tommy Schlamme, I was thinking about how they both refer to him as Bartlet.

JOSH: Mm-hm.

HRISHI: I noticed it while we were talking to them and I've been a stickler about this for us in the past, saying I think we should call him "the President," respect for the office... but I was thinking about this and I think that probably for Aaron, he is writing a character who is the man. And if you are talking about the man, then it makes sense to call him "Bartlet" as opposed to "President Bartlet," because he's - as the character that's being written--he's not just the President. There are times when he's doing presidential things and that's a big part of the plot, but in the greater context as the show obviously displays so often - it's not just that this is an

office. This is a man. This is a person. A human being with flaws and foibles. And so, for the record, I'm going to say, I am totally ok with calling him "Bartlet," although that feels a little bit weird. It's a little locker-roomish to call him "Bartlet" when we call everyone by their first name. So, I'm going to say we can call him "Jed." I'm going to call him "Jed."

JOSH: Oh. That I don't think I can do. [laughter] No.

HRISHI: I don't think I can hang with Bartlet, just because it feels weird, but, I feel like, you know, C.J., Leo, Charlie, Jed.

JOSH: Hm. This is a seismic shift for you, Hrishi. And maybe I've swung the other way now because I don't know if I can call him Jed. Although I buy your argument that the focus on the President is often just about how human he is. We should be able to call him "Bartlet" or "Jed." But I don't think I can call him "Jed."

HRISHI: Yeah. Hey, Josh. Have you ever had an egg cream?

JOSH: Indeed I have. Oh yes. That was like a Jewish Easter egg to me right there. If there were such a thing. A Passover egg. I don't know.

HRISHI: Easter egg cream at least.

JOSH: Oh, very nice. Yeah, my dad's from Brooklyn and that is a Brooklyn staple, a Brooklyn Jewish staple, I think. An egg cream is excellent, and it made me wonder who made it for the President. I want to get the backstory of the egg cream, but God knows of course I would never write it myself. That would be sacrilege.

HRISHI: Um, I don't know if this is sacrilege, but I prefer the vanilla egg cream to the chocolate egg cream, which is what the President is drinking.

JOSH: Yeah, I don't believe my people would acknowledge a vanilla egg cream. Maybe I'm wrong. I don't think so. Yeah, I don't think so.

HRISHI: I first had a vanilla egg cream, or rather an egg cream of any kind, happened to be vanilla, at the Yankee Doodle.

JOSH: In New Haven.

HRISHI: Yes, may it rest in peace. I mean the Yankee Doodle, not New Haven, the city, I'm pretty sure that's still there.

JOSH: The city is still there, not so much the Yankee Doodle.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: In my world, egg cream is a chocolate drink. But in any event, while we are Jew-adjacent...

HRISHI: Dr. Jew-adjacent

JOSH: Very nice. Oh! We have more Yiddish in this episode. To Jim's and all our delight.

[West Wing Episode 2.03 excerpt]

DONNA: I'm perfectly serious, Toby. He's recovering from an attempted murder. He's supposed to be resting and I don't want people going over there getting him fartoosted.

TOBY: Fartootst. Don't bring the Yiddish unless you know what you're doing.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And also, if you are watching, as I do, with the closed captioning on, the close captioning person, God bless him or her, got it all wrong. In this scene, Donna says "fartoosted" and Toby corrects her and says "no its fartootsted" but the closed captioning person wrote "*fartushed*," which is wrong and then has Toby correcting her "no its *fartoost*" which is also wrong. It should be, just for those keeping score at home, it's fartootst, f-a-r-t-o-o-t-s-t.

HRISHI: I think that is too, this is crossing over into territory I would not feel comfortable attempting. I think about this scene every time I say something is 'farkakte'.

JOSH: Oh, nice. Look at you throwing down with the Yiddish.

HRISHI: Or, or use a spatula.

JOSH: [laughter] Very good. I do like that. They do a mini run on English words, farfetched, that sound like Yiddish.

HRISHI: I was thinking of you at the end of this episode.

JOSH: Oh, that's nice Hrishi. I think of you at the end of every episode... Because I know I have to record with you. [laughter] I look forward to it.

HRISHI: I was thinking that if only, "so say we all" from Battlestar Galactica, existed it would save us some time.

[West Wing Episode 2.03 excerpt]

TOBY: God bless America.

SAM: God bless America.

C.J.: God bless America.

DONNA: God bless America.

JOSH: God bless America.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Oy vey. Yeah. I went to the hand over face, watch through cracks between fingers, when I realized that, indeed, we were going to get a “God Bless America” from each one. And my take on it is that even the cast, at this point, was getting a little tired of it, because to me they didn’t really put their own personal spin on the phrase, so much.

HRISHI: No. No.

JOSH: No. I think they were just like, “Alright, ok, let’s do it. God Bless America.”

HRISHI: But what spin could they really put on God Bless America? That was pretty tried and true.

JOSH: Oh, someone could have said “Go get ‘em, God!”... No. that would have not worked. I take...I withdraw the statement. But it was maybe a bad call to end the episode with that.

HRISHI: It was sweet though, right?

JOSH: No. No it wasn’t.

HRISHI: Ugh. You got your pushes, you got your hero push without music. You have to give one up sometimes.

JOSH: That’s true. Fair enough. Yeah. And I also feel like maybe after the Bible slam from President Bartlet, it was like for the rest of the audience, “We still like God! We’re gonna give you a little God shout-out in multiple fashion.”

HRISHI: Yeah. One thing I will say about the Jenna Jacobs scene, just to go back for a second, the bible scene, it’s hard to think of that as taking on a straw man when the thing that he’s railing against is an opinion that held by so many around the world. You know, the Bible is a best seller.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: So the fact that it is being used to prop up these arguments, when it’s being taken literally, and you have to have this literal interpretation, I really loved that he was using the same parts, and he was like “you have to look at all of this.”

JOSH: Yeah. Now, that’s true. You’re focusing my objection to it; straw man was probably the wrong phrase to use. I’m going to dredge up old wounds here, but again it’s one of those dramatics rather than substance things, like in the...

HRISHI: Celestial Navigation.

JOSH: Right. In Celestial Navigation the whole racial profiling thing, again it's not the substance of it. I run the risk of being misunderstood here, so it's really just the dramatics of this Jenna Jacobs, Laura Schlessinger, moment. It's not like, I didn't feel like, "Hey, let her stand up and give her great argument pro-homophobia or pro-strict interpretation of the Old Testament," it's just dramatically, there was no build toward. I was like, "Who is this? What's this? Oh." and then it was over.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: I didn't realize there was going to be a boxing match and then it was over in the first three seconds of the first round. So it was the writing and the execution of it that I found a little wanting.

HRISHI: I think you made that clear. And me bringing it up again is not me trying to further an argument with you, it's more me thinking out loud once you brought it up. I think you're right, I think the reason it felt so juicy is that I had been thirsty for a voice on a large scale to be able to make those arguments, to be able to articulate that. Like I don't think that I had witnessed that or heard that myself, and it was really important to me. It just felt so satisfying, suddenly. Like, here is a TV show that millions of people are watching and finally this argument is being presented in a brilliant way, and it gave voice to something that I would have loved to say to people that I don't normally get to address.

JOSH: No, I get that. I guess what I felt was lacking was something to help me create that thirst for that moment during the episode.

HRISHI: Right. So you want a little bit of salt on your chocolate chip cookie to bring out the sweetness.

JOSH: Very nicely put. That is true. And that also goes politically. Sometimes I feel like "I agree with you, why are you presenting it this way?" and sometimes that, like I was saying, the excesses of liberalism - it's in the technique that makes me go "I'm with you, but... why?"

HRISHI: Right. Like you're preaching to the choir, and I'm in the choir and I'm covering my ears.

JOSH: Yeah. Exactly.

HRISHI: When Brad is hitting his head against the headboard, I thought of you again.

[West Wing Episode 2.03 excerpt]

C.J.: And as a special treat for our friend, JOSHyman, who's recovering very nicely at G.W. The President's science advisors is telling us that psychics at Cal Tech and the Fermi National Accelerator Lab.....

JOSH: (Begins to bang head on hospital headboard)

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I thought, a hit! A very palpable hit.

JOSH: Very nice. And I thought of you, I thought “Hrishi will make a gif out of this.” He does it for such a long time. I was like “we definitely have enough here for Hrishi make a gif.”

HRISHI: Yeah, I can loop that.

JOSH: And he’s hitting his head hard too.

HRISHI: Yeah! That’s what I’m saying.

JOSH: I was thinking, are they adding the sound? Is there a little pillow back there and they’re adding the sound?

HRISHI: No, I think it’s real

JOSH: I believe you’re correct. I give Brad credit. And I also believe, possibly, the shooting of that scene explains so very much about his behavior since that moment. It’s possible that he knocked something loose.

[laughter]

JOSH: In any event, thanks for listening. Tune in again next week. And other things we usually say right about now, like...

HRISHI: If you’d like to discuss this episode with us, leave a comment on our website thewestwingweekly.com or on our Facebook page

JOSH: facebook.com/thewestwingweekly Right?

HRISHI: That’s right.

JOSH: Boom. You can also find us on twitter, I’m @JoshMalina, Hrishi is @HrishiHirway

HRISHI: And the podcast is @WestWingWeekly. This episode was produced by us, with help from the intrepid Zach McNees and the scintillating Margaret Miller.

JOSH: And you can preorder a West Wing Weekly lapel pin by clicking on “pin” on our website, thewestwingweekly.com

HRISHI: The West Wing Weekly is a proud member of the Radiotopia podcast network from PRX made possible by the Knight Foundation and Mail Chimp, celebrating creativity, chaos, and

teamwork. Check out all the shows at Radiotopia.FM. Next time on our show we'll be joined by a special guest.

EMILY: My name is Emily Procter and I played Ainsley Hayes.

JOSH: Ok.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: What's Next.

BATTLESTAR GALACTICA: So say we all. So say we all!

[Outro Music]