

The West Wing Weekly
2.07: The Portland Trip
Guests: Secretary of the Army Eric Fanning,
Congressman Brendan Boyle (D-PA),
and Former Congressman Steve Gunderson (R-WI)

[Intro Music]

HRISHI: You're listening to *The West Wing Weekly*, my name is Hrishikesh Hirway.

JOSH: And my name is Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: Today, we're talking about Episode 7 of Season 2. It's called "The Portland Trip."

JOSH: It first aired on November 15th, 2000. The teleplay is by Aaron Sorkin, the story by Paul Redford, the direction by Paris Barclay. Paris is a very, very talented guy who also directed the "I See You" episode from *Scandal* Season 5.

HRISHI: He won a DGA award for directing for this episode.

JOSH: Nice.

HRISHI: Here's the synopsis from *TV Guide*: "The President is taking a red-eye to Portland, Oregon, to deliver an education address, and Sam must go with him because he can't get the speech right. Toby must also go, to help Sam, and C.J. has to go, too, because she's being punished for making disparaging remarks about the President's alma mater, Notre Dame. Back at the White House, Josh spars with a gay Republican congressman over a bill on homosexual marriage, and Leo monitors a minor crisis in the Persian Gulf involving an oil tanker."

JOSH: I like the phrase, "The President is taking a red-eye," as if he's flying commercial.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: "Ah, you know what? Just book me on the red-eye."

HRISHI: And they make a nice point about the...

JOSH: Scheduling of the flight.

HRISHI: Yeah. I really like this part of the episode when the President says...

[West Wing Episode 2.07 excerpt]

BARTLET: You know why late flights are good? Because we cease to be earthbound and burdened with practicality. Ask the impertinent question. Talk about the idea nobody has thought about yet. Put it a different way.

SAM: *Be poets.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I figured you would.

HRISHI: Of course, it's not actually the reason why, but wouldn't it be great if it were?

JOSH: That's true. The moment was a little breathlessly romantic for me, but I *kind* of like it.

[Hrishi and Josh laugh]

HRISHI: That moment? Or this episode in general?

JOSH: Mm, maybe this episode in general. No, there's a certain... I might be having *West Wing* fatigue.

HRISHI: Really?

JOSH: Yeah. I'm not quitting the podcast or anything. I still love the show, but, as I watched it, I thought, "maybe I'm watching too much *West Wing*," and I should be caught up in the breathless romanticism of certain parts of this episode and I'm not because I'm watching the show too much.

HRISHI: Watching the show too much should mean that you are being uplifted and inspired, but that's not happening?

JOSH: No, I liked this episode. I guess I'm also... I think possibly, maybe it's like a *West Wing* junkie thing and I'm not getting the hits that I need. My palate feels cleansed over the last few episodes, I'm ready for something major to happen.

HRISHI: Mm.

JOSH: I want a little more meat.

HRISHI: Right. This is another one that's a contained, singular episode.

JOSH: Yes, and I do tend to like them, but I feel like we've maybe had three in a row, and I'm ready for the roof to fall in.

HRISHI: I love this episode.

JOSH: But I'm open. I feel like looking at, whatever, the 25 or 26 episodes we've done of this so far, the net result is I drag you down slightly when I'm... So, I'm ready to be uplifted by you...

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: ...in this episode. I'm ready to leave our discussion with a greater appreciation. Although, again, I enjoyed this episode well enough.

HRISHI: Maybe. You might say that I am like the President and I want to be inspired and I want to be taken off the ground, and you're like Leo or Toby and you have to ground me at the end.

JOSH: That is true and now I understand why we're recording this at midnight. And that maybe that'll work.

HRISHI: Exactly.

JOSH: At your request.

HRISHI: [laughs] Right. Because night podcasts, can you think of anything more poetic?

JOSH: Yeah, and we are... Just to set the scene, we are outside, we're in a marsh.

HRISHI: I was going to say, "we're on a plane."

JOSH: Oh, that's right, I forgot. We are on a plane, in a marsh.

HRISHI: We're high above of the marshes of South Bend, Indiana.

JOSH: Yeah. We *are*, though, in the same room, for a change.

HRISHI: That's true.

JOSH: We've done that once before?

HRISHI: Well, we've been in the same room many times before but usually with some interloper.

JOSH: That is true. I mean, when we're doing - right. When we're doing just a *mano a mano* recap. We've only done that once before. Usually, we're in our own homes.

HRISHI: Recording in mono.

JOSH: Nice. *Mono a mono*. And occasionally with our shirts off. But here we are, in the same room.

HRISHI: Fully clothed.

JOSH: As far as people know.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: Ok. Let's get back to the episode.

HRISHI: Here's a question for you.

JOSH: The answer is, "no."

HRISHI: I'm going to state the question now in a way that the answer could be, "no." Is there any good reason why Leo has to drive all the way out to the plane to tell the President about the tanker?

JOSH: Mm. I think he wants to get his little football zetz in live.

HRISHI: And, again, it wouldn't work over the phone?

JOSH: No, I don't think so. I think he wanted to be there. It's all about facial, *mano a mano*, I like to say.

HRISHI: [laughs] He comes out in the car, onto the tarmac, gets out and he says, "we have this situation with a tanker," gets back in the car, and he drives off.

JOSH: If only the phone had been invented, I would have... Yeah, that's a good point. Well, I used to love this episode and now you've ruined it for me.

HRISHI: [laughs] Well, I do have some issues with this episode and not minor ones, but I still love it. And it starts pretty early on. The dynamic between Josh and Donna in this episode is a little dark for me.

JOSH: Well, yeah. I wrote down, "horrible what Josh says to Donna."

[West Wing Episode 2.07 excerpt]

JOSH: Actually, you have no sense about these things. You have no vibe, you have terrible taste in men, and your desire to be coupled up will always and forever drown out any small sense of self or self-worth that you may have.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And I think there's a moment where you see Janel Moloney, as Donna, decide not to let that land with as much weight as it might have.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: 'Cause that could have been a, "Oh, [expletive deleted] you," moment.

HRISHI: Yeah. You know, I think she initially kind of tees him up to have a reaction when she says, "I have a good sense for this," and then he takes the bait and you see she smiles in a way that's like "aha, I got you." And I think it's, you know, in the first grader teasing way of their dynamic, she's laying a trap so he can turn around and say, "here's some evidence that shows I actually really like you," but then he turns around and is like, "I'm gonna tease you back," but then he drops this whopper of a line that is way too mean. It's terribly mean.

JOSH: You're right.

HRISHI: And the thing that I think is the harshest part about it is I think he believes it.

JOSH: Yeah, it feels like he means it.

HRISHI: And, yeah, she chooses to let it not hurt so much, but there's no way that she doesn't hear that.

JOSH: It had to have landed.

HRISHI: Yeah. And that broke my heart. Not just for the fact that he's being such a dick, but that she smiles and shrugs it off and, apparently, her feelings for him have not changed, even in the wake of a line like that. The things that a girl will forgive a guy for. I mean, I guess it goes both ways, but just the fact that that's forgivable. I don't know. That was too harsh. And it continues throughout this episode.

JOSH: That is true. It gets maybe a little lighter later. That's the real one that really lands with the thud.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: I want to just yell, "Get out! Get out!"

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: If you're thinking about it for real, don't get into a relationship with this guy. That's not the kind of thing you say to someone you care deeply about.

HRISHI: And he heard you, and now he's in the new movie *Get Out*.

JOSH: Boom!

HRISHI: I thought that both Josh and Aaron mistreated Donna in this episode.

JOSH: Mm.

HRISHI: Because it's not just in this exchange. I feel like Donna is done a disservice throughout the whole thing. She's really kind of reduced to this quote. What Josh says, "your desire to be

coupled up will drown out any small sense of self or self-worth,” they kind of mirror that throughout the whole episode and she ends up, apart from, like, one sentence that she exchanges with Ainsley about full faith and credit, she’s basically a walking failure of a Bechdel test the whole episode.

JOSH: Mm.

HRISHI: The whole time, she’s just, like, talking about guys and she’s talking about, like... There’s one line that really bothered me where she says...

[West Wing Episode 2.07 excerpt]

DONNA: I played the flute. In high school I was the best in my row. And so, I ask myself, if I pursued the flute professionally, would I be meeting interesting men? And the answer comes back to me. Probably not.

[End excerpt]

JOSH: For me, the nadir takes place in the steam pipe distribution venue?

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: When she comes in and she’s... Basically her whole riff is, “do we look alike?”

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah.

JOSH: “Do you think you want to dye your hair?” I thought, “Oh. Is that who Donna is?”

HRISHI: Yeah. That’s why I think that she’s better than that. That it felt like she was badly treated in this episode. Ainsley is not badly treated and she gets to sort of play off of that and show, you know, like...

[West Wing Episode 2.07 excerpt]

AINSLEY: I played the trombone.

DONNA: Did you meet interesting men?

AINSLEY: Yeah.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And then immediately Donna says...

[West Wing Episode 2.07 excerpt]

DONNA: Is it a hard instrument to learn if I took it up now?

JOSH: Talk to me about the...

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I mean, it's a little bit pathetic.

JOSH: Mmhmm.

HRISHI: And I don't want to feel that way about Donna, that she's pathetic in any way.

JOSH: Yeah, I had a similar experience watching it.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Oh, I don't want Donna to be that...

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah.

JOSH: ...person.

HRISHI: The power dynamic between her and Josh - sure, she's his assistant, but clearly their relationship is deeper than that and more complicated than that, but here it really felt like the power dynamics were icky.

JOSH: Well, maybe we're seeing how raw and vulnerable she was made by that early comment and maybe she's reduced to her not-best self.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah.

JOSH: And it lands more palpably than we initially thought.

HRISHI: A big part of this episode is this confrontation that Josh has with Congressman Skinner, and Congressman Skinner is there to talk about the "Marriage Recognition Act" and it's revealed that early on that, you know, this is their version of DOMA, that's supposed to keep same sex marriage off the books, but he's there as a representative of the Republican Party against this bill even though he is gay.

JOSH: Interesting, I thought, dramatically, that it is revealed so early on.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: in the episode. I don't know whether I like that or not, but I just think if I were writing it, it would be more of a, "Ooh.."

HRISHI: Save it for the end?

JOSH: Yeah, or later. certainly.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It was interesting to front-load it with that information rather than spring it on us in a more... I mean, maybe that just, atypical writing which is better than your average writing.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Saying, "I don't have to toss this out like an aha moment or a gimmick."

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: It's just, this is going to be a part of the conversation

HRISHI: Right

JOSH: The fact of the situation.

HRISHI: I would agree with that. I kept thinking, "this is an interesting position." It's an unintuitive one, and the reason why I think it is interesting to reveal it early is because it's so surprising that you would have gay, Republican, congresspeople to begin with. At least on the surface, it seems like it, but, I talked to former Congressman Steven Gunderson, who is the very first, openly gay, Republican congressman, about his take on this issue and what it was like to be in that position.

JOSH: And when was he in Congress?

HRISHI: Congressman Steve Gunderson was in office from 1981 to 1997.

JOSH: Hm.

HRISHI: He was outed in 1994.

JOSH: Oh, interesting, against his will.

HRISHI: Not by his own doing.

JOSH: Interesting. And he was in office in 1996 when DOMA passed.

HRISHI: Yes. The difference is that he stood up against it.

JOSH: Unlike our *West Wing* congressman.

HRISHI: Yeah, but he's, there's the Log Cabin Republicans. They're a group of Republicans who are gay and stand with the Republican Party, despite the terrible homophobia and just hate speech, really, that the party regularly unleashes. And it made me think that Log Cabin Republicans are kind of like Donna. The Republican party is kind of like Josh. That they will just say some awful things and no matter what, these guys just won't quit them, to bring a...

JOSH: Whoa, look at... Wow, you... There's so many references going on now, I have to just nod my head. But he voted against DOMA.

HRISHI: Exactly. Yeah, Congressman Gunderson did. And let's drop in that call now?

JOSH: Let's.

[Call with Former Congressman Steve Gunderson (R-WI) excerpt]

STEVE: Call me Steve.

HRISHI: All right. Thank you so much, Steve, for talking to me. I was wondering if you could just give me really quickly a little background on yourself and your time in Congress.

STEVE: Sure. First of all, I spent a total of 22 years in elected office; six in the state legislature and then 16 years in the U.S. Congress. So, it was a long stint of public policy engagement and it was a very different era than we have today.

HRISHI: And in this episode of *The West Wing*, there's a character named Matt Skinner who is a Republican congressman who is defending an act that's essentially *The West Wing's* version of the Defense of Marriage Act. In the show it's called the Marriage Recognition Act. and one of the characters in the show confronts him by asking him how he could be a gay person and also be a member of the Republican party. I was wondering if you were ever confronted with a question like that?

STEVE: Oh, probably a thousand times. [laughs]

HRISHI: [laughs] And what would your answer be?

STEVE: Well, my answer is, first of all, I am a "Lincoln Republican." I call that and define that as someone who believes in a strong, market-oriented, regulatory economy, a pro-growth economy. I believe strongly that the private sector has to grow in order for all citizens to improve their lot and their standing in American society. I'm certainly what you would call a national security or foreign policy Republican. I believe in a strong national defense. I believe in a strong role for America globally. And so, when you look at all of this, you would find then on the economic issues, on the military, foreign policy issues, on the regulatory issues, on the local control perspective, I'm a Republican. Now, one place where I disagree with the Republican party at the time in which I served, was on some of the social issues, and a very good example of that was equal opportunity for everyone. Including, should I say, the gay, lesbian, transgender issues, and certainly marriage equality. And whether that A, should be a state issue, or B, it should be recognized in federal law as one which treats everybody the same.

HRISHI: It has to be hard for any member of any party enacting legislation, when legislation is so widely encompassing, to feel like they can stand with their party on every single issue. I

mean, I can't imagine that there's anybody who feels like they agree with their party on everything.

STEVE: If they agree with their party on everything, they probably have little or no independent thought, and to be a blank check for party rhetoric, party leadership, party policy - anything over the span of, in my case, 22 years of public life - would suggest that I don't have the ability or the desire to independently consider what I think is best for my constituents and my country.

HRISHI: Did you ever have trouble convincing other gay people that they should belong to the Republican party?

STEVE: Well...

HRISHI: Did you ever try and make that argument even?

STEVE: I can make a solid argument for them on ways outside of the specific policy related to gays. I mean, such as Defense of Marriage Act, such as non-discrimination, etc., because a lot of them say, "Look, we want and need a strong federal policy in this area," and I understand and respect that. I would suggest to you that it is combination of legislative policy becoming law, certainly the courts and their interpretation, and economics that gives them the opportunity to grow and survive and succeed as an individual or as a partnership.

HRISHI: Steve, thank you so much for talking to me about this. It's really great to get your perspective.

STEVE: Happy to help.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I want to say that I respect the idea that you don't have to be a single-issue politician, or a single-issue voter, or anything like that. That you can be gay and you can also be for small government, and all these other tenants that the Republican party stands for.

JOSH: Fiscal conservatism...

HRISHI: Strong defense. Whatever you want to say, but there's something so intrinsically messed up about the idea that, like, part of your identify is an anathema. It feels a little bit like Donna here, where it's just like, "Can you just, you know"... It feels like their inability to break away is saying something about their sense of self-worth.

JOSH: Well, I think there's certainly some truth to that. I mean, I would say in the Congressman's, or fictional Congressman's defense, he makes the argument towards the end that he's taking a change from within approach.

HRISHI: Mmhmm.

JOSH: And although he's - what is *The West Wing's* version of DOMA?

HRISHI: The Marriage Recognition Act.

JOSH: The Marriage Recognition Act, he is going to vote for, but he makes the argument to Josh, in response to the "How could you possibly be part of this party," that he is looking to make a change from within. So, he, at least, has a - whether you buy it or not - an argument that, in the grander scheme he is Republican, policy-wise, and as a gay Republican, he can only evoke change in their platform or their policies by being a Republican.

HRISHI: What do you think about the idea that these two plots are supposed to be parallel?

JOSH: Are meant to be?

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I think you are maybe drawing interesting... I think you're maybe having an interesting response that maybe was not intended, but that makes it good art.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: It's meaty and fertile to be explored. Whether or not the author or authors had that intention.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It's also an interesting... The whole... So, DOMA passed in 1996 with a veto-proof majority, but President Clinton signed it.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: And there is... It's been brought up again recently, with Hillary Clinton and there's been some, perhaps, partially revisionist looks back on why he signed it. I think Hillary Clinton stated in an interview, I think with Rachel Maddow, that President Bill Clinton saw signing the act as a stop-gap measure against a greater movement to pass a constitutional amendment, but it doesn't, I think, hold up to close scrutiny.

HRISHI: [laughs] Yeah, it's like when...

JOSH: [cross talk] And so I think we get an interesting... I think we're getting Aaron's take on what he would prefer to see the President do. In other words, when President Bartlet is considering whether or not to sign this thing, it's Aaron's revision of the Bill Clinton years.

HRISHI: Right. Although, even then, President Bartlet says...

JOSH: [cross talk] In the end.

HRISHI: Yeah. "I'm sure the gay community can't wait to thank me," because he sticks it in a drawer, only to have to pull the bill out in January and sign it then.

JOSH: Will it be revisited on *The West Wing*?

HRISHI: No.

JOSH: No. Would've been interesting, actually, to see President Bartlet put to it and see what the final response would be.

HRISHI: Yeah. Symbolic gestures - not so great when there are real non-symbolic repercussions.

JOSH: Indeed. One of the nice things that I was thinking as I watched this, though, is, you know made me think back - the Clinton years and DOMA - but it was also nice to watch it from 2016, knowing that, in 2013, the Supreme Court would find DOMA unconstitutional, and that, in 2015, the Supreme Court would guarantee the right for same-sex marriage in all 50 states. I mean, it's one of those nice, I guess, fairly rare moments, when you watch the show and you know - at least from my point-of-view - the happy ending that has happened.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: A lot of the times, we watch something and we know there's been some progress or maybe there's been no progress, and you can't believe how on point Aaron was way back when, raising an issue that's still burning. It's nice to be able to see, "Oh, I know the exact progress that was made in this arena."

HRISHI: And not just legislatively, because they even bring up the fact that the Congressman says, "60% of Americans oppose gay marriage," and Josh has to bring up the fact that, you know, public opinion can be wrong and that you can legislate ahead of public opinion. 60% of Americans oppose gay marriage, whereas, now, somewhere between 53% and 60% of Americans now support same-sex marriage.

JOSH: That's right. So, you're right. Social change has been extreme, or significant, I should say. And, actually, as much as I hate to bring it up again, that also speaks to, when we talked about the Jenna Jacobs scene, just the... Your urging me to view the importance of the scene in the time in which it came out, and those were very different times.

HRISHI: Yeah. There's a lot of product placement in this episode.

JOSH: Hm.

HRISHI: Especially in the beverage arena.

JOSH: Yes! Well that's funny. I was thinking, Aaron does love semi-obscure beverages. He likes his Yoo-hoo, and he likes his Fresca.

HRISHI: Mhmm, and his Dewar's on the rocks.

JOSH: Mm. Is that from the pilot?

HRISHI: From the pilot and a few other times on the show.

JOSH: Interesting. I wonder if he has cases and cases of Dewar's that've been sent to him? Or may the ice cube people just constantly send him rocks.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: Bags and bags of them from the year 2000.

HRISHI: This episode has Fresca, has Canada Dry - we get a shot of a Canada Dry can of ginger ale - Petrus wine.

JOSH: Mm.

HRISHI: Leo recommends it.

JOSH: Mhmm.

HRISHI: And Jack Daniels, which Toby orders. Plus, there's also, Max Mara gets a shout out from C.J. She says she's wearing Max Mara and that's why she shouldn't put on the Notre Dame cap.

JOSH: Now, you have me intrigued. I wonder whether... Are you positing that there were actual product placement deals in place? Because that... It does happen.

HRISHI: Yeah. I don't know? I wouldn't... I thought it was just there for specificity.

JOSH: Man, I'll tell the next time you hear an actor on a late night talk show saying, "Oh I had the worst headache and I took two Advil, and then I was able to go back to the set," they're getting paid for that.

HRISHI: [laughs] Right?

JOSH: That's a \$40,000 mention right there. So, it's entirely possible that there was some real product placement.

HRISHI: I mean, they've got Air Force One. They clearly were burning up budget in the production values for this episode. So, maybe. But I thought it was nice detail that C.J. is wearing Max Mara, contrasted with Donna, who can't afford to keep the dress that she's bought. I was like, "Oh, this is the difference between"... Well, not even the difference between the Press Secretary and the Assistant to the Deputy Chief of Staff. It's really, "Here's a woman who used

to get paid six figures to be a Hollywood publicist, who is much more likely to have a \$2,000 Max Mara piece than...

JOSH: [cross talk] This is true.

HRISHI: ...anybody who's really on the government payroll."

JOSH: You know, Josh - it's just occurring to me now - he had a chance in that last moment. Their kinda... Their little, I guess, supposedly happy resolution as he's...

[West Wing Episode 2.07 excerpt]

JOSH: You looked really great in that dress tonight, Donna. You should buy it for yourself.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: He at least could have said, "I said a really [expletive deleted] thing to you, let me buy that dress for you." Although maybe we would have had complaints about their relationship then, too. Maybe you can't win for losing with us, but...

HRISHI: Yeah. Well, we... I said it would have been weird if he bought her shoes. J

OSH: That's right.

HRISHI: Buying her a dress is certainly...

JOSH: Yeah. Then we wouldn't have approved of that either, I guess.

HRISHI: He really shouldn't have brought up the dress at all.

JOSH: Probably not.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Also, why did she have to come back to work?

HRISHI: That's an excellent question!

JOSH: Like, "Dude, could you maybe cover whatever it is, whatever folder she's going to grab for you?"

HRISHI: Yeah!

JOSH: "Could you maybe just let her go have her date?"

HRISHI: I mean, I guess because Ainsley's still working, she's working on notes for him. I don't totally understand, because they know it's going to be passed, they know what they're going to

do with it. I guess he has to make his recommendation to the President, after having the meeting with Congressman Skinner, but it is another funny thing that stretches the believability a little bit for the sake of educating the audience. We have a fun kind of telladonna between Ainsley and Josh when he goes up to her and says...

[West Wing Episode 2.07 excerpt]

JOSH: Talk to me about the Full Faith and Credit Clause.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Josh is a guy who went to law school. He writes laws [laughs]. I mean, I know about Full Faith and Credit and I didn't go to law school.

JOSH: Yeah. Right. They might as well just say, "Explain this to the audience."

HRISHI: Exactly!

JOSH: [laughs] I need you for a second.

HRISHI: Yeah. It's funny because he... Like, he's so much of a legal scholar that he name checks Laurence Tribe in the episode. He knows Laurence Tribe by... I mean, of course, he went to law school, but he doesn't know Full Faith. He needs...

JOSH: He needs a fresher-upper on that one.

HRISHI: Yeah, exactly. I was thinking that Laurence Tribe - Lionel Tribbey.

JOSH: You know? I think that flicked through my mind as well.

HRISHI: And I would've thought that, "Ok, Lionel Tribbey must be named after Laurence Tribe," except for the fact that he is name checked so deliberately here, and we already had Roger Tribbey well before. More trouble with Tribbeys.

JOSH: Odd.

HRISHI: I really wanted him to be named after Laurence Tribe, but I don't think that's that case.

JOSH: Maybe we'll shoot Aaron an email.

HRISHI: So, one of the plots in this episode is that Sam isn't writing well, and this felt like something just right out of Aaron's life. I remember when he talked to us for our episode with him, he said, "In television, you have to write even when you're not writing well, and then you have to put it on the table for the cast. You've got to give them this thing that you know isn't as good as they are, and then you have to point a camera at it and show it to everybody else." And that felt like he must just be writing his life here when Sam says...

[West Wing Episode 2.07 excerpt]

SAM: I'm not writing well. I'm just... I'd rather not distribute this to the pool yet.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah. I'm looking at my notes and I wrote down, "this is the kind of thing Aaron says." Because I've heard him say it before.

HRISHI: Yeah. And this is...

JOSH: [cross talk] I never say, "I'm not acting well."

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: I'm always like, "Yeah, that was pretty good, I think."

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: And maybe that's why I haven't pushed myself to the heights of acting, that Aaron has with writing.

HRISHI: Maybe you need to take some more long plane rides, at night.

JOSH: Perhaps so.

HRISHI: Push yourself to the heights of...

JOSH: [cross talk] Mm.

HRISHI: ...the...

JOSH: The Mile High Club. No. Left turn. Sorry!

HRISHI: [laughs] I was going say the troposphere? Trope-o-sphere?

JOSH: [cross talk] Go ahead. Say it.

HRISHI: Stratosphere?

JOSH: That sounds like a thing .

HRISHI: Is that a thing?

JOSH: Hey, Ainsley! Tell me about the troposphere!

HRISHI: Yeah, the troposphere!

JOSH: There you go.

HRISHI: It's the lowest layer of the earth's atmosphere.

JOSH: [cross talk] Oh, nice.

HRISHI: I think I was right. Ok. You know what's impressive about an episode that mostly takes place on Air Force One is that they still manage to do a walk-and-talk.

JOSH: Yeah, they do.

HRISHI: [laughs] On a plane! They even talk about it.

JOSH: Right, Toby wants to get Sam out there moving, and "let's walk."

[West Wing Episode 2.07 excerpt]

TOBY: Let's take a walk.

SAM: Where?

TOBY: Up and down the plane, get the blood flowing.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: [laughs]

HRISHI: I think the thing that Toby says about the club sandwich...

[West Wing Episode 2.07 excerpt]

TOBY: I'll have a club sandwich, Jack Daniels, and ice.

STEWARD: Mr. Seaborn?

SAM: Nothing for me.

TOBY: You have to have something.

SAM: I'm fine.

TOBY: [to the steward] Bring him a club sandwich.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: That's, like, one of the sweetest, like, big brother kind of moments.

JOSH: Oh, see maybe it's only because I'm a glutton, but my take was Toby just wants a second sandwich.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: "He's not hungry so I'm going to order another of what I like."

HRISHI: [laughs] I liked it.

JOSH: [laughs] Well, you took it probably the way it was intended.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: To me, it was like, "Good move - second sandwich."

HRISHI: [laughs] I just also... There was another thing about Fresca I wanted to mention. It's funny that Ainsley wants Fresca and they don't have any Fresca in the White House, because did you know...

JOSH: Hm?

HRISHI: ...hat LBJ loved Fresca?

JOSH: No.

HRISHI: He loved Fresca so much that he had a Fresca soda fountain installed in his private lounge by the Oval Office.

JOSH: How do you know that? How'd you find your way to that piece of marginalia?

HRISHI: I think it was because I was recently watching that movie.

JOSH: That movie, *LBJ Drinks a Fresca*?

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: Oh, yeah, well that would...

HRISHI: I was watching that movie, *Elvis and Nixon*.

JOSH: Sure. Michael Shannon and Kevin Spacey.

HRISHI: Yeah, and there's some discussion about President Nixon and how much he loves Dr. Pepper and I think I was googling after that to see if that was true, or something, and I think I found that, you know...

JOSH: Interesting.

HRISHI: ...different presidential favorite things? I'm not sure I remember. It's been a little while. I've been carrying that around for a little bit waiting for the Ainsley episodes so I could drop the Fresca.

JOSH: Let me ask you this - we've commented a bit on Josh and Donna's relationship in this episode and its slight ickiness. I didn't love everybody prying into Leo's... "I know the divorce papers are coming, are you going to drink again?" It kind of... I mean, he took it well, so who am, as a viewer, to get pissed off on his behalf? But it kind of irked me.

HRISHI: Yeah? Even Margaret? I thought this was another example of a nice, you know, work place as family. We've got Toby as Sam's big brother and then you have Margaret as the, you know, concerned daughter.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: I don't know. Leave him alone. He's your boss. Or say it once, lightly, or something, and then Donna comes in, and she feels comfortable enough to bring it up.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I kept waiting for Leo to go, "Would you guys all shut the [expletive deleted] up?"

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: "I'm an adult man."

HRISHI: I did like his response.

[West Wing Episode 2.07 excerpt]

LEO: I'm an alcoholic. I don't need a good reason to.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: It is a good line.

HRISHI: Yeah. Is it weird that that Leo would recommend Donna have a nice Petrus with her meal?

JOSH: Interesting. I didn't bump on it at the time, but I would say, I've known many people with drinking problems and many alcoholics and some of them enjoy talking about what they used to like and what they would enjoy, and can be around people who are drinking. And so, I think maybe it's almost, "Well, I can still tell you what tastes good."

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right. Yeah.

JOSH: There was a time...

HRISHI: Did you hear him talking about his Blue Apron meal?

[West Wing Episode 2.07 excerpt]

LEO: Tell Dario, the chef, that you work for me and that you want the flash-seared escolar with foie gras butter and a fresh juniper berry gravlax on a bed of shaved fennel. You have a nice '87 Petrus with that.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Oh, I know. That was so... I thought, "culinary tech specs for Hrishi."

HRISHI: Exactly. This is what I was talking about, when we do the Blue Apron ads, and I'm like, "It's straight out of a *West Wing* episode!"

JOSH: Very funny. You're right.

HRISHI: I think the reason why I like this episode so much is a few different exchanges. One is this one between Skinner and Josh - they're now deep into it, they're in the mess, and the Congressman says...

[West Wing Episode 2.07 excerpt]

MATT: The government has a responsibility to protect the rights of minorities, but it can't impose the minority's values on the majority.

JOSH: Freedom of choice isn't a minority value just because the majority doesn't agree with the minority's choice.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Fantastic piece of writing! Yeah.

HRISHI: It's so compelling and so exciting and both of these points are, like, salient and sharp, and just to read them on the page, it's incredibly dry but somehow in the episode it works, and that is, like, a distillation for me of what I love about this show.

JOSH: Mmhmm. Yeah, I would say this is my favorite sub-plot of this episode because we keep returning to them, even though it's not one continuous scene. We get to see sort of the phases of a conversation between two intelligent people discussing an issue of substance. Not the kind of thing you see on TV very often, and not done at this level often. So, I like this.

HRISHI: And I like how much respect they treat each other with.

JOSH: Mmhmm.

HRISHI: I think we've seen Josh kind of brow beat people on the other side, or even people in his own party, but here, they're really are having - even though Josh gets to do his up-in-arms, "How can you be a member of this party?" But he's still doing it with a level of respect that's really refreshing. Another exchange that's one of my favorite lines of the whole series, something that I think about regularly, you know, maybe once a month, this comes through my head and has been, actually, a huge part of my own life, is this exchange when Charlie writes down, "send them to college." He says...

[West Wing Episode 2.07 excerpt]

CHARLIE: Mr. President, if this was an idea, somebody would have had it already.

BARTLET: I find fault with that formula.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: On a totally, like just, aside from *West Wing* and *West Wing Weekly*, that was something that was really meaningful to me when I was working on the idea for *Song Exploder*. I was thinking, I was like "Ah, should I do this podcast?" I had this exact same thought with myself. I was like, "If this was a real thing and this could work, somebody would have already done it, "And then I immediately thought of President Bartlet saying, "I find fault with that formula."

JOSH: That's very good! I go through the same. I don't attribute it to the *West Wing*, although I will henceforth, but I do go through the same thought process, usually in less exalted circumstances, when I'm thinking of, like, TV shows to pitch.

HRISHI: That's one of those things that's great about the show is this little, like, a little couplet of dialogue can become, at least for me, a life lesson that I've held onto.

JOSH: All right. You're doing it. I think you might be the wind beneath my wings. Have I ever told you that you're my hero?

["Wind Beneath My Wings" by Bette Midler softly plays in the background]

JOSH: At the time, this is when I think I felt I had *West Wing* fatigue, and at that moment, I was like, "Really? Charlie's coming up with the idea that's now the germ of a new educational policy?" And I think I just wasn't in the right frame of mind...

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah.

JOSH: ...to appreciate it [laughs]. You got be ready for it. It just goes back to self-worth.

HRISHI: Mmhmm.

JOSH: Charlie's essentially saying, "I can't generate an original idea..."

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah.

JOSH: ...that's of worth, that hasn't been touched on by somebody else."

HRISHI: And this has been something that's run through the whole series, you know? There's the moment in "What Kind of Day Has It Been," when he wants to suggest something and Zoey says, "You should tell the President" and he's like...

[West Wing Episode 1.22 excerpt]

CHARLIE: Zoey, I work in a building with the smartest people in the world.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: You know, and he gets excited. He gets that feeling of like, "this feeling, it doesn't go away," but it's still this, like, reluctance of, like, "I'm not the guy to have the ideas. I'm not the idea guy."

JOSH: Ok. Now you've gotten me. I'm appreciating the episode more and more. Just tell me the next time it happens, they say, "Why don't we ask Charlie? He's always right."

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: Tell me there won't be another time when Charlie's not quite sure whether or not to share his brilliant idea.

HRISHI: Except the funny thing is it was an idea and it's called Teach for America.

JOSH: True.

HRISHI: The parts where *The West Wing* decides to depart from reality and cleave to reality is sometimes a little bit convenient because Teach for America is definitely a thing and it had been a thing for a long time, by that point.

JOSH: Well, in our alternate world, it can be Charlie's idea.

HRISHI: But an alternate world where we still have Laurence Tribe, but no DOMA.

JOSH: Well, that is true. I mean, it's the theory of multiple parallel universes, Hrish. Don't get me started.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Because I know a lot more than that phrase.

HRISHI: [laughs] The grand unified theory.

JOSH: Exactly. Thank you. That's what I was really trying to think of.

HRISHI: The grand unified theory of our multiverses. David Graf is in this episode, and he plays Colonel Chase.

JOSH: Mmhmm.

HRISHI: What's interesting about that is that he was in an episode of *Sports Night*. The second episode of *Sports Night* ever, called "The Apology."

JOSH: "The Apology." I remember that.

HRISHI: His character's name in that episode - Chase.

JOSH: How about that?

HRISHI: That's just... You know?

JOSH: I think this speaks to Aaron's complex, sponge-like mind, and his horrific scheduling of writing two series at once.

HRISHI: Right. Like, that seems...

JOSH: [cross talk] I think stuff gets mixed up in his brain and comes out and then you can make weird connections that he didn't even know that he was making.

HRISHI: Right, exactly. I don't think that... There's certainly no reason why these two characters need to have the same name, and yet, he's... I'm sure it's no accident that David Graf is cast for these two different parts, and somehow, when Aaron's picturing it, he associates the name Chase with that actor.

JOSH: While we're on David Graf, what's his super famous role? Most recognizable? Isn't there...

HRISHI: *Police Academy*.

JOSH: *Police Academy*, thank you. That's what I wanted to say.

HRISHI: Yeah, David Graf who's Tackleberry.

JOSH: You know, it speaks to his skill as an actor that we buy him in uniform after playing Tackleberry.

HRISHI: [laughs] Right.

JOSH: We buy him credibly...

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah.

JOSH: ...as a man in uniform on *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: Here's a language nitpick that I thought you would appreciate, or maybe I'm totally wrong about it, but at one point, the President, when talking about this Marriage Recognition Act, he says...

[West Wing Episode 2.07 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: We shouldn't be defining love and we certainly shouldn't be ill-defining it.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Which seems like curious - and by that I mean a nice way of putting a totally incorrect - usage, right? Like, that's not correct.

JOSH: Yeah, no. I definitely bumped on it when I heard it. I didn't write anything down, but...

HRISHI: "We shouldn't be ill-defining it."

JOSH: Yeah, that doesn't track particularly.

HRISHI: Yeah. Also - and here's where your humbugging just can't - it must wither.

JOSH: Yes?

HRISHI: When C.J. asks the President about going to Notre Dame. We actually know the reason why the President went to Notre Dame. It's because Martin Sheen made the request to Aaron Sorkin that he wanted him to be Catholic and he wanted him to go to Notre Dame, but then there's this beautiful other backstory that's created for this episode when C.J. asks the President...

[West Wing Episode 2.07 excerpt]

C.J.: You were accepted at Harvard, Yale, and Williams. Why did you go to Notre Dame?

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Because I was thinking about becoming a priest.

C.J.: Really?

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Yeah.

C.J.: What happened?

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I met Abbey.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Eh.

HRISHI: That's so good!

JOSH: [imitates a college-age Bartlet] I got horny.

[Hrishi and Josh laugh]

JOSH: I guess? That swept you off your feet?

HRISHI: It did.

JOSH: Well, it was sweet.

HRISHI: That's sweet that his path in life was changed by this one particular woman.

JOSH: Yeah, I suppose. [laughs]

HRISHI: Nothing?

JOSH: I'll give you an, "I suppose." Yeah, no. It's sweet. I didn't... It didn't have a huge impact on me.

HRISHI: I loved that.

JOSH: It's good background information.

HRISHI: I like that that's - how kind of unceremoniously that information comes up. It's not used as a plot. You know, C.J. says, "Why don't you give me something like that when we're running for something?" And he says, "just to annoy you," and I'm so happy that it comes up in this kind of very humble way, as opposed to having it come out on the campaign trail.

JOSH: [cross talk] Right, true. That's true.

HRISHI: But, I guess, because, you know, we've known this thing about him and Notre Dame for over a season, the idea that you could still layer in this really meaningful, significant character plot point in his backstory in this exchange is...

JOSH: [cross talk] Ok, ok, it's beautiful. I love it.

HRISHI: All right, good. Me too. I agree. [laughs]

JOSH: [laughs] Why doesn't she sing the song?

HRISHI: Oh, you wanted the song?

JOSH: It's like the Chekov thing- you introduce a gun in Act One, it's got to go off by Act Two. Don't talk to me about five verses of the Notre Dame fight song and then not have it sung.

HRISHI: Why didn't you sing any Gilbert and Sullivan for me in our last episode?

JOSH: It's got to get the analogy.

[Hrishi and Josh laugh]

HRISHI: I'm just saying, sometimes you want a song, you don't always get it.

JOSH: Well, that is the hard truth.

HRISHI: [laughs] Now, we're going to take a quick break, and when we come back, we're going to talk to Congressman Brendan Boyle of Pennsylvania and Secretary of the Army, Eric Fanning.

[Ad break]

HRISHI: We're joined now by Congressman Brendan Boyle who represents Pennsylvania's 13th congressional district.

JOSH: Democrat Brendan Boyle.

HRISHI: I guess that's an important detail.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: We thought it'd be great to talk to you about this part of the episode where Charlie scribbles, "send them to college." And, one, I was like, "Oh, that's Teach for America," at a federal level, but you have experience in this area before you even got to Congress, right?

BRENDAN: Yeah. My experience in it really started from my own experience trying to go college. I'm the first in my family to go college. I was fortunate in that I was always good in school, it always came easier to me, but then, you know, being able to afford the schools that I got into, especially when your parents make \$40,000, \$50,000 a year, is incredibly difficult. And so, I have a typical story of piecing together scholarships and student loans and all sorts of odd work study jobs and a Dad's union scholarship and making all of that happen. So, out of my own experience came a desire to make higher education more affordable. Unfortunately, over the last 20 years, it's only gotten considerably worse. So, as a result of that, when I was in grad school, I studied a program that was started in Georgia called HOPE Scholarship, and the idea was kind of similar to "send them to college," free college tuition and room and board, based on

merit. And now different states have different systems. Georgia started with a 3.0 GPA. That's how they instituted their state lottery. All the funds went to the HOPE scholarship. Florida started it the next year, and I tried to do that in Pennsylvania, but it really came out of... I would not have had the original interest in the subject if not for my own personal experience.

JOSH: And you are, are you not, married to a public school teacher?

BRENDAN: I am, yeah. My wife, she is a passionate, public school teacher. Used to teach in the D.C. area, now teaches in suburban Philadelphia in the district.

HRISHI: And you're also a huge *West Wing* nerd, right?

BRENDAN: I am a big *West Wing* nerd, and I watched the show religiously and recently rewatching this episode was fun for me.

HRISHI: Is there ever stuff that you think about, as a legislator, that is inspired by the show?

BRENDAN: Well, I'll say this - when we're having a good day in the office, we will joke that, "Oh this was like a *West Wing* day," and then if we're having a bad day we'll say, "this is like a *House of Cards* day."

JOSH: [laughs] I wish you no *Scandal* days.

[Everyone laughs]

BRENDAN: That's true. Thank God we haven't got to that point yet!

JOSH: [cross talk] I hope you never will.

BRENDAN: But there's always a second term, but I'm really struck by how close the series got to a pretty accurate portrayal, and also, I mean, it's an idealistic version, but it's fairly accurate, and it also reflects that people are complex. That you have the noble aspirations, yet at the same time, the pragmatic, "Hey, we got to win and got to get reelected." The struggle with that even in the episode of trying to write beautiful prose, with the same time of, "Ok. How do we pay for it?" I didn't know, of course, just as a fan - it seemed realistic to me. Now that I'm a member, I'm even more impressed with it and impressed with its realism.

HRISHI: For the program that they want to start, it's 100,000 teachers, is the idea, and then it gets knocked down to a hundred teachers.

BRENDAN: A hundred, yeah.

HRISHI: How did you guys pay for the REACH program that you did?

BRENDAN: So, REACH, kind of similar to how they did it in Georgia and Florida. And, by the way, I didn't get this passed in Pennsylvania. So, as a Democratic member, I couldn't quite

convince the Republican Governor of the brilliance of my proposal. So, even though a lot of states have the HOPE scholarship or some version of REACH, Pennsylvania, to this day, still doesn't. It's still the... Either the most expensive or second most expensive public colleges and universities in the country. So, I hope that we're kind of halfway through the story and that it's an idea whose time will finally come.

JOSH: Hopefully, there'll be a *West Wing* ending.

BRENDAN: That's right! I'm rooting for the *West Wing* ending! But in terms of how we funded it - what you see in a lot of these states is it coincided with a time when gaming was being legalized.

JOSH: Mmhmm.

BRENDAN: So, the question was: what do you use those proceeds for? Do you use it for tax cuts? Or do you use it to invest in education? Now, the irony is, truth be told, actually, while I have no moral problem with gaming at all, I do struggle with the idea that, "Wait a minute. Are we inadvertently creating more victims of 2% of the population is prone to be addicted to gambling by doing this? Or are we actually creating more addicts to fund a worthy cause?" So, I kind of have my own complicated feelings about the funding mechanism, but that said, the fact that it was coming in, and it seemed like a good purpose to put those funds toward.

HRISHI: So, it wasn't like in this episode where it broke down because of the money? The money was there.

BRENDAN: No. No, I mean, that is, I think, one of the frustrating things, to me, is that - and it's very similar to the national debate that's happening this year, and the amazing progress that has been made on that issue of higher education affordability - is that it's really a question of priority because there are funds there. I mean, we could do it. If you look at what it would cost as a percentage of state budget or federal budget, it's actually, in that perspective, not that much money. It really has been the case, in my opinion - but I think this is proven by the facts - it's a case where it just hasn't been prioritized nearly highly enough.

JOSH: Yeah, that's a national shame.

BRENDAN: Right.

JOSH: And what it reflects on our priorities.

BRENDAN: Right, and it also gets to a deeper question for me. I mean, my dad came here as an immigrant and grew up in a Philly neighborhood where raised to believe in the American Dream, flag on every porch. If we believe that America is supposed to be a meritocracy and we're now creating a system in the 21st century in which a higher education is more important to get a good job than ever before, and yet, we have public colleges and universities that cost more than the average family makes a year, are we really living up to the spirit of the American

dream if we're saying that you need education in order to climb that ladder, but, here, these rungs right here are impossible for you to attain. So, I think it goes to actually a deeper question about who we are as a country and what we value.

JOSH: And so, when you were working for REACH, would you have these kinds of conversations? This is the kind of conversations that are dramatized on the show.

BRENDAN: Right.

JOSH: And would you have these kinds of rock bottom principled conversations or was it more...

BRENDAN: [cross talk] It was...

JOSH: ...nuts and bolts practical?

BRENDAN: Right. So, the nuts and bolts practical was more the 80%, 90% and then there's 10-20% of the time where it's gut check. Especially if you get down... Now, REACH, we never got to that point, but other things I've worked on, where it gets to the point. Ok, you're needing to get some compromise on something in order to get it passed. Where do the compromises happen? And by doing it are you losing the essence of it? And if you don't do it, are you being an obstructionist and blocking the only chance at a stepping stone? So, those kind of conversations tend to dominate. The nice thing, and the reason why I, today, as a member of Congress will hop on Amtrak and play an old *West Wing* episode is there are a number of times that I find I need to be re-inspired. You can get worn down and so it's nice to take a step back and totally escape from whatever major thing you're working on at the time and watch the show that still speaks to you and is very inspiring.

JOSH: That's fantastic. I always wondered what music Michael Phelps is listening to to psych himself up. Now, I know that there are congresspeople with headphones in and they're watching *West Wing* episodes. [laughs]

HRISHI: We have a lot of listeners in Pennsylvania and I'm sure a bunch who are your constituents. Where can they tweet their favorite *West Wing* quotes at you?

BRENDAN: Oh, great! Follow me on Twitter, @RepBrendanBoyle. If you want to get interesting observations about this presidential election, occasional Philly sports comments, then go ahead and follow me on Twitter, and I have a lot of fun with that, and it's also a great way to stay engaged with the public.

JOSH: Any other favorite *West Wing* episodes?

BRENDAN: You know, I didn't mention this about the episode. Part of the reason why I love this episode too is that I'm a Notre Dame alum.

JOSH: Oh.

HRISHI: Oh.

JOSH: That's right!

HRISHI: Right! We should've... we didn't talk about that. Yeah.

BRENDAN: [cross talk] And I'm a diehard Notre Dame fan. So, it spoke to me for many different... And any time, you know, Bartlet would wear an ND shirt or paraphernalia, I would especially love it. So, the whole idea that, you know, C.J. is being punished.

JOSH: You approve of his hazing?

BRENDAN: I completely approve and we've done something similar to staffers in my office who make the mistake of publicly not rooting for Notre Dame during football season.

JOSH: What version of hazing do you do?

BRENDAN: Well, you know, didn't make her sing the fight song, but there's a certain eating of crow, especially if Notre Dame beats the team that you went to school and you're a graduate of that school, it can be a painful experience coming back into the office.

[Everyone laughs]

HRISHI: Well, I'm sure Josh approves.

JOSH: I do.

[End of interview music]

HRISHI: We're joined now Secretary Eric Fanning. He is the Secretary of the Army. Before that, he was the Undersecretary of the Air Force. Before that, he was the Deputy Undersecretary of the Navy. Making him the only person to have been appointed to three different positions in three different branches of the military.

JOSH: Thanks for joining us.

ERIC: I'm happy to... I told Melissa. I'm like, "I don't want to come off as a stalker on this 'cause I love the show."

JOSH: Well, so do we. That's what the whole podcast is about. So...

ERIC: I mean, just this episode, which I actually didn't remember that well. There are so many things. You know, Michigan, Notre Dame. I grew up in Michigan. Army plays Notre Dame every year. I mean, there's a ton from every episode that's... The Defense of Marriage Act, whatever that thing was called.

HRISHI: Yeah, the Marriage Recognition Act, in the episode.

ERIC: There are so many. I mean, aside from just being a fun show to watch, just how it seems to have predicted the administration I'm a part of now, you know? To have a young Congressman beat the maverick Republican and become Secretary of State. It's... Yeah, my team kind of gets a little tired of it. I'm like, "Ok, you got to watch that episode then."

HRISHI: [laughs] What do you think? I mean, I thought the Air Force One thing could be cool, but...

ERIC: In my previous job, when I was Undersecretary of the Air Force and acting Secretary of the Air Force, I had responsibility for the plane, and I was on it once and this Colonel was like, "It's your plane." Like, "It's not my plane." But I've never flown on it when it was Air Force One. I've never flown on it with the President. Very involved in buying, you know... It has to be replaced. It's an aging plane, but it's also not an Army thing, so I don't know if...

JOSH: Also, can you explain for listeners what the Secretary of the Army does?

ERIC: Well, people ask because very few people understand what a service secretary does. I tell them I'm a CEO of a business unit. I don't really have responsibility over what the Army does in war. My job is to produce it. So, recruit, train, and equip. I got 1.4 million people in or out of uniform, \$144 billion or so dollars a year.

JOSH: Woo.

ERIC: And I create a product that, you know, I've got make sure that it's the right product, and that it's distributed in the right way, but it gets turned over to the generals and admirals who have war fighting commands, and so they can be Army generals or they can be from the other services.

HRISHI: 'Cause I was so surprised looking over your bio that you were acting Secretary of the Air Force and then now Secretary of the Army. I didn't know you could cross-pollinate like that.

ERIC: Well, it's unusual. I actually started in this administration... The first... I've had nine different titles in this administration. No political appointee's ever worked in the Navy, the Air Force, and the Army, let alone also in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, so it just kind of was a nice trajectory, and it's fun to get to know all the services and nobody's really ever had that opportunity before.

HRISHI: So, that makes you uniquely qualified in some ways?

ERIC: It makes my experience unique.

JOSH: For this podcast.

ERIC: Yeah, I don't know if it's...

HRISHI: [cross talk] Exactly.

JOSH: Possibly overqualified.

ERIC: Well, overqualified because I have seen ever single episode of the *West Wing* at least once, so that makes me qualified. It makes my path unique. I like to think it makes me qualified also, but it's a great job. I love it.

JOSH: And in your current position, you're the highest civilian official in the Department of Defense?

ERIC: The highest official in the Army, and that's what confuses a lot of people. A lot of times they'll say that you're the highest civilian in the Department of the Army. I'm like, "No, I'm the highest official." The Chief of Staff of the Army actually has two hats but - and his capacity as Chief of Staff of the Army he works for me. As a member of the Joint Chiefs, that's a whole different chain that goes up through the Secretary of Defense to the President. So, he's sort of dual-hatted, but in the context of the Department of the Army, in terms of building the Army, the Secretary of the Army is the highest official.

HRISHI: I was thinking maybe the President would be the highest civilian, but actually he's not a civilian, he's the Commander in Chief.

JOSH: He's the Commander in Chief.

ERIC: He is the Commander in Chief, and he is the boss of all of us, but, you know, my reporting chain, my boss is the Secretary of Defense.

HRISHI: So, have you... You've seen this episode before, clearly.

ERIC: I have, yeah.

HRISHI: Is there anything in it that felt pertinent to your day-to-day life?

ERIC: Well, the first thing is, of course, the humorous thread of the Michigan-Notre Dame game and I grew up in Michigan. And, you know, I know that they didn't actually play the year that that episode was filmed. And Michigan has won more games in that rivalry than Notre Dame.

JOSH: [cross talk] [laughs] Throwing down. We were just talking to Congressman Boyle who's a Notre Dame alum.

ERIC: I was rewatching the episode this morning, I was like, "Oh, there's 10 things I could talk about in there," but that's certainly one of them, being a big Wolverine. So...

HRISHI: [laughs] Did you get a little incensed at the fact that Michigan really took the brunt of it in this episode?

ERIC: No, no, no, because Leo immediately gives it to the President as he's getting on the plane, so there's some Michigan defenders there.

HRISHI: Yeah. So, from having been on the plane, how good's the *West Wing* version of Air Force One?

ERIC: Very good, actually. It's funny, I'm a terrible person to watch any Washington show with because I can be very critical.

JOSH: [cross talk] Oh God.

ERIC: Like, "Oh, that's not the right rank or that's not that many stars, or that's not what that room looks like." I think you all know that there are parts of the *West Wing* that are very accurate physically and other parts -like where more of the offices were - that don't look anything like the West Wing or the White House at all. By and large, the Air Force One is very accurate to what the plane is like. It's probably a little bit brighter in terms of the lighting in the actual Air Force One because it's not being filmed, but it's a pretty good portrayal. The press compartment is a little bit smaller and that usually surprises people, but most of the compartments, the way they're designed on the set are very much like it is on the plane.

HRISHI: Ok, so here's the kind of question that I have that I feel like I never get a chance to ask, but maybe you might actually be able to answer it. There's a lot of discussion about the food on the plane. You know, the club sandwich and the pasta salad. Do they really have, like, that extensive of a menu on Air Force One?

ERIC: The military prides itself on hospitality, and it's kind of roughly divided. The Air Force has the planes, the Marines have the helicopters, Army does a lot of the ground transportation and communication, Navy does, you know, the messes and what have you, but when you fly on a military plane - Air Force One is a military plane - the food selections are sort of endless. When I go on a trip as Secretary of the Army, that's kind of one of the things that's prepared in advance. If you're not careful, you're eating way too much food when you're on one of those planes.

HRISHI: And when you had to get the new Air Force One ready, was that part of the... Like, did you have to think about stuff like that?

ERIC: No. You're really thinking about protection and communication mostly, and it's also... The current Air Force One is an incredibly old plane. It's a 747-200 and there're... I don't think there are any more commercial variants of that flying around. There are a couple of cargo planes, maybe.

JOSH: How old do you think it is?

ERIC: Well, it was delivered either at the very end of the Bush administration or as Clinton came in. Meaning that it was purchased and configured well before that.

JOSH: [cross talk] Sure.

ERIC: I mean, we're talking about buying the last 747s. There're 800s, -800s that are coming off the line at Boeing and it'll be a while before they're delivered because of all the things you need to do to the plane to make it safe for the President.

HRISHI: Wow. What else did you...

ERIC: [cross talk] Well, it's funny. No offense to anybody, but I always watch the C.J. moments in those things now, and I watch them, fast forward to those, so that was fun, but, you know, Josh staying back and working with the Congressman on, I forget what the act was called, but a Defense of Marriage-like act.

HRISHI: Yeah.

ERIC: Because that's obviously been a big part of my own experience in Washington being, now, the most senior, openly gay official ever in the Pentagon and all the things that we've done in this administration in terms of repealing Don't Ask Don't Tell and opening service to so many different other people that weren't allowed before. So, it was interesting to watch that now, 16 years later because the Don't Ask Don't Tell thing seems like ancient history in the Pentagon.

HRISHI: Mmhmm.

ERIC: So, that Defense of Marriage Act - which, by the way, wasn't overturned by the courts until we'd already repealed Don't Ask Don't Tell, so - but it seems so long ago now. So, to have watched it on that show was interesting, and those were all the real issues that were discussed in Washington when that act was being debated, but It just made it seem very dated.

JOSH: I find it heartening in a way though. Often, we watch an episode of the *West Wing* and the issues are still burning and completely unresolved and sometimes the progress has been glacial, if it exists at all, and it's somewhat heartening to say, "Oh boy, that was way back then. Look how much progress has been made."

ERIC: I think, if I were to divide it, a lot of the social issues there's been amazing progress and just how fast things have changed, and certainly in the military, but I think in society in general. But then politically how much things haven't changed, and one of the... As I said, I use teachable moments out of *West Wings* all the time, but one of the more maybe meta lessons - there's an episode where Toby is trying to find a compromise on social security and he's working it directly with the President. Josh doesn't know about it, but he figures out something's going on, is sniffing around and he finally figures out what's happening and he says to Toby, "We don't compromise. We demagogue, and then we win in the next election, increase our power base, and then do it the way we want to do it." And I just see that election, after election, after election in Washington. That everybody's talking about, "We got to get to the next election. You know, we go to win, we got to change the dynamic, and then got to do it our way," But there's always another election.

JOSH: Right. You can endlessly position yourself.

ERIC: Yeah. There's a lot of issues in the Department of Defense in terms of budgets and size of the military and so forth. Everyone says "We just got to get through this election and we'll get some more guidance on what's going on." Like, well, there's another election. The day after this one's over, they'll be gearing up for the next one. So...

JOSH: [cross talk] Right.

HRISHI: There seems to be some need to divide politics from the Department of Defense and from the service, but your job is senate-confirmable, right?

JOSH: What is the confirmation process like for a position such as yours?

ERIC: I worked in the Bill Clinton transition and the Obama transition and was in the first four years of the administration in positions that weren't confirmed, and when I was nominated for the Air Force job, one of the people who had hired me out of college, who'd been confirmed three times in the Clinton administration - in fact to two of jobs that I ended up having - and he was my model when I went into this administration and I ended up having two of the jobs he had. He said, "You think you know the confirmation process because you've been sherpa for so many people going through it." He says, "you'll never understand until you go through it yourself," and he was right. There are so many more steps to it than I realized. And then going through it the second time, you realize it's different for every person and it's different every time. It actually took me a lot more attention on this second one, because it was a more senior position, and I had a member of Congress, a Senator, keep a hold on me for a long time. It had nothing to do with me. It was an issue that wasn't even necessarily an Army issue, and so people thought, "Oh, this dragged on, it took you so long." I was the acting Secretary of the Army and they made me - the Senate Republicans made me step down from that before they'd let me have a confirmation hearing, and then the hold hit. And so, I was out of that position back in the Secretary of Defense's office for about four months. And everyone says, "Oh, you had four months off," or "a four-month break," but it's not. It's a day and then another day and then another because you don't know.

JOSH: Oh, you never know.

ERIC: And when I got confirmed, it was, like, a Tuesday. And I'd spent that morning working the phones, as I was every single day, and what I was being told is, "Ah, this is going to take a little bit longer than we thought." I'm not getting good news. And I was out running an errand that day, just to get myself out of the house and try and distract myself and manage my expectations back down to this process is going to take a little while longer, when the phone lights up and it's the Army team saying Senator Roberts, who had the hold on me, wants to talk to you and it's going to be a good call. And I'm sitting in my car, like, not having pulled out of the alley behind my house, like, "I got to run this errand. I'll never get this done." And he calls within two minutes and he says, "Senator McCain, Chairman McCain, and I are going to floor in two hours." And in

two hours I was confirmed by the Senate, having thought that day that it was going to take weeks.

HRISHI: Right.

ERIC: And you're there the next day. You know, arm, hand in the air, taking the oath. So, it's a... You really - you wake up every day wondering if the Senate is in session, is it going to break today, is it going to happen today or is it not? And when it does, it happens very quickly.

JOSH: Sounds nerve-wracking.

ERIC: You really do every day have to kind of manage your expectations and find ways to calm yourself down.

HRISHI: There's a thread that kind of runs through the *West Wing*, especially these first two seasons, and even just in a very recent episode, of how President Bartlet has no military experience and he kind of runs up against that in his own estimation of himself and how he might want to approach military action and with military leaders. And, in your job, is that ever a dynamic that you have to walk between? Your experience as a civilian versus, you know, when you have to... I'm sure there are times when you have to tell generals what it is they can expect, you know? Like, you're responsible for them.

ERIC: Yes, all the time. Far more than... It's probably the biggest question that I get. It's a far bigger issue - if even being gay is an issue, and it really is not in my experience - but not having served in the military, and my first answer to people is, "Well, I wasn't allowed to." You know, we had a prohibition against that while I was doing all these civilian jobs, and I come from a military family. I have two uncles that were West Point grads and career Army, but I like getting the question because we're 40+ years into an all-volunteer force and the military is very well -rained for what it does. The military - the all-volunteer force is incredibly professional and really important strength of our nation, but that outside perspective is very important. Bringing those civilians in, and, if you've got the right people in place - we've got career civil servants who know the military, we've got the uniform military, obviously, who knows the military - and then you can bring in some very interesting outside perspectives and experiences to add to something beyond what those individuals may have as an institution because they've all grown up together.

HRISHI: So, lack of military experience should not be considered precluding of being able to have an opinion about how it's going to...

ERIC: [cross talk] Yeah, I think for... because you're making a number of decisions. I'm not going to make a decision about how to conduct a war, but you want that civilian leadership. It's the hallmark of our nation to decide if we should go to war, and why, and what it means, and what you're trying to accomplish. And then when it works as it should, and often does, you know, you let the admirals determine how to conduct that. You know, you set the strategic objective and they decide how to get there.

HRISHI: Awesome. So, you have no problem backing up President Bartlet in those situations?

ERIC: None at all. No. Obviously. Nobel prize winning economist who taught at Dartmouth College. So...

JOSH: He generally seems to have an emotional response to potential military maneuvers, and then he gets a little bit talked down or, "hang on."

HRISHI: He goes from emotional to strategic.

JOSH: That's right.

ERIC: I mean, along those lines, from this episode, the Portland episode, when Josh is telling Toby, "When the President gets himself out there, he wants you to be the one that dials him back so he doesn't have to be the one to do it."

JOSH: Yeah, that's right. Understanding your guy.

HRISHI: What's the hardest part of your job?

ERIC: Well, the hardest - which, thankfully, doesn't happen very often - is when we lose a soldier. And we'll typically - during the surge, it was happening at really sort of frightening rates, but it doesn't... I think twice since I've been Secretary that's happened. You go to Dover, where the remains come back and the family is there and you meet with the family. That's clearly the hardest part. On a day-to-day basis, it's also personnel. There's 1.4 million people in the Army in uniform or in the civil service and I spend a chunk of my day determining, on the hard cases, you know, is someone going to be made to leave or is someone going to be demoted or is someone going to lose a rank or something like that. And so, trying to sort of sort through those - which are all in gray zones. If there were black and white, they wouldn't make it to me, you know? Is this person going to be punished for this? How is this person going to be punished for that? That's... You're making decisions that impact someone's life and some family and that's definitely the hardest. The politics is, you know, can be challenging at time, too, definitely, but that's a part of the job and most of us have grown up with that, and so it's something that we're used to.

HRISHI: When did you get started down this path?

ERIC: Right out of school. My first job out of college was on the House Armed Services Committee, and I was working for the Chairman who, at the time, was Les Aspin who became Bill Clinton's first Secretary of Defense. So, I think I was about 24 years old, moved over to the Pentagon to work with him when he became Secretary of Defense and was in the Clinton Pentagon for a while, and then came back to the Pentagon in this administration.

HRISHI: So pre-*West Wing*.

ERIC: Pre-*West Wing*, yeah.

HRISHI: What... Did you...

ERIC: [cross talk] I think pre-everything. I remember the first cell phone I had the size of a brick, you know?

HRISHI: Do you remember when you started watching *The West Wing*?

ERIC: I think it was very early on, but I don't remember when I first watched it. I just remember I've watched it a number of times since.

HRISHI: Thank you for taking the time to join us!

ERIC: Yeah, no, this is great. This allows me to be a little bit of a fan, stalker and do it in, like, an official capacity for a real reason.

HRISHI: Exactly!

ERIC: Awesome. Thank you!

JOSH: And that's it for this episode of our show.

HRISHI: Thanks so much for joining us, and we hope you'll join us next time. In the meantime, you can leave a comment for us and discuss this episode with us or the other *West Wing Weekly* listeners by going to thewestwingweekly.com or our Facebook page, [facebook.com/thewestwingweekly](https://www.facebook.com/thewestwingweekly). You can also follow us on Twitter. Josh is @joshmalina, I'm @hrishihirway, our podcast is @westwingweekly. Our guests today are on Twitter as well. Secretary of the Army Eric Fanning is @secarmy. Congressman Brendan Boyle is @repboyle.

JOSH: By the way, Hrishi, you had a tremendously effective, if somewhat pathetic, plea to our audience to "like" the episodes on our website?

HRISHI: I didn't make that plea.

JOSH: You didn't?

HRISHI: No, you made the plea. You said to do it for my sake.

JOSH: Oh, I did it on your behalf? Well, that's... Maybe that's the pathetic part I was thinking of. [laughs] But hundreds have "liked" the Emily Procter. And I'm now convinced that the efficacy of your - or my plea on your behalf. Maybe you can ask people on my behalf to actually follow us on Twitter, because that's what... I'd really like to see that happen.

HRISHI: That would be pretty great. I... please follow Josh on Twitter.

JOSH: [laughs] That's what I'm looking for.

HRISHI: He currently has a meager 205,000 Twitter followers.

JOSH: It's not enough. And also, if you enjoy the show - and admit it, you do enjoy the show. Just say it. You can throw us a five-star rating and a nice comment on iTunes.

HRISHI: It's true. And if everybody who listens to this podcast followed us on Twitter - or if you aren't on Twitter, go and start an account and then follow us on Twitter - we would probably be the most popular podcast on Twitter.

JOSH: That's true. What else? Thank you for buying pins. Go buy more pins at westwingweekly.com/pin. It's too late to buy a shirt, but thank you if you did. Maybe it'll come back.

HRISHI: Or something new, perhaps.

JOSH: Or something new.

HRISHI: Maybe a sweatshirt.

JOSH: Maybe we'll finally put up a donate button for those weird few people that just want to give us money, don't want anything in return.

[Hrishi and Josh laugh]

JOSH: I love those people the best of all!

HRISHI: Even if you don't understand them. *The West Wing Weekly* is a proud member of the Radiotopia podcast network from PRX, made possible by the Knight Foundation and MailChimp, celebrating creativity, chaos, and teamwork. Check out all the shows at radiotopia.fm.

JOSH: Ok.

HRISHI: Ok.

ERIC: What's next?

[Outro Music]