

The West Wing Weekly
2.13: Bartlet's Third State of the Union
Guest: Don Baer

[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 thirteen. It's called "Bartlet's Third State of the Union." We're going to be joined later by Don Baer, who was the chief speechwriter for President Bill Clinton.

JOSH: And this is our first episode of the new year! Woo! It's not actually the new year as we record, but let's pretend it is like they do on TV. Happy New Year, dude!

HRISHI: Everything feels so different.

JOSH: Doesn't it? Thank God we're out of 2016.

HRISHI: Only good things happening in 2017 so far.

JOSH: That's right. This episode has a story by Allison Abner and Dee Dee Myers. It was directed by Christopher Misiano and the teleplay is by Aaron Sorkin. It first aired on February 7th.

HRISHI: Oh we're back.

JOSH: In the year 2001.

HRISHI: We're back to your dreaded Februarys.

JOSH: We're back to a month of awkward pronunciation.

HRISHI: Do you know Allison Abner?

JOSH: I do not, I think she's lil'.

HRISHI: Oh jeez. She's married to Gene Spurling, "West Wing" consultant. Former director of National Economic Policy for presidents Clinton and Obama.

JOSH: Wow, I didn't know that. I don't think I ever met either Dee Dee Myers or Allison Abner.

HRISHI: But this is nice, because she and her husband met on The West Wing.

JOSH: Oh is that right?

HRISHI: Allison Abner and Gene Spurling, they both worked on The West Wing.

JOSH: They met season one?

HRISHI: Or season two maybe.

JOSH: Oh, I don't know, I'm assuming they're married now, as of this episode.

HRISHI: They're married now.

HRISHI: Oh, by the way, well they're married now in 2017.

JOSH: Sure, good, good catch.

HRISHI: It's 2017; I keep saying 2016 on all my podcasts

JOSH: I keep writing "5776" on all my checks.

HRISHI: I got it, I got it.

JOSH: Old Jewish joke.

HRISHI: I got that.

This episode is really part one of a two-parter, which we can get into later, but first let me do the synopsis from TV Guide.

"It's State of the Union night and West Wing staffers are basking in the address's glow, or spinning furiously on a special edition of Capital Beat, telecast from the Roosevelt Room. But Abby has serious problems with its tone and that's not the only distinction. Guerillas have captured five DEA agents in Colombia and it turns out that a cop Bartlet cited for heroism in the speech was once accused of brutalizing a black suspect. Meanwhile, Josh can't get numbers on the speech from the pollster the White House has hired, Joey Lucas."

JOSH: Mmmmm and I sensed, of course you knew, I sensed this was kind of part one of a two-parter even though I didn't remember this episode and I haven't watched the next one yet. I sensed certainly the DEA agents of it all has yet to be resolved.

HRISHI: Right. Hey, Josh, for fun and for comparison, do you want to hear the NBC synopsis? We haven't done one of those in a long time.

JOSH: Please.

HRISHI: Okay, "There's electricity in the air as the President addresses the Congress for his third State of the Union Address, which was intricately composed by Toby and while Josh anxiously tracks public response via a phone poll, a crisis looms when five American drug agents are taken hostage by Colombian rebels. As Josh spearheads the sampling efforts, he crosses paths with sassy pollster Joey Lucas and they renew their sexual chemistry. Elsewhere, Bartlet earns Abby's ire when the speech omits mention of her passionate issues, including violence against women, while an important cable TV political host sets up in The White House for a live post speech analysis."

JOSH: My immediate reaction, the NBC synopsis is more erotically charged and more difficult to read out loud.

HRISHI: Certainly more difficult to take seriously as you're reading it.

JOSH: Yeah, interesting. Remember when you used to write your own synopsis? Back when you really, really tried on this podcast.

HRISHI: One person said that they missed my old synopses, but that's just not enough for me to do it.

JOSH: Oh, well, let me double that, I miss them, too, Hrish.

HRISHI: Still not enough.

JOSH: Well, I understand. Hit the website people. What will it take? What will it take? How many ratings on iTunes do we need for you to start writing synopses again?

HRISHI: Here's what it would take, it will take, it would have to go crossover. Subscribe to Song Exploder, and then rate and review that.

JOSH: I salute your effort and its inherent selfishness, because it gets me nothing.

HRISHI: Exactly.

JOSH: But then again, you'll be doing the work, so get out there and listen to Song Exploder! Love it, as much as I do, and rate it, as I have. Five stars.

HRISHI: Aww, thanks, Josh.

JOSH: Oh sure.

HRISHI: Should we talk about the episode now?

JOSH: No, I don't feel a need, but, if you want to.

HRISHI: Well, this episode starts with a frontl.

JOSH: Yeah it does! An excellent frontl.

HRISHI: Do you want to define frontl again for everybody? Now that we're in 2017.

JOSH: Can you do it? I'll spell it and then you define it.

HRISHI: Sure.

JOSH: F-R-O-N-T-L.

HRISHI: The frontl is the sound that you hear while the show is still on the title, over the title card of the episode, and here we've got, it starts off with news.

[West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

NEWSCASTER: We are, by my watch, six minutes away from President Bartlet's entrance onto the floor of the House of Representatives.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: The TV is tuned to what I assume is Exposition News Network.

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: ENN. And they're filling us in on the State of the Union. The state of the State of the Union.

JOSH: [Noise of agreement]

HRISHI: And we find out that it's the third State of the Union, if for some reason we missed it on the title card and there's a little introduction of what we're about to see. The doorkeeper of the house, Edgar Finney, this is the guy who the president actually addresses when he walks into the House.

[West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

NEWSCASTER: Perhaps some people don't know, in order for the president to address congress, he must first receive permission from the speaker.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I did not know that. Has he ever been denied? Has the President ever just not made it through? The guys like, "you know what, I gotta get home."

HRISHI: That's and great question Josh and I um...

JOSH: I strongly suspect the answer is no.

HRISHI: [Laughs] I was going to say, I look forward to you finding out and letting us know.

JOSH: Yes, I've got Google for New Years, so I'm going to try it out later. I'm anxious to find out, when we talk later with Don Baer, to learn what is real in terms of how the State of the Union is presented in this episode, and what is heightened dramatically by Aaron and company. Here is one of the things I wondered. Capital Beat, our fictional political news show within a show, is doing some sort of three or four hours on the air, just after the State of the Union, and interviewing all the regulars of the West Wing and that didn't strike me as super realistic.

HRISHI: Yeah, I was wondering if that ever happened.

JOSH: I somehow doubt, I would like to see what the numbers are for the State of the Union all together, and then would really like to see what the numbers are, ratings wise for the third hour of Capital Beat, live after the State of the Union.

HRISHI: There are two things that I love in the cold open. One is when Josh is anxiously passing through the polling bank or whatever and there is a guy who says "the polling hasn't started yet" and Josh says

[West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

JOSH: Well, thank you, mister helper.

DONNA: Josh

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Mister helper. Josh is a real dick here.

HRISHI: [Laughs] In general?

JOSH: Isn't he?

HRISHI: In this episode?

JOSH: The way he treats the polling staff early on. Right? I mean, with the gum, and "does any of you have an accent?" I mean, it's just not Josh at his best.

HRISHI: No. When Josh feels stress, he tends to be short on generosity of feeling for others.

JOSH: Well said.

HRISHI: I had another, there is a guy who I deemed mister helper throughout this episode, my own mister helper, which it's a guy who, I love him, off-screen after the State of the Union there is a guy who says

[West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

MISTER HELPER: Hey! Sam Seaborn everybody!

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Oh, thank you mister helper! Yeah, and then later, there is a conversation with angry Abby and then Leo when she says...

[West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

ABBY: And I don't need to be told who the architect of tonight's speech was.

MISTER HELPER: Toby Ziegler!

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Same guy, I'm assuming, and I have dubbed him, Mister Helper.

JOSH: I want to point out a small player in this episode. He played Pollster Number Two.

HRISHI: Hmm, okay.

JOSH: My research tells me he was played by John Hershfield and young John, who plays a small but important role, has a weapon in his acting arsenal that I wish I had. He does that thing, Josh kinda upbraids him, I can't remember the exact interchange. Pollster Number Two, as played by John, comes to the defense of the female pollster that Josh has been short with and then Josh snaps at him. And he does that thing where his hair moves all the way back, his scalp goes [Josh makes noise of something moving, almost like a windshield wiper] *whreep*.

HRISHI: Wait, are you talking about Mister Helper?

JOSH: Is he Mister Helper?

HRISHI: I'm going to have to check, hold on. Who comes to the aid of the person who is being berated for the gum?

JOSH: Yes, that's Mister Helper?

HRISHI: Yeah when uhhh.

JOSH: [Cross talk] Right, right right.

HRISHI: When the polling hasn't started yet.

JOSH: I think it's a response to Brad's calling him Mister Helper, he does this thing. I want you people all to go look at it. Where he just does a facial expression and his hair goes backwards *whreep*.

HRISHI: I'm looking.

JOSH: It's only about a minute in.

HRISHI: Okay here we go. I don't see the wig thing that you're talking about. Getting his wig pushed back.

JOSH: It's the gum moment, and then he says something in her behalf, Josh kind of gives him the maybe the mister helper thing, and his hair goes *whreep*. Maybe it's not as extreme as you're prepping yourself to look for. His hair doesn't fall off of his head. He just has remarkable scalp control.

HRISHI: [Laughter] oh!

JOSH: Did you see it!

HRISHI: I saw it!

JOSH: Oh, fantastic. Oh, that makes my day, so you see what I'm saying.

HRISHI: That is Mister Helper, for sure.

JOSH: And it is played by John Hershfield and he has remarkable scalp control.

HRISHI: Yeah, that's good, I'll try to make that into a GIF if I can.

JOSH: Ooooooh, that would be awesome. [Sound of squeaking on glass]

HRISHI: The other thing, the other moment that I love in this cold open is, as always, I like it when nothing is happening, when there is no action. Like, I like it when the moments in the Oval Office when it's so quiet you can hear the clock tick. And everybody is just kind of looking around and feeling anxious. I love this moment where there is all this nervous energy before the speech and then the president has to stop and tie his shoe.

JOSH: Oh, I wrote that down too. It's fantastic, it's so human and it's such a beautiful juxtaposition of the mundane and quotidian and the grandness of the entrance he's about to make.

HRISHI: Yeah, there is almost something like you don't know what to do in that situation. You can't help. You just have to stand there. Do you avert your eyes? It's just a weird thing.

JOSH: Yeah, and he does look vulnerable, he looks like a little kid, bending down to...a little kid.

HRISHI: Yeah, nobody can quite look at him in that moment and then goes and then he talks to Mr. Finney and then he prays, although it looks at first like he might just be checking to see if his shoelaces are still tied.

JOSH: Yeah, so what did you think of his crossing himself.

HRISHI: Sure!

JOSH: Yeah, I liked it. I can imagine some people getting their church and state back up a little bit. But this is his personal moment.

HRISHI: Really?

JOSH: Yeah, maybe I'm wrong, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it just sat well with everybody. I liked it because that's Bartlet the man. He's about to walk out in front of everyone and be Bartlet the president. It wouldn't play well tens seconds later, but this is his personal moment before he makes his entrance.

HRISHI: I wonder if even if it wouldn't play well later, I mean, he does, you know, everyone ends their State of the Union speech with "God Bless America."

JOSH: Some people do object to that, of that I'm certain, but I think if you actually crossed yourself I think Twitter would blow up now at the State of the Union, I believe.

HRISHI: But in any case, in this personal moment, I was like, yeah of course, he's a Catholic.

JOSH: Absolutely, that's who he is.

HRISHI: He's a devout Catholic even, so.

JOSH: Let Bartlet be Bartlet. My favorite moment of the cold open is when and, I'm anxious to discuss with Don, this whole writing up to the last moment and getting it into the teleprompter, I'm wondering if that actually happens, or whether this thing is locked and loaded long before. Which I guess is kind of what I suspect, unless world events require a last minute. But these guys are just tweaking language, which of course will become a major plot point in the episode, but I like that they decided to take out the phrase "to vigorously pursue campaign finance reform." I don't care that much about the issue, some much as the fact that they took out a split infinitive.

HRISHI: As split infinitive, I knew it! I knew you were going to bring that up.

JOSH: Which I will say, I've done enough research to find out, disappointingly, that it's basically just okay now.

HRISHI: Yeah, of course.

JOSH: I grew up, When I grew up, it was not okay. It wasn't just stylistically, you don't do that! I learned it as being incorrect. Now it's one of those things that everybody just did it so much that those who have their hands on the reins of language are like, okay this is fine since everyone is doing it but I silently hailed them.

HRISHI: How about prepositions. Is a preposition an okay word to end a sentence on?

JOSH: Well, you just did! I guess the answer is yes.

HRISHI: That's another bug bear for language experts that I think has also been mostly done away with, like the splitting of the infinitive.

JOSH: Yes, There is some old joke about that ,too, where somebody says, "where are we going to have lunch at?"

Oh you're not supposed to end a sentence with a preposition.

"Okay, where are we going to have lunch at, asshole?"

[Laughter]

HRISHI: That's great. There is one that I can't remember exactly how it goes, where Winston Churchill said something. He was like, " That is the sort of thing of which I will not put. " Speaking of language, Josh, have you ever heard the phrase "smokeless" before?

JOSH: No I have that written down in quotation marks. Is that a thing or is that an Aaron creation, is that? It's kind of brilliant, I love it.

HRISHI: I love it too. Mrs. Landingham somehow is able to divine that CJ is not wearing pants and she asks Charlie about it. He explains that she sat in wet paint, the wet paint which will become a recurring character in this episode. And then Mrs. Landingham says:

[West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

MRS. LANDINGHAM: Charlie, is it possible that CJ isn't wearing any pants right now?

CHARLIE: Yeah, she sat in wet paint.

MRS. LANDINGHAM: And she's not wearing any pants?

CHARLIE: Well, she's wearing underwear, Mrs. Landingham, she hasn't gone smokeless.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, I love that. I did note that Mrs. Landingham has the rather peculiar superpower of being able to tell whether or not you're wearing pants, based on viewing you from the waist up.

HRISHI: The waist up, exactly.

JOSH: Like, that is, I'm not sure how you use that to fight crime, but that is an interesting superpower.

HRISHI: Good for stopping flashers maybe?

JOSH: There you go.

HRISHI: You know, I stay off the website. The West Wing Weekly website, mostly because people are a little meaner there and I am a delicate flower.

JOSH: You got into it, though, not that long ago.

HRISHI: I did.

JOSH: I enjoyed watching that unfold.

HRISHI: It was with someone who questioned the authenticity of my adverse reaction to little moments of sexism, or maybe sometimes, not so little moments of sexism. And don't really know how to reassure someone when I'm saying stuff on this podcast I actually have thought it and that's why I'm saying it. But I would like to dedicate, just as we have dedicated our Jewish moments to Jim and nitpicking to Gail, I would like to dedicate all of our moments of calling out weird or blatant or not so blatant moments of sexism to P.M.

JOSH: There you go, boom! I suspected as I watched and took notes, and enjoyed the episode. I suspected we would reach this point in conversation.

HRISHI: Really?

JOSH: Because, there are things to point out. The whole, the repeated description of Ainsley as a sex kitten.

HRISHI: Yeah!

JOSH: Is odd.

[West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

SAM SEABORN: A lot of people assume you were hired because you were a blond, Republican sex kitten and they were...

[end excerpt]

JOSH: In fact, I kept, I was trying to let it just wash over me like, okay, are we going to go there, or are we not going to go there. Is it worth, but then yeah, once it came up, maybe it's just a second time, I thought, it really is weird. I don't even know... she's pretty! Is that why she's a sex kitten? I mean why? The president says it! I mean, on

Sam's suggestion. Sam says it, she never balks at it, but why, why would people take her as a Republican sex kitten?

HRISHI: Especially after, it was not so many episodes ago, that Sam and Tribbey when into Brookline and Joyce's office, talking about how they exposed them to a harassment suit, with their actions and he's going to tell the president to call her "a sex kitten." And you know, and then the President has reaction like:

[West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

BARTLET: That's really good.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Sarcastically. But then he goes and he actually says it. But then there is also CJ, calling out this hilarious instance of sexism where Sam says this other thing about the bathrobes. Where he says:

[West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

SAM: There are bathrobes at the gym?

CJ: In the women's locker room.

SAM: But not the men's.

CJ: Yeah

SAM: Now that's outrageous, there's a thousand men working here, and fifty women.

CJ: Yeah, and it's the bathrobes that's outrageous.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Always keeping you on your toes about this stuff. Anyway, that's for you, PM.

JOSH: I liked, I think we've discussed Ainsley as the female Sam Seaborn. Yes?

HRISHI: Mmmhmm, yeah.

JOSH: I thought she had such a Sam Seaborn-like moment, with just pure genuine elation when...

HRISHI: Wait, I'm not sure if we have discussed her as the female Sam Seaborn. We've discussed her as like, a foil for Sam, but I think you might be stuck in our gender swapped conversation.

JOSH: Possibly, or I might be parroting something I've read from listeners on the website. Somebody's put that in my head that she's in some ways like a female Sam.

HRISHI: I like that, no, she's also like, you're about to say, I think in this episode, she has the same kind of buoyancy and

JOSH: Yeah, when she says

[West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

AINSLEY: It's a really big night for me

[end excerpt]

[Cross talk]

HIRSHI: It's so sweet!

JOSH: It is so cute and sweet in the same way that Sam can be very cute and sweet and genuine, just in pure enjoyment and relishing something going well. It seemed like such a Sam moment.

HIRSHI: Many there is a finite amount of cute and sweet that can be allotted in each episode and Ainsley got all of it and that's why Sam is kind of a crank.

JOSH: There you go, it may be a zero sum game.

HIRSHI: Zero sum Seaborn.

JOSH: Nice

[Laughter]

JOSH: Our puns have not got any better in 2017, because it is 2017.

HIRSHI: Exactly. You know what's a thing that annoys me? That unneedlessly annoys me, but annoys me nonetheless. The sound effect that accompanies someone rewinding a tape on a VCR.

JOSH: Why is it completely inaccurate?

HIRSHI: It's just pure fiction.

JOSH: Huh.

HIRSHI: When you rewind something, you don't hear the *[rewinding noise]*. So I'm talking about when the first lady is watching the speech and she keeps going back over and over and this is like a little Aaron trope, we saw it in the pilot when Josh going back and is watching the Mary Marsh debate, and again you get *[rewinding noise]* the sound. No VCRs do that; it's not like she's watching it on a reel to reel, I'm assuming.

[West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

BARTLET: Blue ribbon national commission to fashion ... (rewind noise)

BARTLET: Boldly setting aside our partisan blinders...

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Who remembers?

HRISHI: I remember, because even back then, I was like “VCRs don’t do that, they don’t make that sound.”

JOSH: I think when someone does that on screen, I’m just so struck by the kindness of the gesture. [Pause] “Be kind, please rewind.”

HRISHI: Oh, jeez. Wow.

JOSH: Yeah, that’s my best, that’s what I’ve got.

HRISHI: Did you limber up before this episode, because that was a stretch.

JOSH: Oh dear. ... that’s our show...

HRISHI: What did you think about Abby’s reaction to the speech?

JOSH: Well, I liked, I liked this episode very much. First of all let me say, we’ve been on a break, and it was good fun to be watching *The West Wing* again. I had whatever the inverse of *West Wing* fatigue is. I had *West Wing* hunger.

HRISHI: I felt the same way, it had been a few weeks since I had watched an episode, and putting it back on, I felt like Dana Whitaker, Felicity Huffman’s character, in *Sports Night*.

[Sports Night Episode 2.22 excerpt]

DANA: "My show is on. My show is on! My show is ON!"

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yes, I thoroughly enjoyed watching the show and just remembering how great it is, everything about it and this was, again, I almost have, whereas you have the edge on me in many ways on this podcast, I have an ability to enjoy these episodes almost as if seeing them for the first time. In fact even as I watched this I thought, “maybe I’ve never even seen this episode.” I did not know what was coming. You know, her reaction to things, turns out to be more complex than it appears at first blush and so my mind was kind of working as to why she was so tweaked about this all and it opened up and unfolded for me in a very enjoyable way.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I was never ahead of what was going on.

HRISHI: I really liked the way they structure this reaction because they set it up first with Mrs. Landingham warning Charlie about the president balancing his checkbook.

[The West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

MRS.LANDINGHAM: When the president enquires into the first ladies personal bookkeeping, the first lady gets angry with him and yells.

CHARLIE: Well, she’s going to get angry and yell when I inquire into it too.

MRS.LANDINGHAM: Well, the president doesn’t care so much about that.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And then he goes and he talks to her about it and she gets really upset and I think in a way that seems, even though we know that this has been set up that she gets annoyed about this stuff, even then, it seems like her reaction, she's overreacting.

[The West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

CHARLIE: Written to a woman...

ABIGAIL: Oh how long has that been up his ass?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That kind of took me back. I kind of liked how direct and how clearly, that told you right away, like, oh wait a minute, this is not the sort of comically tweaked response I was expecting. She's pissed.

HRISHI: Yeah and so it kind of sets things up, wow, she's really pissed and then it slowly unfolds that it's actually this very layered reaction because she didn't know that he was going to be running for a second term and she feels that it's been announced in this speech. Which of course, we know it has been because as we started in the previously on, forming the committee to reelect the president. She's very savvy. She's like a really savvy insight into the speech, knowing what it means for the political future of the president and she's able to cut right through it but the plot takes a second to connect the dots between her reaction and the actual story.

JOSH: Right, well said.

HRISHI: And again, their dialogue might be some of the best stuff, I think, in this show is when the president and the first lady are fighting.

JOSH: Alone, mmmhmm.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: When they're alone and they're at odds, it gets real.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Very quickly and they're both such good actors that there are depths there in the pauses and, yeah, I agree, those are some of my favorite scenes on the show.

HRISHI: I think that Aaron Sorkin is able to unleash something in those exchanges that's...you don't really get to do that, we don't see that kind of relationship like in "Noel" when Josh kind of loses it with the president and stuff. This is like part of the foundation of their relationship is that they're both so sharp and so smart and they can like really cut each other. Her line about the school uniforms is so great.

[The West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

ABIGAIL: At what point in the process did you decide not to mention the Violence Against Women Act in tonight's address?

BARTLET: To make a ninety minute speech into an eighty minute speech things had to go.

ABIGAIL: It's a good thing it didn't have to be any shorter or school uniforms might not have made the cut.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I love that she has a really savvy political mind in addition to being a medical doctor.

JOSH: I was thinking as you were speaking, it's one of the rare times that the show regularly steps back from the hubbub of the day and things that have to get done and the thrum and the moving machine. When they're alone together, it's a step back, it's a little bit of a remove from where the show usually lives. And so sometimes some of this deeper character stuff can take place.

HRISHI: Yeah and it's a nice little seed that's planted about the check and then the check ends up being to a woman who is a battered women's shelter and he cuts the violence against women section of the speech. It's just really elegantly constructed.

JOSH: Yeah, Aaron has a way of dramatically sucker punching you sometimes when you don't know which elements are throw away and which elements are going to resonate later on and this episode hit me a few times with things sort of having a little bit more meaning later on than I anticipated. I liked our discovery that there is a code for [expletive deleted] is going down, we need you right away.

[The West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

MARGARET: I'm sorry to interrupt, but Leo McGarry was wondering if you would come say help to an old friend of his.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: It made me chuckle, because I have a similar thing in my family.

HRISHI: Oh yeah?

JOSH: My wife Melissa and I always wanted our son Avi to be able to signal to us that, not necessarily that he was in great distress, but you know, if he was at a friend's house and was asking to sleepover but he didn't really want to.

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: But maybe was in front of the kid, do we had kind of a safe phrase alá "Leo McGarry would like you to meet an old friend of his" and it was, if you would just ask "How's Grampy?" Grampy being my dad. If he asked about grandpa, we know that means, "I don't really want to stay over here," or whatever it is. So, we were once at a friend's house, good friends of ours, and we told them this story because we were talking about our kids, which is largely what we do and they laughed and they had a similar thing, and this and that. Forty minutes later Avi comes in and says "Hey Mom, how's Grampy?" And we're like shut up, and he goes, "no I'm concerned, How's

Grampy?" And of course then our friends are like, "I think Avi would like to leave." It was really embarrassing, but funny.

HRISHI: Well, it raises the same question that I had in the show, which is what if Avi really is wondering about the health of your dad. Like what if Leo really wants to introduce someone to an old friend of his.

JOSH: Yeah, that's right, he doesn't have that as an option. We've eliminated the possibility that our son can ever express concern for my father. We may have robbed him of something.

HRISHI: Margaret brings out that line first and it makes sense and it works and we're like, okay great. But I thought Toby really makes a mess of it when he does it. 'Cause CJ is sitting there talking to a reporter and he's asking about a story, you know he's got a thread that he's going to follow it and she's asking him to hold off. And then Toby, incredibly unsubtly comes in and says...

[The West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

CJ: Marc, I've talked to the guy and before the stampede beings, please give me a chance...

TOBY: CJ

CJ: Let me talk to you before...

TOBY: CJ, Leo McGarry would like you to meet an old friend of his.

CJ: Marc, give me twenty minutes before you break the story.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Isn't it weird that Toby would come to CJ and refer to Leo as Leo McGarry.

JOSH: Good point. Yes, very odd indeed. It didn't strike me at the time.

HRISHI: Any reporter is going to see through the like, clever ruse.

JOSH: Something's...what the hell is going on!

HRISHI: And the way he delivers it in a very suspicious way.

JOSH: He's not great at subterfuge, Toby Ziegler.

HRISHI: Apparently not.

JOSH: What did you think of the scene with the cop?

HRISHI: Oh, I thought it was heartbreaking.

JOSH: Yeah, me too, as played beautifully by Richard Reilly.

HRISHI: It reminded me a little bit of other scenes that I've enjoyed and that have been similarly heartbreaking, like when Sam's friend also for potentially seemingly like a racist,

he loses his support from the White House because of his selection of jurors. In the same way, we find out the full story, and it turns out if you hear the full story, you know that this guy didn't do the things that he is being accused of, but there is just no time, the appearance is all they have time for, and so he has to bear the punishment all over again.

JOSH: So, you assume that is the case, you buy his story.

HRISHI: Oh, oh.

JOSH: Well I had a similar reaction to the reaction that I had in "Celestial Navigation."

HRISHI: I see.

JOSH: And I actually preferred this scene and situation, because I didn't feel forced to believe the cop. It definitely gave me pause, and I thought there was some real credibility there. But I wasn't 100% convinced. I didn't feel like the show was telling me you have to believe this guy. Although maybe I am wrong, maybe I just misread it. I kind of felt like, oh, the case was dismissed and his explanation sounds credible. That may be what happened. But I'm not ready to say that it's clearly what happened.

HRISHI: I see.

JOSH: But it put me in the zone of wondering, which I felt was a more interesting, active place to be in as a viewer.

HRISHI: Hmm and you think there might have been some intention to have that ambiguity there?

JOSH: I did think so.

HRISHI: Huh.

JOSH: I did think so; I thought there was more air in the whole situation than is sometimes the case with this show.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I wonder, I wonder how others responded to it. I'll be curious to hear and to read.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Great actor by the way and did a play with Richard in 1993 in Los Angeles. With Richard and Samuel Jackson—Distant Fires.

HRISHI: Wow!

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: I like that casual name-drop in there too.

JOSH: Yes, he went on to do a lot of other things, me less so.

HRISHI: Does he have a hit podcast?

JOSH: You know what, he probably does.

HRISHI: He probably does, it's true.

JOSH: I'll look later.

HRISHI: Snakes on a Plane monthly.

[Snakes On A Plane excerpt]

NEVILLE FLYNN: I have had it with these mother [expletive deleted] snakes on this mother mother [expletive deleted] plane.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: There is another little Sorkin trope, that comes up in this episode which is a dramatic power outage, which reminded me a little bit of Thespis interfering on *Sports Night*.

JOSH: Ah, very nice. Of note to me was the fact that the power outage, not that important really.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I don't even say this as criticism. It's one of the interesting things about an episode like this, where you're not really sure what matters so much and what doesn't and you know, in the end we had some Josh and Donna and Joey funny interactions and cute stuff and you know, it didn't really matter that much, whatever. Josh is obsessed with the polling. Donna is kind of flirting with Josh by doing that weird thing of trying to hook him up with someone else, and Josh is kind of being comically obnoxious to other people, and obsessed with the numbers. In the end none of it really matters too much. It's kind of, what they were up to.

HRISHI: Well it depends on how invested you are in the love triangle between these three or really in the will they/won't they of Josh and Donna. If you're very invested in it, then this is a heavy episode.

JOSH: I guess so, I guess the answers I've got more in mutual funds, than I do in this love triangle. Yeah, I guess that's right, I guess I forget that there are those who are deeply rooted in this. Here's the thing that I thought of that, and I enjoyed all their work, I just kept thinking, boy does Joey know how much Josh likes her.

HRISHI: Yeah, exactly.

JOSH: In the way she's acting.

HRISHI: Yeah she really does.

JOSH: Yeah she knows.

HRISHI: One thing I did like, the most important part of the Joey stuff I thought was learning that the sign for donut is a circle around your mouth. She says, "I'm going to get

a donut” and she makes the sign for donut. I liked that. She was kind of on fire with her Noel Coward-esque wit.

JOSH: Yes, good episode for Marlee and Bill.

HRISHI: Although, between Noel Coward and calling Ainsley ‘Gracie,’ Sam calls her Gracie and then her listening to “Blame it on the Bossa Nova,” I thought, maybe they need to update the pop culture references on the West Wing, to like, past 1965.

JOSH: Yeah, perhaps.

HRISHI: It doesn’t have to be super trendy; just you know maybe, post Carter administration.

JOSH: Yeah, right, so no Joey Bishop.

HRISHI: Right, like, how old do they think that their viewers are? You wanna talk about “Blame it on the Bossa Nova”?

[Music plays]

Blame it on the Bossa Nova, and his magic spell. Blame it on the Bossa Nova...

JOSH: Sure, big scene.

HRISHI: Ainsley is not ready to meet the president, and she has this incredible line both beautifully written and wonderfully delivered when she says:

[The West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

AINSLEY: I don’t want to live in fear of the inevitably bugling of the English language that will occur and the mortification that will ensue.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: You know what, it is a great line, it is a great moment and it’s another instance where I felt that she was very Sam like, and it reminded me of Sam’s riff on how he was not impressive when he meets

HRISHI: Karen Cahill.

JOSH: Yes. I thought it was very similar riff and again I thought, these guys are constitutionally similar.

HRISHI: Well, now they are, thanks to the nineteenth amendment.

[The West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

BARTLET: That’s really good.

[end excerpt]

[Laughter]

HRISHI: Am I right?

JOSH: Yeah, so, so right. That joke is so 2017, because of course, it is, 2017. I like it. Yeah, we're on fire, to the extent that we're ever on fire.

HRISHI: We're just hopefully a low extent, because I'm highly flammable.

JOSH: Boom. Or inflammable. That's a Sorkin reference isn't it?

HRISHI: Yeah it is.

JOSH: Might be *Sports Night*.

HRISHI: Yep, I think it's *Sports Night* during the secular, not secular, which is then echoed in the West Wing.

JOSH: That's a real departure of a scene to see one of our characters, see one of our favorites lit in a bathrobe dancing and then having to deal with the president. I thought it was very funny. It was a tall order for Emily to pull off and she did a good job.

[The West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

AINSLEY: Mr. President.

BARTLET: I never even knew we had a nightclub down here.

AINSLEY: Oh my God.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, it's a good opener.

HRISHI: Pink squirrel, have you ever had a pink squirrel?

JOSH: I have not. Is that a real thing?

HRISHI: What else do you want to say about that scene?

JOSH: Do you like it?

HRISHI: It's very funny. I get a little annoyed that Sam doesn't warn her that the president is coming, he just kind of lets it happen.

JOSH: Yes, no, there are two opportunities there for humiliation to be averted. The president could have turned around and walked away, that would have been nice of him, and, yeah, Sam could have, when he discovers the state she's in, either have waved off the president or warned her. I like it, I like when Aaron in addition to planting seeds dramatically, also lays a little comic bread trail so we've got the initial sitting on the bench, pants paint thing with CJ, we don't expect to revisit that again, yet we discover that Ainsley made the same mistake.

[The West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

AINSLEY: ...I went out to the sculpture garden

SAM: You know, you guys, really, there's a wet paint sign on the bench.

AINSLEY: My assistant went to get me clothes.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: We've set up this sense of dread that she has in terms of meeting the president and then it all comes crashing together kind of hilariously in that scene. I liked it, very much.

HRISHI: Yeah, Ainsley has that line:

[The West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

AINSLEY: I am not that teetotaler you think I am.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Was there something that I missed, where it's made it seem that he does think that she's a teetotaler?

JOSH: No, to me, I thought the same thing, is this a reference to anything? I don't think so, to me I think it's just, to me it adds a little romantic excitement between the two of them. That she's been maybe even thinking about what he thinks of her, I just kind of took it that way, oh, that there's a little something there. Or something else has transpired off screen.

HRISHI: She's teasing him about teasing her about being like, uptight or prudish or something like that.

JOSH: Right, and you can also, I like the look in Rob Lowe's eye suggesting that he is so absolutely not going to dance with her.

[Laughter]

JOSH: He's about as excited by that prospect than she is by meeting the president.

HRISHI: For a brief moment there is some actual real political talk in this episode. Mainly around Capital Beat stuff, but I thought, this is one where I wondered how people who disagree with the politics of the West Wing but enjoy the show feel about a moment like the one where Toby is debating Corbin Bernsen about gun control and he says:

[The West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

TOBY: No. But I do know that if you combine the populations of Great Britain, France, Germany, Japan, Switzerland, Sweden, Denmark and Australia, you'll got a population roughly the size of the United States. We had 32,000 gun deaths last year and they had 112. Do you think it's because Americans are more homicidal by nature? Or do you think it's because those guys have gun control laws?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Certainly, gun control is not a simple or easy question, I was just like, that's a great point. It's an excellently made point during this show and I want to come back and see the rest of Capital Beat to see what Corbin Bernsen's character says.

JOSH: Yes, they do conveniently go to commercial and then we move on.

HRISHI: Yes, Toby gets to drop the mic.

JOSH: Yeah, to other parts of the episode. I wondered how accurate those numbers are, because certainly that little riff he does is pretty impressive if true.

HRISHI: Well the 32,000 gun deaths that he cites is pretty accurate. One thing that is kind of maybe left out is that two thirds of those are usually suicide.

JOSH: Yes, that is, I think significant, and I think probably that Corbin Bernsen would have pointed out.

HRISHI: But still, that still leaves, 10 to 12 thousand.

JOSH: Yes, the numbers still speak.

HRISHI: There's a part where, Josh, noting the like, stuff about Donna's comments to him, he's talking to Sam and he says:

[The West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

JOSH: Hey, can I tell you, Donna's been acting kind of ...

SAM: I gotta go.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: We never find out, speaking of dramatic ending points, we never find out what Donna's been acting like. Kinda of adorable? Was he going to say adorable?

JOSH: Yeah, I don't think so. So tell me, those who are super invested in the love triangle, what did they glean from this episode?

HRISHI: Just you now, just the temperature is rising in the Donna / Josh storyline.

JOSH: Is it?

HRISHI: Seems like, I mean, this is, she is definitely acting...

JOSH: Adorably?

HRISHI: No she's acting like, she's acting a little weird, and a little intense about the whole him asking out Joey Lucas. I feel like I shouldn't say too much, there is a really great point that is going to be made in the next episode about this, so we'll wait.

JOSH: We'll get to some real discussion about the State of the Union next with Don Baer.

HRISHI: First, let's take a quick break.

[AD BREAK]

JOSH: Joining us now on the podcast is Don Baer. He's the CEO of the public relations firm Burson-Marsteller and the chairman of the board of directors of PBS and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

HRISHI: We're talking to him today about "Bartlet's Third State of the Union" because under President Bill Clinton he served as the Chief White House speechwriter and director of Communications.

JOSH: So Don, that essentially makes you President Clinton's Toby Ziegler, am I right?

DON: That would be for you to say, I don't know. I do have his hairline, though I don't have the beard.

JOSH: Good answer! Are you now, or have you ever been a fan of The West Wing?

DON: I love The West Wing, I was, I have been and I am, no question about it.

JOSH: Excellent.

DON: It's funny, because I've noticed over the years, I have two sons, now 26 and 22, so they were little boys when I first started working in The White House and I've encountered a number of their friends over the years who have been very inspired to work in politics, in fact one of them is staying with us right now, and is going to be the communications director for Maggie Hassan who is the new Democratic US senator from New Hampshire. And he was, as best as I can understand, was inspired to enter politics because of The West Wing.

JOSH: That's remarkable. We hear that not infrequently and it always knocks me out, it's such a wonderful aspect of the series.

HRISHI: So in determining whether or not you are or not Toby Ziegler for President Clinton. In this episode, at one point, Toby is referred to as the architect of the speech, of the State of the Union. So, would that be accurate to call you the architect of some of President Clinton's States of the Union?

DON: Look, if you notice, the chief of staff of staff, McGarry, in talking to the first lady, cause it comes up first, he says you know if you're angry about something, you know who the architect of the speech was, and I thought he was going to refer to the president. Right, her husband, so if you got a beef, a bone to pick with someone, you should talk to the architect of the speech, you know, your husband. And then of course, moments later Toby walks in and she says I know who the architect was and then she insists on seeing him. So of course, the answer that one always gives, the political answer one should always give, well of course the president is the architect of his own speech and the truth of the matter is Bill Clinton was always the architect of his own speeches. You know there were a handful of us who were a part of the process and there to help. I guess you could argue that when you're the chief speechwriter, sometimes the communications director, or some combination of those two, you're the keeper of the outline for the speech. I would never claim credit for being the architect of one of those speeches but I handled some of the key tools that went into the building of it.

JOSH: The president gives hundreds of speeches during a year, but the State of the Union would be the most far ranging, or cover the most topics and so as a result do you have an incredible number of people trying to get a piece of it or trying to get their input in more so than in any other given speech during the year?

DON: What? You think someone would try to influence what goes in the president's speech? Yeah, there are dozens maybe even hundreds of people who are trying to influence what comes out of the president's mouth, especially on the State of the Union address. You know it's the speech that's seen typically by 30, 40, 50 million people and of course you have people who are trying to get policies into the speech, their positions on policies into the speech. You have people who are trying to their rhetoric into the speech because they're eager for the president to use their words. It can be pretty daunting to deal with all that incoming.

HRISHI: And do you think on a general level this episode represented the process at all accurately or did it feel very Hollywood?

DON: Well I would say the show *The West Wing*, I always liked and have always been a big fan. My first line when people would always ask, for years they would ask "Is the show like what it's really like to work in the West Wing?" and I always said, "they all seem so much nicer to one another than I remember it being" and that's not to be too cynical or sound too bruised, but you know, first off, all you see is the night of the speech. What you don't see in the case of the State of the Union, is the months and weeks and really months that going into the architecting of the speech and the development of the policies and the near litigation of what goes in and what doesn't go in. I think the show did a good job of conveying some things, maybe it's because for me, always and especially for the State of the Union address, the tension was very internalized, but it was very real. You know it felt very, very intense, I'm not sure that that was reflected. There was a lot of calmness. Though I'm sure they were churning inside, and it's just very hard to show that on the air.

JOSH: And in this episode, we're also seeing changes being made, literally in the car on the way to deliver the speech. How down to the minute can it get in a State of the Union?

DON: Oh it depends on the president I guess, but certainly the president I served, very down to the minute, up to and including moments before he would go out. Now, what this episode doesn't show, which was for the State of the Union and other big speeches, was probably my most prevalent memory when it came to big speeches was working with the teleprompter operators to make sure that the right speech was actually spooled up and what was showing on the screen for the president. I joined the White House in the spring in '94, about a year after they had, after the current presidency has started and there was a notorious example of the speech before I got there, so I don't claim credit for it, it was a joint session of Congress speech on healthcare reform and the speech that was in front of the president on the teleprompter that had been put in on a disc, a hard disc, which is what we used to use to put it into the teleprompter, was an earlier version of the speech, not the one that he had prepared to deliver.

HRISHI: Oh God.

DON: And they realized it, he stood up there, and he would have had a hard copy, but the whole point is not to refer down to the pages in front of you, but to use the teleprompter. I think maybe it's possible in that case he didn't even have a hard copy because the thing had been finished so close to delivery that they didn't have time to

print out a hard copy. I don't know that for a fact, but he was able to deliver, I think it was something like the first eleven minutes of the speech as it was supposed to have been delivered, by memory, which is pretty incredible.

JOSH: That a cool customer.

HRISHI: Wow.

DON: And they were racing to get the text on the screen up to where he was, so he sees the words flying in front of him on the screen even as he's delivering the speech in front of millions and millions of people and the Congress. Honestly, I have a lot of stories, great stories about the teleprompter. Which was the White House Communications Agency, which is a military agency called WACA, is the acronym. Working with WACA to make sure that the right speech was really in front of the president and always that was done at the very last minute because sometimes we even made changes on the screen because there wasn't time to make it on paper. So yeah, it's accurate, if anything, they stay a little calmer than the reality that I experienced.

HRISHI: That partially answers one of the questions that I had for you about how much memorization goes into it. With changes happening last minute, how much time the president actually gets to learn, sort of the rhythm, and really the performance of the speech. There is some stuff between Toby and the president in the West Wing between, you know, the singer versus the song and you know, Toby kind of cringing sometimes when he feels like the president has stepped on one of great lines. Things like that, did you have those feelings?

DON: First off, for the State of the Union in particular, you try to get to a draft that you feel solid about at least 24 to 36 hours before, so then the president has ample time to practice it. The practice used to be in the family movie theater. The family theater in the main mansion, the main residence of the White House, and staff would come in and some friends would come in as a kind of fake audience for the president to deliver the speech. And often, you know, we had set up laptops where we could capture when he, you know, delivering the speech different than what was on the page. So he would change the language, right, he would change the cadence and the rhythm of the words, he might change certain words here and there. We would want to capture those so that the final version that was in front of him on the screen was the one that he felt most comfortable with. There was a lot of working through that and we would pause and be able to critique what he was saying. There would often be a speech coach there who would work with him on emphasis and ways to sort of make sure that lines were really delivered. And that would be the right way to do it, because then he was delivering something that was genuinely rehearsed. The time that that didn't happen was the first year that I was chief speech writer for the president, which was 1995, which was President Clinton's formal second State of the Union and it's also a legendary or notorious one because he never came down to practice. This was shortly after the '94 congressional elections.

JOSH: Midterms.

DON: Right, midterms and the Republicans had taken control, Newt Gingrich has come as the speaker of the House. There was a lot of soul searching around of what the message was going to be and how the president wanted to address all of that. The fact was that he never came down to practice the speech and it was changing up until about, ten minutes beforehand and I was running around trying to make sure that it was captured on the disc, you know, on the computer, so we could get it into the

teleprompter. He never practiced. All I'll say is, the speech as written was 5,200 words long and President Clinton delivered speeches in that kind of a setting at about 110 words per minute, so you can do the math, that would have made that speech come in at under an hour, right, which was what we were aiming for. But the speech that he delivered to Congress, was something like, between, I can't remember exactly, 9,250 to 9,600 words long.

JOSH: Huh.

HRISHI: Whoa.

DON: He added stuff while he was up there because he hadn't rehearsed and the speech ran 1 hour 24 minutes, which at the time, the longest delivered State of the Union in history. Of course, you know, I was a little mortified by that.

JOSH: He would later break that.

DON: Well, he would, but he would fortunately later break that. So I don't hold the record for having that. 'Cause the 2000 was 1 hour and 28 minutes long. So in any case, so to your second question about, yeah no, there was always this tug of war between the writer and the president about the words and how he would deliver them and whether he would change them and I felt that very much because I had been a writer. I had been a journalist and a writer before going in and the words really mattered to me, as they did to him, but I thought it was intentional. There were times when he wanted to take it and make it his own and not let me sort of, control all of that and we had some funny moments about that.

JOSH: And am I correct that the State of the Union in '95 was a big hit, it was very well received?

DON: So you know, look, we get back to the White House, there were these parties. They were not quite as formal as the parties that were displayed in the show. You know, the president and first lady would invite staff up to the main floor of the White House for champagne to sort of thank us and celebrate a little bit. And I remember standing there, and of course I was shell-shocked, it had been two weeks solid and all of the intensity that went into not knowing exactly what the message was going to be and the reworking of it, sometimes me and the president alone, because he cut out a lot of other people in the last, let's say, 72 hours and it was just a very intense period politically and in every other way. And you know the speech comes in really long and I'm standing around, going "oh God, who knows what's going to happen next?" And I remember Harold Ickes came up to me, Harold Ickes was at that point deputy chief of staff and he came and he whispered to me "oh God, the polling numbers aren't good, it didn't play" and I was like, just completely devastated you know with a glass of champagne for about, I would say, two and half minutes and then Harold came back up and he said, "I was wrong, it was an enormous hit, they loved the speech" and in fact something happened that was very rare, which is, the audience of the speech built throughout the course of the speech. It was almost like people were running around going "he's still talking, you gotta come see this!" like you know, but it actually wound up being a terrific hit and was part one of the things that helped to sort of put the Clinton presidency, beginning to put it back on track after the tough midterm elections.

JOSH: And there's an ongoing joke in the series about every speech of Bartlet's being referred to as the political speech of his life, but for President Clinton, that really was a huge turning point for him, no?

DON: Yeah, yeah, it was, it was. Yeah no, I found that funny because that it always happened too. I remembered once, sitting at my office in the West Wing, the basement of the West Wing at my computer trying to draft a speech he was going to have to give that night. It was an Oval Office address on a foreign policy matter and I had not written a word, right? Not written a word yet, and watching Wolf Blitzer, who was then covering the White House standing out on the front lawn of the White House, you know where all the stand ups were done, saying, tonight's speech may be the most important speech of the Clinton Presidency, and I'm going "oh God, great."

JOSH: You are waiting to hit the first letter.

DON: You know "and sources tell us that he will be saying "x, y, and z" and I'm going really? Who told you that, I'm going that sounds good!

JOSH: That's a lot of pressure!

DON: Yeah, exactly!

HRISHI: Which do you think is more pressure in general a State of the Union or an Inaugural Address?

DON: An inaugural address, no question, much harder. Now I did not work on the first inaugural, I was there, I was a journalist at the time, but the second inaugural, which I did work on and helped to lead was a lot of pressure because it feels like you're writing much more for history and that's always dangerous, right? That's always usually when the worst rhetoric comes to the surface too, like when you think you're writing lines that might be put in granite someday.

JOSH: It's going to look good in print.

DON: Yeah, and I actually always kicked myself because the best line in my view of President Clinton's second inaugural address didn't come to me until afterwards in time for his State of the Union address that year.

JOSH: What was the line?

DON: The line was:

[President Clinton's State of the Union excerpt]

President Clinton: the enemy of our time is inaction

[end excerpt]

DON: I thought it was a great epigrammatic line, "the enemy of time is inaction" and it would have been the perfect set up for what his inaugural address was really all about.

JOSH: That is a great line. As an actor I'm always giving my best audition on the way back to my car. At least you have a second chance.

DON: Right.

JOSH: You could put it in another speech.

HRISHI: I wonder if your reaction to how a speech did, or I guess your performance as a writer, if it was affected by things like reviews in the press and polling numbers.

DON: No question, more than it should have been.

HRISHI: I was just wondering, like if you had a separation between, I think this is the best speech that I wrote, even though it didn't garner the same reaction that this other speech wrote. Or if it really you're like, this is the one everybody loved, so therefore it's my best speech.

DON: Yeah, you know, I usually knew when we had a really good speech. And I must say most times if it was a good speech in my view, it was usually well received by the media and by others, other critics if you will and I knew when we fell short, when we didn't quite get there. Now whether or not something was good for the ear of a writer, not necessarily a good gage of whether it was an effective speech in that I think that '95 State of the Union is a good example, because it was not a writerly speech and certainly the president took it in a whole different direction but it was an important communal speech. You know a speech in which he and the country communed in a way that really important for them to feel that from him and with him at that time. There are other speeches where rhetorically things worked and they didn't necessarily move the country in any measurable or permanent way. In rhetoric, speeches today are a lot harder for people to remember, the media culture is different, I think, than it was at one point. There is an evanescence to the words of a president, to everyone's words that make it harder for these moment to have anything at all approximating a lasting impact. Back in my day we had cable television and people doing their peer criticism almost immediately and I remember the time of the second inaugural address, it wasn't well received by a lot of the critics and the president and I, we talked to each other. He called me and I said, "Mr. President, I really wanted this speech to work for you" and he said, "I'll never forget this, "I wanted it to work for you!" And I thought that was really kind thing for him to say.

HRISHI: I was wondering, do you have a speech in mind that you think of as, or maybe a list of speeches, that you consider your greatest hits?

DON: I don't love talking about them that way.

HRISHI: That's understandable.

DON: But I used to joke that I probably should have quit after my first three months, because in some ways I never got better. I was there and just started about three or four months before the 50th anniversary for D-Day, for the Normandy invasion, where President Clinton spoke and, of course, Ronald Reagan has spoken ten years earlier at the 40th anniversary and that's where he gave his famous these are the boys of Pointe du Hoc speech which was a very moving speech. I knew that we were up against, you know, the standard of Ronald Reagan in that speech. I wanted to make sure that we really did a great job and one that was both moving and the speech you know to me posed an opportunity for President Clinton, the first baby boomer president, to speak to the World War II generation that was about to be passing from the scene, to thank them for what they had done. So somewhere along the way and I actually remember it, it was during the time my family and I were celebrating Passover, I'm Jewish, and there is a lot language in the Passover Seder service about 'from generation to generation' and all of that, and the line that came to me at that time, and again I had a real sense of the number of words and rhythm and things like that for a big ceremonially speech like that and the line was

[President Clinton's 50th Anniversary of D-Day Speech excerpt]

PRESIDENT CLINTON: We are the children of your sacrifice

[end excerpt]

DON: And that to me needed to be the core of what the speech was about. For Bill Clinton essentially representing the baby boomer generation to say to the fathers and mothers of his generation, we are your children, we are the children of your sacrifice, you know and we commit to carry on the devotion that you showed us how to do in WWII. So that became the core of the speech. I would say that the speech that he gave at Colleville-sur-Mer, which is where the American cemetery is on the bluffs overlooking the Normandy coast, was probably the best speech that I ever worked on with him.

JOSH: Wow, and Haggadah inspired, I'm delighted to learn.

DON: There you go, right.

JOSH: That's fantastic, that's beautiful. I'll have to go watch it, to listen it.

HRISHI: We'll put a link up to the um, I know that the Normandy speech is on YouTube from the Clinton Presidential Library, so we'll put a link up to that on our website as well.

DON: That would be great. Every so often, you know, when, deep, deep at night, I'll go back and look at those speeches. I try not to.

JOSH: You must take pride in being one of the subtle and unseen hands in these important historical moments.

DON: Yeah, well, I mean it sounds cliché but it is a real privilege and an honor to ever have the chance to do something like that. I worked with a small group people. I remember another important one was when President Clinton had to fly, of course the last minute to give the eulogy for Yitzhak Rabin, who had been his great partner in peace. There is a line in that speech that was from my own bar mitzvah Torah portion. My portion was the one in which Moses finally bids farewell to the children of Israel before he dies. His line to the children of Israel is "be strong and of good courage" and so Bill Clinton was able to say to the people of Israel after the loss of their beloved prime minister:

[Yitzhak Rabin Eulogy Excerpt]

PRESIDENT CLINTON: Be strong and of good courage

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Wow, that's a beautiful story.

HRISHI: That's incredible.

DON: He also has the line, which was famous, and became a bumper sticker in Israel "Shalom Haver."

[Yitzhak Rabin Eulogy Excerpt]

PRESIDENT CLINTON: Ya'aseh shalom bimromav, hu ya'aseh shalom aleinu, ve-al kol Israel, ve-imru, amen and Shalom Haver.

[end excerpt]

DON: Which is “peace, my friend.”

JOSH: Friend, yeah, that’s beautiful.

DON: Yeah, and so that line, someone called into us from the Israeli embassy as we were flailing around trying to get the speech ready before the president flew to Israel for that funeral. So anyway, so you pull all this stuff from different sources and in different ways and it is a great, great honor to be able to be a part of.

HRISHI: And being one of the few people who have had that privilege, you’re one of the few people who can really answer this question: how good of a job is Toby doing?

[Laughter]

DON: Toby’s great, I love Toby. I once met Toby at some party in Washington and I said to him, he were standing in the corner. And I said, they tell me your character is based on me and he looks at me and says “oh really?” like, who cares. [Laughter] No listen, I think the team of Toby Ziegler and Sam Seaborn is one of the best teams we’ve ever seen, they do a great job, and they’re hard jobs.

HRISHI: It’s a strange thing to have to write for a TV show and in the world of a TV show, the thing that you write has to be seen as great writing. Like you have to convince, you actually have to write well enough for it to land to the audience as well as in the world of the show.

DON: You know, it’s funny, in “Bartlet’s Third State of the Union,” they only show one or two snippets of the actual speech. And I noticed they show his peroration, they show the sort of final riff, and it sounded to me like something we would have written, you know he talks about the great potential of this country and we’ve always fought back against challenges and he still believes that America’s greatest days are ahead, something like that. I’m pretty sure that we wrote those lines also, right, we all use those things. Yeah, there is one thing about this episode that really struck me, it hit me hard after I watched it. It’s called “The Third State of the Union,” I notice that there are these two States of the Union that really come through strong in this episode. Which to me, reminded me how the writers and I guess Sorkin, in particular, how the personal really is the political, and how these are stories of human beings. There is obviously the speech, the State of the Union, but there is the state of the martial union, so I don’t know what the third State of the Union in there was, I’m still searching around to try to figure it out, but I do see two states of the union there in the storyline.

HRISHI: That is awesome!

JOSH: Do you wanna co-host a podcast about The West Wing?

HRISHI: Yeah, that’s so good!

JOSH: You’re good!

DON: Yeah, I would love to do that, that would be great. I'll be a guest podcast host from time to time if you need somebody.

HRISHI: We do!

JOSH: We're going to bring you back, you just earned it.

DON: I'll tell you, and this to me is the greatest thing about the show, it struck me, working there, you know I had not come to working in the West Wing, the real West Wing, as a long time political person, you know, I had been a journalist and a lawyer before that and I had covered politics, but it's different when you had been in it really professionally, which I had not been before I went to work there. The people there are people. And every one of them from top to bottom and the stories, and what motivates them and the hopes and the fears and the frustrations and did I mention the fears, that are kind of you know, in their minds every moment. I probably shouldn't say this on a podcast, but one thing for sure before every State of the Union, usually on the day before, my office in the West Wing was right next to the men's room and I would go in there and throw up because I was so nervous about what was coming.

JOSH: So much invested.

DON: And whether it was going to work.

JOSH: That's remarkable.

HRISHI: Well, Don, thank you so much for talking with us.

JOSH: What a great interview, thank you so much for sharing your time and your thoughts.

DON: Thank you, it was great to talk to you both, I really appreciate it.

JOSH: Okay, that's it for this episode of the West Wing Weekly.

HRISHI: Thanks so much for joining us. If you want to discuss this episode with us, you can leave a comment for us on our Facebook page. [Facebook.com/thewestwingweekly](https://www.facebook.com/thewestwingweekly). Or if you want to criticize my reactions to sexist remarks, you can leave a comment on our website, [thewestwingweekly.com](https://www.thewestwingweekly.com)

JOSH: That's what I'm going to do.

HRISHI: I'm looking forward to it.

JOSH: You can and should be following us on Twitter by now. But here is yet another opportunity. Hrishikesh is @HrishiHirway, I'm @joshmalina. The show is @westwingweekly. You can certainly go buy a pin at [westwingweekly.com/pin](https://www.westwingweekly.com/pin). I'm seeing them more and more out and about. I get a thrill every time I see one. I was at Trader Joe's today and I ran into a lovely fellow listener named Aviv and he did the signal to me. Absolutely delighted me.

HRISHI: That's so awesome.

JOSH: It was pretty great.

HRISHI: Is that your first signal that you've gotten in real life?

JOSH: It was my first in a completely spontaneous, random context. I've done some performances where afterward people in the audience did it for me while we were campaigning incredibly ineffectively in Ohio with The West Wing cast, we got the signal any number of times. Always excited me, but this just out of the blue was a great moment.

HRISHI: That's awesome.

JOSH: And I think it is, it is, as have you have put it is, it is our Shibboleth.

HRISHI: In addition to our lapel pin, if you missed your chance to get a West Wing Weekly signal t-shirt or a university sweatshirt...

JOSH: Or if you already got one and you need to buy six more so you can wear it every day of the week.

HRISHI: Which I would, by the way, I got myself the, I'm wearing right now, embarrassingly enough, I got myself the tri-blend crewneck sweatshirt and in addition to the signal t-shirt, these are the most comfortable things I own. There is a rule with bands at least where you're not supposed to wear your own band's t-shirt, and the same is probably true for podcasts I think, but they're like, so soft. This sweatshirt is so awesome that is now my go-to thing to wear when I have to travel and I need a little coziness, which I was doing a lot over the holidays.

JOSH: I'm very excited for the products to come back, because I bought eight of them intending to keep at least two for myself, and I've given them all away. Everybody wants one and I'm just that nice, so I'm excited that they are available again right now. We're going to do another run of them. Go to thewestwingweekly.com/merch within the next two weeks. You've got two weeks to get your order in. Next week we'll be back with episode 2.14, talking about "The War At Home." So thanks for listening, and thanks to our guest this episode, the incredible Don Baer.

HRISHI: This podcast is produced by Josh Malina, and me, Hrishikesh Hirway, along with help from Zach McNeese and Margaret Miller. The West Wing Weekly is a proud member of the Radiotopia podcast network from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary cutting edge shows. For more, go to Radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

DON: What's next?

[Outro Music

