

The West Wing Weekly  
2.14: "The War at Home"

[Intro Music]

JOSH: Hello, you've decided to listen to The West Wing Weekly. I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: [laughs] And I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. On this episode we're talking about season 2, episode 14, "The War at Home."

JOSH: It was written by Aaron Sorkin. It was directed by Christopher Misiano. And it first aired on Valentine's Day, 2001, saving me the embarrassment of having to pronounce the name of its month.

HRISHI: It's episode 2.14, season 2 episode 14 and it aired on 2/14.

JOSH: Ah! That's so cute. That won't happen again for another thousand years.

HRISHI: [laughs] Umm. Here's the synopsis from *TV Guide*:

The crisis over the missing DEA agents in Colombia intensifies and the fallout from the State of the Union address isn't so good either. For starters, a liberal senator is upset about the speech's Social Security suggestions; it doesn't look like the flap over the brutality accusation against a police officer Bartlet cited in the speech is going to go away quickly. And Joey Lucas's polling numbers are discouraging. Or are they? Meanwhile, Abbey doesn't like the White House atmosphere.

JOSH: Nice. We talked last episode about how this was essentially part 2 of *Bartlet's Third State of the Union* but I didn't realize until watching ahead of our recording today it's totally part two...

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah...

JOSH: [cross talk] Yeah, so much so that they really, probably, should have called this a two-parter.

HRISHI: Right...

JOSH: It picks up where the last one left off and it is absolutely the conclusion of what began the previous week.

HRISHI: Yeah. The episode begins with a frontl of Leo opening the door to come outside of the Oval Office to find the president.

JOSH: The president smoking!

HRISHI: The president smoking. And without a jacket despite the cold weather, which is a running thing throughout this episode.

JOSH: Yes. Outerwear is a major recurring theme.

HRISHI: [laughs] And Leo tries to convince him that he should give up smoking and the president inaccurately credits George Bernard Shaw with the line about

[West Wing Episode 2.14 excerpt]

*PRESIDENT BARTLET: George Bernard Shaw said you don't live longer it just seems longer.*

LEO: *I'm not sure it was Shaw.*

PRESIDENT BARTLET: *I'm not sure it was either.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And who actually said it?

HRISHI: It was actually said by Clement Freud, who was the grandson of Sigmund Freud.

JOSH: Nice!

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It was shocking to see... I remember seeing my grandfather—may he rest in peace—smoking once, when we, like, met my grandparents for dinner, and I had never seen my grandfather with a cigarette and it was just a huge cognitive dissonance...

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right...

JOSH: And my whole world turned upside down. It turned out my grandfather enjoyed a very occasional cigarette and I felt the same way too...the president is smoking...

HRISHI: Mmhmm...But you'd seen him smoke before. You knew he smoked.

JOSH: This is a big episode for Big Tobacco altogether. We get to see Cigar Toby.

HRISHI: [laughs] That's true. There's a Bob Woodward shout-out on *Capital Beat*.

[West Wing Episode 2.14 excerpt]

HOST: *I'd like to thank all our guests tonight: Henry Shallot, David Sesh, Toby Ziegler, Bob Woodward...*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Which, I thought it was nice.

JOSH: I noticed that. I thought it was kinda cute but it was also like, huh...we didn't see him.

[laughter]

JOSH: It's funny that they only showed us the parts that had the cast of *The West Wing* on in there...

HRISHI: [laughs] But it reminded me of how much Aaron loves *All the President's Men*.

JOSH: That is true.

HRISHI: Years before our podcast started I went to a screening here in LA presented by Aaron at the Egyptian Theater. He presented *All the President's Men*. It was right around when *The Social Network* came out and he was talking about William Goldman as his mentor and the idea of creating a movie out of recent events, instead of waiting, you know, decades, to make something about American history that's already been written in the textbooks. He was doing something similar in *The Social Network*, writing a movie about, essentially, current events, but he was like *All the President's Men* did the same thing. This movie came out just barely years after Watergate all unfolded.

JOSH: Right, and one could certainly argue that that's what Aaron had previously done with *The*

*West Wing*. Even though it's not necessarily ripped from the headlines it was certainly of its time.

HRISHI: Yeah. Taking plot inspiration from stuff that had happened just months earlier or maybe even weeks at times with the Clinton administration. What I like about this episode is that there are a few attempted telladonnas but they are kind of thwarted from the usual model that we have in the show, where instead of Donna asking an innocent question and then Josh getting to explain it to her, in this episode there are several times where that kind of formula is set up but then it gets diverted.

JOSH: Josh literally says to Donna at one point...

[*West Wing* Episode 2.14 excerpt]

*JOSH: Why do you ask me the question when you're going to have the conversation all by yourself?*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Which is a clever line, but, also reflected how I was feeling as a viewer at that moment...

HRISHI: Oh, yeah.

JOSH: And I would actually like this episode very, very much but there were several moments when I felt, wow, you're really laying it out for us, aren't you... [laughs]

HRISHI: Yeah...

JOSH: Even though, to be honest, there's times when I need the information or I like it or I need a little refresher on what they're talking about. So I'm not saying I'm above it, but I don't like feeling like I'm in a classroom...

HRISHI: Right...

JOSH: And I felt that way at a couple of points.

HRISHI: Yeah. Well maybe this was Aaron's way of trying to diffuse that a little bit, you know. Undercutting his own exposition.

[*West Wing* episode 2.14 excerpt]

*SAM: Do I need to lay out the ways in which this man is important to us?*

*TOBY: No.*

*SAM: He is adored by the left...*

*TOBY: Stop laying out the ways...*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It's kind of clever because Toby's like, you don't need to be saying this. You don't need to keep saying this and yet it's also delivering, simultaneously it's delivering all the exposition that we might want.

JOSH: Yeah. It's not like I have a better solution. It is a challenge that faces Aaron and the other writers of *The West Wing* over and over and over just by the nature of the show. You know, there is a viewership with differing amounts of knowledge as a base and there's certain things

we have to be up to speed on to have a sense of what's going on and so it's a, you know, episode by episode a challenge sometimes to bring along the audience without feeling like you're putting them in a classroom or that you're talking down to them.

HRISHI: Mmhmm. I mean, that's the one thing I did like about that Josh and Donna exchange that you were talking about because it isn't like Donna is sitting in the classroom where Josh is teaching. This is a little bit different because she already had all the answers and she was kinda doing a weird Socratic method with herself through Josh. She was essentially having a monologue with Josh as somebody to bounce the stuff off of.

JOSH: I think that's why for me it was one step worse than a telladonna...

HRISHI: [laughs] [cross talk] Yeah...

JOSH: Ok, well neither of the characters on screen needs this information so they can only be...[laughs]...speaking to those of us who are watching the show and they're not supposed to know that we're watching them.

HRISHI: [laughs] It reminds me a little bit of like, a Sorkin theme of, like, the line of, you can either ask the questions or you can answer them but you can't do both. But, of course, people do both all the time on the show.

JOSH: Also true.

HRISHI: Back to the Sam and Toby exchange about Seth Gillette, though. Sam very innocently answers the question about him setting up the meeting. Toby's like, you set it up already? And Sam's like

[West Wing Episode 2.14 excerpt]

*SAM: Just the time and place.*

[end excerpt]

[laughs]

JOSH: Yeah. That's a funny line.

HRISHI: Just like how in the last episode you knew that the plot lines were unresolved by the end of the episode even though you didn't know yet there was going to be a part two, you get the same kind of feeling with Seth Gillette, because they bring in Ed Begley, Jr. for Seth Gillette and he has one fantastic scene with Toby but then that's it and you're like, well, you know that guy's going to be back.

JOSH: Ed Begley is such a good...Ed Begley, Jr., I should say, is such a great actor because...I thought he was terrific in this role and for me he's always battling the image of him in *Son of the Invisible Man*, from *Amazon Women on the Moon*. Have you ever seen that movie?

HRISHI: [cross talk] I never have...

JOSH: [cross talk] It's an anthology movie...

HRISHI: [cross talk] No...

JOSH: You should watch it it's on YouTube in its entirety. It's an anthology comedy, like a sketch movie and he plays the son of *The Invisible Man*, who is convinced that he has

replicated his father's formula for the solution that makes you invisible...

HRISHI: Mmhmm...

JOSH: And so he's all wrapped up and he reveals himself to his friend and slowly unwraps himself and he is not in fact invisible and he unwraps himself down to nakedness...

[laughs]

JOSH: And he's like, "ooh, look at the phone is floating in the air..."

[laughs]

JOSH: And he goes to a bar and he tries to do all these crazy tricks around people and then not realizing that he is naked and not invisible. It's very, very funny [laughs] and so for him to then convince me as the junior senator from North Dakota is an impressive feat.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I also like the inter-party battling of centrist Toby trying to deflect an attack from the left.

HRISHI: Yeah, it's an interesting dynamic because a lot of times within the administration he really plays more of the role that Seth Gillette is doing where he is pushing...

JOSH: Indeed.

HRISHI: Centrist policies more to the left. He's trying to be truer to their liberal ideology and here he's gotta play devil's advocate. Well, not to play devil's advocate...

JOSH: [cross talk] Right...

HRISHI: [cross talk] I think he actually believes what he's saying but...

JOSH: Yeah, I do too. I think, but it's an interesting shift and reversal of his usual position vis-a-vis the rest of our heroes and as he tries to push them to the left and I love his line

[West Wing Episode 2.14 excerpt]

*TOBY: The President's not a member of your party. He's the leader of your party.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: That whole scene is...well, there are two exchanges, between the president and the First Lady, their big scene and then this is the other big scene for me in this episode. I love when Toby tells him

[West Wing Episode 2.14 excerpt]

*TOBY: Go to bed. Would you PLEASE!*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: That's so good.

JOSH: Yeah, it's an interesting turn of phrase...

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah...

JOSH: I like it too.

HRISHI: The "go to bed" line also, by the way, reminded me of "will you go to lunch" in

*Glengarry Glen Ross.*

[*Glengarry Glen Ross* excerpt]

*Williamson: Now will you go to lunch? Go to lunch! Will you go to lunch!?*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It's one of my favorite parts of that whole play.

JOSH: And that's good...that is similar.

HRISHI: Yeah. That really landed with me. And I do like that you know, this episode has a lot of, sort of the big plot points because it involves international diplomacy, and military plots, and stuff like that, and I like that in the middle of all of that, in this kind of international stage there's also this extremely policy-oriented domestic battle that's happening between Toby and the senator.

JOSH: Yeah. And then there are actual policy-related domestic squabbles going on...

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah...

JOSH: I mean, what's happening between the president and his wife is very personal.

HRISHI: Yeah. They...

JOSH: [cross talk] They get hot quickly...

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah...

JOSH: In that first scene. I love how quickly the temperature turns up. Stockard's on fire..

HRISHI: Yeah...

JOSH: And it's just great that they never lose the layers of being a close, loving couple, but one that knows how to push each other's buttons and then never fails to do so. It's just great acting.

[*West Wing* Episode 2.14 excerpt]

*PRESIDENT BARTLET: We didn't get a chance to talk again last night.*

*ABBEY: I don't think we should.*

*PRESIDENT BARTLET: Talk?*

*ABBEY: No.*

*PRESIDENT BARTLET: Ever?*

*ABBEY: Oh, if wishing made it so, Jed.*

*PRESIDENT BARTLET: Look...*

*ABBEY: I don't think it's a good idea for us to talk about this now.*

*PRESIDENT BARTLET: Why?*

*ABBEY: 'Cause you're going to focus on Colombia.*

*PRESIDENT BARTLET: I can do two things at once.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I love that. Sparks flying. I thought, watching this episode, there's both a lot of subtlety going on and then there's some clunkier aspects, like, you know, leaving the Sit Room to go play chess.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: [cross talk] Ok...You know, it's funny. Which even in its clunkiness I actually liked the idea of Leo and the president having this conversation and they're both still looking four moves ahead on the chessboard, even as, you know, they're trying to figure out what to do in this [mumbling]. I didn't mind it even as I kind of, ok, I get it, they're playing chess. I still kinda liked it...

HRISHI: [laughs] [cross talk] Right... I liked that Leo, in that scene, is still the president's wartime consigliere, even on the chessboard, that in a moment like that, the president, who's such a great chess player, he can't see all the moves and he needs Leo to whisper some of them to him. And Leo's quietly, sort of, coaching him.

JOSH: Mmhmm. I also had a whopper of a #Trump-ay-yi-yi moment...

HRISHI: [cross talk] Ohh...

JOSH: In that first Sit Room scene Martin Sheen plays so beautifully the president asking for advice

[West Wing Episode 2.14 excerpt]

*PRESIDENT BARTLET: Do we know where they are?*

*FITZGERALD: They were moved about sixteen miles into the jungle at Via Serrano.*

*PRESIDENT BARTLET: What would it take to get them back?*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: This is a president that we know doesn't have military experience...

HRISHI: [cross talk] Mmhmm.

JOSH: And we see him later, in fact, refer to the Black Hawk having been shot down by "one of those shoulder thingies." Or something like that.

HRISHI: Right, yeah...

JOSH: He doesn't know the terminology; the stakes of the moment are just so clear and he wants to hear from this group of experts that he's assembled. And all I could think was that we're days away from a president who famously said

[excerpt]

*DONALD TRUMP: I know more about Isis than the generals do. Believe me.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: A man who is famously leery of advice...

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right...

JOSH: And it just sat with me, that scene in the situation room because you see the incredible downside of being the president or just what it entails...the monumental nature of the

responsibilities involved and you want to believe that you've got somebody, regardless of whether you agree with the ultimate decision, somebody who takes the decisions with the weight that Bartlet does.

HRISHI: Yeah. Well, let me play devil's advocate for a second. The reason why this whole mission goes so badly is because of bad intelligence.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: And that is a reason that Trump has cited for discrediting the intelligence community. You know, like he doesn't take the briefings seriously or he's sort of denigrated those briefings in general because he points to the invasion of Iraq and all these things that have come out of the intelligence community and saying that these guys are useless, I don't need them... I'm not exactly sure how he's going to find anything out without them, but still the idea that misinformation is sometimes worse than no information. There is an argument to be made for that stance in this episode.

JOSH: I don't see how no information rather than the information at hand, that may be faulty, is somehow preferable.

HRISHI: I'm not saying that it's a logical stance to take but I'm saying that at a surface level this episode provides some ammo for that stance.

JOSH: Yeah? I guess? Look. It provides ammo, so to speak, for questioning intelligence.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Mhmm.

JOSH: Certainly, questioning your intelligence. And...I'm really jumping ahead, but Leo later in the episode cites Vietnam and his service there

[West Wing Episode 2.14 excerpt]

*LEO: If I could put myself anywhere in time it would be the Cabinet Room on August 4, 1964 when our ships were attacked by North Vietnam in the Tong Pin Gulf. I'd say "Mr. President, don't do it. You're considering authorizing a massive commitment of troops and throwing in our lot with torturers and panderers, leaders without principles and soldiers without conviction with no clear mission and no end in sight."*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That, coupled with the fact that the episode deals with faulty intelligence obviously put me in mind of the messy, long war with no end in sight that the US is about to go into not long after this episode...

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right...

JOSH: Given all that, I loved that the final images of the episode were in fact of flag draped coffins of the war dead. Given that one of the, I think, continuing controversies during Iraq and Afghanistan, although it was a pre-existing policy, but was there was a media ban exactly showing those images.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

JOSH: That ban has been lifted. But there was a ban on the media showing exactly these kinds of images that Christopher Misiano and the producers of the show decided to end the episode

with and I felt that that was a very strong and powerful way to conclude.

HRISHI: Yeah. And also just the pathos from Martin Sheen.

JOSH: Oh, yeah. I loved his, I mean it's a little bit of a taste of what I know we're going to get soon in another episode. I love the just railing, ranting against the injustice of life that you sometimes get from Bartlet.

[West Wing Episode 2.14 excerpt]

LEO: *Sir...*

*BARTLET: We weren't prepared for someone to try and outfox us with a stratagem so sophisticated it's an entire generation beyond "hey, look, your shoelaces are untied!?" Is that how I just lost nine guys to a damn street gang with a ham radio? They lured us there so that they could kill nine American soldiers.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: [crosstalk] Kind of great.

HRISHI: But more than his anger I think I was really moved by his grief at the end. And that was my sort of Trump-ai-yi-yi moment a little bit. I was thinking about how a president's job is not just to be a blustery force at the podium but they should also be able to channel the national mood somewhat and that requires a level of empathy, and just looking at that image of *The West Wing* president, I was just trying to reconcile that with the reality of what we're going to have for the next four years and I was like, this just is a moment that would never happen in the upcoming administration.

JOSH: I suspect you're right. What do we know? But I suspect you're right...

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah, who knows?

JOSH: And that's what...and I thought that throughout and it was also, it goes also beyond the president to all our heroes down to Charlie, you can see are rocked and want to do what they can for each other in the most human way. I mean, in a way, I made light of it earlier, all this concern about outerwear, I thought, is kind of a sweet flip side of the monumental decisions and ramifications of those decisions going on with the administration and then, just the flip side of this human to human. "Oh, is my assistant going to remember to bring a sweater?" "Yes, ma'am you mentioned that already," and you know, "Charlie, can I get you a jacket?" And I like that the way they would treat each other seems to be reflected in how they take their responsibilities to the nation.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: The micro and macro.

HRISHI: One thing I didn't like in this episode was a sense that a lot of characters were talking about black people in America as, like, a group separate from themselves, with a distinct kind of sense of "other." And that's certainly understandable as, you know, when Toby and C.J. are talking about the African-American population, they are not members of that population. But, the most jarring for me was when Toby used the word "blacks."

[West Wing Episode 2.14 excerpt]

TOBY: *Because blacks are going to react well to our supporting a brutal cop.*

C.J.: *He's not a brutal cop.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Maybe this is going to strike some people as being overly politically correct but I feel like that is an outmoded term, that's a relic from an older era that just rings flat, it sounds a little offensive.

JOSH: Yeah. Interesting. I didn't bump on that word or that moment, I don't recall it. I did agree with you, I did write down, that I kept thinking over the course of the episode the 'black community' or the 'black population' were quantified as this political unit and it was most glaring for me, I thought when back to the cop, is it Sloane?

HRISHI: Yes, Jack Sloane.

JOSH: Back to that little plot line where it turns out, according to C.J., that, and again I had to revise my opinion about what we discussed last episode, I now fully believe that we are meant to believe that he was falsely accused and that he is absolutely innocent of aggressive police tactics. To me it actually does pair, although it's an interesting, maybe a little flip side to this, what bothered me about "Celestial Navigation". We didn't see it dramatized, we don't have a lot of points of view, we just know that C.J. is telling us that he was falsely accused. And she doesn't know, it's what she believes. But I do believe it's one of those things, again, where we're supposed to just believe that. Even though we don't have that much information. And she kind of off-handedly explains that the only reason he was cited was to pacify the black community.

HRISHI: Mmhmm.

JOSH: And that's just, as if that wouldn't just be a horrendous injustice...

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right...

JOSH: To the cop, it's also kind of patronizing...

HRISHI: [cross talk] It's absolutely patronizing...

JOSH: To the black community.

JOSH AND HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah...

JOSH: So we just kind of rush past this moment and I thought, wow, it's just political calculus in a very, very...

HRISHI: [cross talk] Heartless?

JOSH: In a very coarse way.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Which doesn't necessarily make it bad *West Wing*. But it's worth noting and I thought it was interesting. It's more information about the characters and how they act and it takes everybody down a little notch for me.

HRISHI: Yeah. I wanted to, just because we focus on language so much and because the show

is so focused on language so much, I did want to talk for a second about that idea, about, because it's something I've noticed in our own episodes sometimes when just what language you and I will choose, like African-American versus black. I don't use the term "African-American" usually because I feel like it presumes too much, maybe. Because if your ancestors came over in the 17th century or 18th century to, like, somehow qualify your status as American, it's a qualifier, you know? African-American that distinguishes from just, American. Versus when, at least the way I think of it, when I say "black" it's more about referring to someone's appearance, the way you might say somebody is blonde or blue-eyed. Like if someone's ancestry was from Haiti, would it be. You know, you just have to make an assumption if they're a generation removed or you don't know anything about them.

JOSH: True.

HRISHI: So I tend to stay away from that. But I also think that that seems that maybe that seems like dangerous territory, and I think it can be in a moment like this when Toby, for me, misuses it and says "blacks." That is, like I said, that is just old-fashioned in a way that is uncomfortable and it's a strange thing to have to parse, but I wanted to bring it up.

JOSH: It feels like something Toby would say, though.

HRISHI: Of course.

JOSH: It is something Toby said, so maybe that's why.

HRISHI: I remember reading something about, like in style guides, either The Manual of Style or The New York Times or maybe it was all of them about which is the preferred or which is acceptable to use or to say, like 'black people' is okay, but to say 'blacks' - that's not okay. Maybe this is just semantics. I mean, I guess it is technically just semantics. But, yeah, it feels like it's charged in a different way.

JOSH: Yeah. I get that.

HRISHI: Like, I don't use the term Indian-American for myself for the same thing of like, not wanting to feel like a qualifier, like I'm somehow less American than someone who's parents aren't from India. I was born here and I'm an American.

JOSH: Yeah. Yeah, well I sometimes think about whether I'm Jewish-American or an American Jew. Whether...which one I'm emphasizing.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: Which, you know it is because I care about language too and the precision of it...

HRISHI: Of course.

JOSH: Am I an American first? Am I a Jew first?

HRISHI: [cross-talk] Yeah.

JOSH: One implies one, and one implies the other.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Somebody was just recently, I didn't get it into it with them, I was very pleased with myself, but on Twitter, someone going off again, she had obviously just finished listening to the

'Celestial Navigation' episode.

HRISHI: I saw that.

JOSH: What she seemed to take away was that I thought it unlikely that there would be a 'driving while brown' incident, which, again of course, was not my point. But then she was also just haranguing us both really for our white privilege.

HRISHI: [laughing] Yeah.

JOSH: Us, two white guys. 'Should I start?' Ehh, nah, I'm just going to leave it.

HRISHI: The same thing, I started to write a response to be like, 'Here's my profile picture' [laughing] and then, I was like, 'You're right, I have NO idea about racial profiling. I have NO experience with that.'

JOSH: Yeah, I was going to go there and then thought, nah. I'll let Hrish, if he.. I figured you weren't even noticing it. I was not going to bring it to his attention. You can't go one on one with every single person but there you go.

HRISHI: It's my New Year's resolution to get to-

JOSH: [interrupting] Now that we have an Instagram account, maybe that will happen less frequently.

HRISHI: Right. Fewer Twitter fights, more Instagram fun.

JOSH: That's right. But you can see what we look like, too.

HRISHI: [laughing] Oh, that's TRUE! I see what you're saying!

JOSH: [also laughing] There's pictures of us!

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Stop with the 'two white guys' comments.

HRISHI: [laughing]

JOSH: Another, I thought, scene, that came off in a more tendentious manner than was probably intended was the 'Breakfast with Bartlet,' where he would teach Josh and Sam the basics about incarceration and drug charges.

HRISHI: Right.

[West Wing Episode 2.14 excerpt]

*PRESIDENT BARTLET: We imprison a higher percentage of our citizens than Russia did under communism and South Africa under apartheid. Somewhere between 50 and 85 percent of the prison population has a drug or alcohol abuse problem. We've tried 'Just Say No.' I don't think it's going to work.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Really? This is the level of conversation that these three people are having?

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Or is this happening for us, the viewers?

HRISHI: Look at these domestic policy experts getting a 101 course.

JOSH: [cross talk] A little basic primer on incarceration for drug charges.

HRISHI: For this episode Stockard Channing was nominated for Best Supporting Actress for an Emmy.

JOSH: Ah, that's interesting. I think that's great. She was terrific in this episode. You don't need a lot of screen time to score when you've got good material and you're that good an actor. She's not really on much, but she lights up the joint as soon as she's on screen.

HRISHI: Yeah. I was thinking about, like, because this is a two-parter, how they might have chosen episode 14 versus episode 13, because she delivers a terrific performance in both of them. But I thought what puts this one over the top for me, the reason why I'm like, 'okay, yeah,' this is the more difficult needle to thread, is she has to say the words 'I love you.'

[West Wing Episode 2.14 excerpt]

*PRESIDENT BARTLET: Call me when you get there.*

*ABBEY: I will.*

*PRESIDENT BARTLET: I love you.*

*ABBEY: I love you too.*

[excerpt end]

HRISHI: Could you give an actor the three harder words to say? And not mess up. I don't think you can. It's such a loaded phrase. How do you say it and be true to the moment and true to the character and all these things? And the way they say it has so much subtext.

JOSH: Very, very nicely put! That's a very very good point. The subtext of their relationship which goes back for years and years, which always feels present. And also, they're saying it to each other in a situation where there's so much going on.

HRISHI [cross talk]: Yeah.

JOSH: Emotionally, the anger, betrayal.

HRISHI: Lying to God.

JOSH: Yeah, yeah. I also liked when she laid into him about the promise that Bartlet had made her vis-a-vis his MS about not running for a second term. I mean, I like the personal nature of what it means between the two of them, this decision to run again or not. But also the real transgression of covering it up and keeping it from the public.

[West Wing Episode 2.14 excerpt]

*ABBEY: I don't know if it's going to get better, I don't know if it's going to get worse, but we had a deal. And that deal was how you justified keeping it a secret from the world. It's how you justified it to God. It's how you justified it to me.*

[excerpt end]

JOSH: There something very significantly wrong that he's done to have kept this disease that can have the effects that she lists, that's a major deal for a president.

HRISHI [crosstalk]: Yeah. Absolutely. And the line she repeats, she says it's how you justified keeping it a secret from the world and that is such a huge bomb to drop because I don't think we've really considered the secrecy of it, of course, has come up because of the-

JOSH: The assassination attempt.

HRISHI: Yeah, the anesthesiologist, but that idea of running only for one term was how he justified it being a secret from the world. Just an elegant parallel structure that gets delivered there justifying it from the world, justifying it to God, justifying it to her. And also I like the order in which that happens, as if the stakes get raised with each one and she comes last.

JOSH: Nice observation. Yeah, very good point. And it also speaks to the ingredient of ego of, I think. It's something I always think about, that part of the problem with our system, is that you have to be a raving egomaniac to want to be president.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: You figure, well, in any event he can get through one term before any of these potentially devastating symptoms catch up with him.

HRISHI: Right

JOSH: But, even with that, his admitting it to himself or to his wife, he wants it more. He wants it longer and he's telling you it's because he wants to get stuff done. And you only get eighteen months to govern, but you can taste the element too of also, he's had this power. He is the president. And he wants another term.

HRISHI: Yeah. The secrecy of it, too, I thought had a really neat parallel in the plot with Colombia. There's a line that Leo delivers.

[West Wing Episode 2.14 excerpt]

*LEO: Those fourteen people keep bigger secrets than this.*

[excerpt end]

HRISHI: Talking about the exchange that the President of Colombia makes the offer to let Aguilar go in exchange for the DEA Agents, and the president says 'How can we trust him?' There was a call-back in the line where he says:

[West Wing Episode 2.14 excerpt]

*BARTLET: You know what Truman Capote said was the bad part of living outside the law?*

*LEO: What?*

*BARTLET: You no longer have the protection of it.*

[excerpt end]

HRISHI: It wasn't totally connected but I felt like the seeds were planted, that that idea of his of keeping his MS a secret kind of lays the foundation of this idea of, at once you're living outside the law, you no longer have the protection of it. And his justifying this God, if he suddenly, transgresses from that, this already weird jerry-rigged, deal that he's made with his own faith and family and now he's going to even stretch beyond that: He's on his own.

JOSH: Well, now you're leading me into the one area of the plot that I bumped on slightly. And I

thought, 'Get Hrishi to explain this to you.'

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: So, um, how does it resolve, it's an interesting resolution, I thought, I mean the question of whether you negotiate with terrorists is an ongoing one.

HRISHI [crosstalk]: MmmHmm.

JOSH: And, so I thought, it's a clever resolution what they do is that they do so, but with the cover of not having done so. But how does Santos, how does the President of Colombia allow the public story to be that Aguilar's released on his word, when it's so clear in the phone call that he's saying to the president, through his interpreter, I will do this if you say the word, and no I don't think it's the right decision.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: So how does it play it out? How could it play out? That Santos would take the public push-back for having made the decision on his own when that's not what happened?

HRISHI: Yeah. Especially given how strongly the argument for not negotiating with terrorists is made. It's like 'okay, well yes, that's what the United States does, but Colombia...eh, they can waiver on that.'

JOSH: Right, I would think this is not going to play well for Santos. I mean, how does, maybe it's just one those things that it's best not to, best not to.... it doesn't make that much sense in a way.

HRISHI [crosstalk]: I think that's what it is.

JOSH: I think it doesn't.

HRISHI: Because it would be pretty wrong for the President of Colombia to capitulate to the cartel and like, let out this guy from jail, I mean that's - That's really tough.

JOSH [crosstalk]: Right. It works out very nicely for Bartlet, but I don't think Santos would let it play out quite that way for him.

HRISHI [crosstalk]: Deux ex Colombia.

JOSH: [laughs] Yeah.

HRISHI: How about President Santos though?

JOSH: I did think that, too.

HRISHI: Calling him President Santos, that's pretty good. There actually is, Colombia has had a President Santos, but even that was in the future of this show. He was elected, you know, the current President of Colombia is President Santos.

JOSH: Oh, is that the case?

HRISHI: Yeah, but he didn't come into office until 2010. So, it was kind of prescient on a couple of levels.

JOSH: Apparently [laughs]. How about a little comic subplot in Ainsley's second meeting with President Bartlet.

HRISHI [laughs]: I liked how Sam kept making it about how, she said that thing about-

JOSH: The House of Atreus.

HRISHI: Yeah. Exactly! And she mentioned about how, like, the disgrace she's brought upon her and her father. And [laughing], Sam really runs with that.

[West Wing Episode 2.14 excerpt]

*SAM: Don't you have to absolve yourself of the humiliation visited on your family and The House of Atreus?*

[excerpt end]

JOSH: Yeah, this is just another one of those scenes that makes me want to see Aaron Sorkin's version of *Noises Off*.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: It's just, he's got her walking, you know, the joke that she needs to pee.

[West Wing Episode 2.14 excerpt]

*LEO: How ya doing Ainsley?*

*AINSLEY: I'm concerned about peeing on your carpet.*

*LEO: Okay... well, now I am too.*

[excerpt end]

[Both laugh]

JOSH: Then she leaves to go to the bathroom and walks into the closet and then the president enters and, I mean, Aaron is absolutely capable of you know, door-slamming farce. And I love when it shows up on *The West Wing*. And I want to see undiluted farce from Aaron. I don't think he'll ever do it.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Just doesn't have it in him to leave greater issues behind.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: But I'd love to, if I could get that out of him. I want to see it. I want to be in it.

HRISHI: Maybe you can get him to write you a one-act slapstick.

JOSH: Perhaps, in his spare time.

HRISHI: I love, that in that scene with Ainsley too, when Sam goes to retrieve Ainsley from the closet. His body language, as he moves past, gingerly, like gingerly past the president.

JOSH: [laughing] It's very funny. It's very, well written and performed.

HRISHI: There's a great part where, at the very end of the scene, he gives her this great compliment of 'you're very bright and we're proud to have you' and then he says 'Listen' and then he puts his hand on her arm and he says 'Listen,' he gets cut off because of the situation in Colombia and they have to pull him out. But you just know he was going to give her one of these fantastic, you know, just pearls of Bartlet-y goodness. And you never hear it.

JOSH [crosstalk] That she'll never forget. He does give her a nice moment, though, somehow. I don't know, somehow, he intuits that her father is very important to her and says something like 'Your father must be very proud of you.'

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I was like, wow, that's almost like, that's other-level. He just somehow senses she's [inaudible] daddy. Either that or Sam has told him.

HRISHI: Right. Good staff-work

JOSH: Yeah.

[ad break]

HRISHI: What about the, back to the Jillette conversation. Toby drops the uh, anemones line.

[West Wing Episode 2.14 excerpt]

*TOBY: And the fish says with friends like this, who needs anemones?*

[end excerpt]

JOSH. Yeah, what the hell?

HRISHI: And I thought, that's a weird time to deploy a groaner.

JOSH: I thought so too. It's like, wow, why not just pull 'I cut this Family Circle out of the paper. It's a particularly funny one.' It didn't land .. it had some seriously relevant comedy right there. That's just a bad joke. That belongs on the podcast, not on the actual show.

HRISHI:I [laughs] I had a couple of other stray observations, there's a line that the First Lady says, where she says

[West Wing episode 2.14 excerpt]

*ABBY: When was the last time you packed a suitcase at all?*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It made me think about something I'd read in an article about Hillary Clinton, months ago. I think, maybe, talking about her relatability, or talking about her candidacy in general and how hard it is to ask someone to be relatable when they haven't driven themselves in a car for over twenty years.

JOSH: Hm. Yeah, there you go. Isn't there something about Bush about not knowing the price of a loaf of bread or a gallon of milk?

HRISHI [crosstalk] Yeah.

JOSH: These people aren't people people, they're another species.

HRISHI: By design. They're shielded from that kind of experience. So... another stray observation. I thought that camel-colored turtleneck that Donna wears is really a great color for her. Good for her coloring.

JOSH: Ah, thanks for bringing that up. Well let's talk - we haven't talked Josh and Donna. I did, I loved when Joey finally lays it all out for him. Both in what poll numbers mean, how numbers work, and his relationship with Donna. It's kind of fantastic.

HRISHI: Yeah, that came up in our conversation with '538' and I think I mentioned it then that that little passage in the episode was really eye opening for me too.

[West Wing Episode 2.14 excerpt]

*JOEY [KENNY]: You don't know what these numbers just told you. I'm an expert, I don't know what these numbers just told you.*

*JOSH: We know.*

*JOEY: Really?*

*JOSH: Numbers don't lie.*

*JOEY [KENNY]: They lie all the time. They lie when 72% of Americans say they're tired of a sex scandal while all the while newspapers circulation goes through the roof for anyone featuring the story. If you polled 100 Donnas and asked them if they think we should go out you'd get a positive response. But, the poll wouldn't tell you it's because she likes you and she knows it's beginning to show and she needs to cover herself with misdirection.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: That was a perfectly formed little nugget of information that I was like "Oh, right" Like; here, let me use this very concrete example to explain how something like this statistic wouldn't make sense. And yeah, that's a really, really fantastic scene. This is a very good episode.

JOSH: It is. It's a very good episode.

HRISHI: Yeah. She lays it all out for him, like you said, and even then at the end and Josh's response is:

[West Wing Episode 2.14 excerpt]

*JOSH: Believe me when I tell you that's not true.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Oh, I know. I was like 'DUDE!'

HRISHI: Like, who is he convincing?

JOSH: Exactly! There's nobody out here in the world you're living in or among the millions who are watching that buys that.

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: It's interesting. It's insight into him as a character. I don't think of him as just utterly delusional but he's so [laughing] he's so off.

HRISHI: Yeah, and it's also strange given his conversation with Sam -

JOSH: Right! It's really dishonest more than delusional.

HRISHI: Exactly, yeah. And I'm like is he lying because he's still trying to flirt with Joey and he doesn't want to bring this element of 'love triangle' to it? Yeah, and his conversation with Sam it seems like he's very aware of what the stakes are and what the dynamic is between them on both sides. And he doesn't understand her way of navigating, you know, Joey Lucas explains to him her way of navigating through this dynamic, but, that he has a very different one in which he

gets in the way actively of Donna going on dates with other guys. But, I also like how Sam just has not been paying attention and doesn't care at all.

JOSH: Joey's a little bit over him at this point, I think. I don't know if over over, but she's seen what she's seen. She's maybe a little bit tired of waiting for Josh to ask her out or make a move.

HRISHI: I think she knows she'd be dating down.

JOSH: Yeah, well, that's for sure. No offense to Brad, oh no no, offense to Brad.

HRISHI: [laughs, loudly] Because Joey's in this episode, of course, we get Kenny in the episode as well and at the end when the president is doing his phone call with President Santos, there's the translator. We don't actually hear his [President Santos'] voice, we hear the translator, and I love how this happens. That, on this show, words are so specific and so important, but the voices aren't necessarily, and there's this great dramatic dynamic that emerges from having someone who is not the author of the words speaking someone else's words. And I like the guy who they had for the translator, who's played by Adam Alexi-Malle.

JOSH: Oh, that's right. I also wanted to give a shout-out to the character Mickey Troop. Tony Plana's the actor.

HRISHI: Yeah, the Assistant Secretary of State?

JOSH: It doesn't say. I'm looking in the... I'm not sure what his position is. Mickey Troop is the character's name. Is that what he is?

HRISHI: I think he is the Assistant Secretary of State for South America, something like that.

JOSH: A huge hat tip for playing Jefe in *Three Amigos*. One of my all-time favorite and I think, worldwide underrated movies.

HRISHI: That's so funny because that movie looms so large in my childhood.

JOSH: How?

HRISHI: That it's hard to imagine it being underrated. All of my friends were in love with that movie.

JOSH: Interesting! See that, for me, is the most frequent movie that I've made other people watch and have them turn to me and go, 'Really?' And I'm always like 'Yeah, I love this movie!'

HRISHI: I was like, eight, when I'm talking a moment when- my friends- in third grade,

JOSH: Yeah, I'm talking about making adults watch it.

HRISHI: [laughing] Back to -

JOSH: It's possible that I have not progressed emotionally.

HRISHI: But I think about it all the time. 'How do you know it's a male plane? See the tiny balls?' I thought it was really interesting too when Mickey Troop is talking about the kind of victory that the American people are used to.

[West Wing Episode 2.14 excerpt]

*TROUPE: Mr. President, for the kind of victory Americans are used to, the kind of victory Americans demand of a war, you need a ten to one ratio.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: That idea of, like, the branding of conflict, you know that you have to consider the ratings. It's not good enough to accomplish the mission, you have to do it in a way that's going to also feel good.

JOSH: Play well.

HRISHI: Yeah. Well, thanks so much for listening. Thanks for joining us. We hope you'll join us next time when we'll be talking about Episode 2.15, which is called 'Ellie.'

JOSH: Until then there are all sorts of things you can do. You can follow us on Twitter, Hrishi is @HrishiHirway, I am @JoshMalina, the show is @WestWingWeekly. You can like our Facebook page.

HRISHI: It's Facebook.com/TheWestWingWeekly.

JOSH: We now have an Instagram account.

HRISHI: Big news. Which is @TheWestWingWeekly.

JOSH: Follow us there. You can also, as you should have been doing all along, you can listen to Hrishi's other podcast, Song Exploder.

HRISHI: Another thing that's happening this week, this episode comes out on January 17th.

JOSH: Whoo!

HRISHI: An auspicious date. Everybody say 'Happy Birthday to Josh!' [canned cheers]

JOSH: Should I make it to the January 17th, I'll be 51. If you want to honor the anniversary of my birth by donating to by Mazon.org \$54 will get you a 'follow back' on Twitter.

HRISHI: This is also exciting because we just put out, yesterday, we put out 'What's next?' our song featuring Lin Manuel-Miranda, whose birthday was yesterday, January 16th. You guys have back-to-back birthdays!

JOSH: If you'd like to honor Lin's birthday, you can do so by making a donation to Mazon.org [laughing]. I don't know whether he cares, but I think it's a nice way to celebrate his birthday.

HRISHI: You know what I think about, every time I think about Mazon? I always think of Kanye West.

JOSH: Why's that?

[Kanye West's "Ni\*\*as in Paris" excerpt]

*WEST: Don't let me into my zone. Don't let me into my zone. I'm definitely in my zone. Zone. Zone. Zone.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That is AWESOME. I forgot that he was such a ..

HRISHI: He's such a huge Mazon fan.

JOSH: And their wonderful work.

HRISHI: This episode was produced by Josh and me, with help from Zach McNees and

Margaret Miller.

JOSH: The West Wing Weekly is a very proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary story-driven shows. You can learn more at [Radiotopia.fm](https://radiotopia.fm)

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

HRISHI: What's next?

[Outro Music]