

The West Wing Weekly
2.22: "Two Cathedrals" (Part 1)
Guests: Mary Graham and Lawrence O'Donnell

[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 "Two Cathedrals". It's the season finale of season two of *The West Wing*.

JOSH: It's a doozy. And it was written by Aaron Sorkin and directed by Thomas Schlamme. And it first aired on May 16th in the year 2001.

HRISHI: And it's such a doozy that we're gonna spend the next two episodes of the podcast talking about it.

JOSH: We're throwing a double dose at you.

HRISHI: That's right. Here is the synopsis from *TV Guide*. "As it happens, a tropical storm is bearing down on Washington on the day the president is to disclose that he has MS and has been lying about it for eight years. Bartlet himself is distracted, but the staffers are, as usual, all business as they deal with the congressional Democrats, party officials, and network execs. They also must fashion two responses to the question that is to be asked first at his primetime press conference: Will Bartlet seek re-election?"

JOSH: Duhn, duhn, duhn.

HRISHI: Joining us for this episode is Lawrence O'Donnell, writer and producer of *The West Wing*, and in this episode he is an actor, as well. But first we're going to speak to author Mary Graham. I spoke to her about her book, *Presidents' Secrets*, which is obviously relevant to this episode. Before we get into all of that, I did want to point out one thing that I loved about this episode. It's a minor thing, not enough to warrant discussion within a real recap. But there's a part where Lawrence O'Donnell as the president's father in the flashback, he introduces Mrs. Landingham to the young Bartlet.

[West Wing Episode 2.22 excerpt]

DR. BARTLET: I want you to meet someone. She's going to be taking over in my office from Mrs. Tillinghouse. Excuse me, this is Dolores Landingham. Mrs. Landingham, this is my eldest son Jed.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Oh, Aaron and names.

HRISHI: Yeah, his names are always great. But I thought there's very specific criteria for the name of what would be the elder Bartlet's secretaries.

JOSH: Yes?

HRISHI: Tillinghouse, Landingham, they definitely, like, follow a little bit of a formula that you could extrapolate between those two names.

JOSH: What would that formula be?

HRISHI: Of like, you know, there's a kind of Anglican name where there's a, sort of, like, a gerund.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: And, like, a place name as a suffix.

JOSH: Oh, I get it.

HRISHI: So I was thinking about the Wu Tang generator. You know that, the Wu Tang name generator?

JOSH: Right. Yes, I do. Are you going to tell me that you've created your own?

HRISHI: [laughter] I made a Bartlet secretary name generator for our website. You can try it out. Go to thewestwingweekly.com/generator. Here, Josh, I'm going to hand you the computer, and, uh...

JOSH: [laughter] let me try it.

HRISHI: Let me see what you get.

JOSH: This is unbelievable. Let's fire it up. So I just hit "generate," yes?

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: "Mrs. Wallinghill." [laughter]

HRISHI: [laughter]

JOSH: That was a lot more fun that it should have been. All right, I don't want to give any others away.

HRISHI: Di, di, di, di, go ahead.

JOSH: Ok, ok, I'll hit one more. "Mrs. Millingden."

HRISHI: [laughter]

JOSH: [laughter] "Mrs. Milling..." Can I do one more?

HRISHI: Yeah!

JOSH: "Mrs. Wheelingfield."

HRISHI: Here's the game. You win the game if you actually get "Mrs. Landingham" to appear.

JOSH: Ahhhhhh, nice.

HRISHI: That is a possibility. Go to thewestwingweekly.com/generator [cut off]

JOSH: Is there any way to expand this? Can we solicit suggestions for gerunds or suffixes? Suffices? Suffi?

HRISHI: Ah, yes, but then I would have to go back in and redo the code.

JOSH: So, no.

HRISHI: [laughter] Let's not allow that. Go to thewestwingweekly.com/generator, and we'll put a link up to it on the episode post page, as well, and have some fun with that. Ok, now we're going to talk to author Mary Graham. Mary Graham co-directs The Transparency Policy Project at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, and she's the author of three books on the politics of information, including most recently *Presidents' Secrets: The Use and Abuse of Hidden Power*. Mary, thanks so much for joining us.

MARY: My pleasure.

HRISHI: I was really excited to talk to you because we're dealing with the MS storyline right now at the end of season 2 where President Bartlet has been concealing MS. And in "18th and Potomac" they're going to come clean with it, but they've gotten these really devastating polling numbers.

[West Wing Episode 2.22 excerpt]

Kenny: 62% of Democrats aren't going to vote for you. 65% of those describing themselves as liberal aren't going to vote for you because you lied.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: In your book you really lay out how there are a lot of real-world examples of things like this.

MARY: There are, and it's one of those things that reminds you that the stories of presidents are very human stories. Presidents tend to come to office usually in their fifties and sixties. None of them come with perfect health. One of the things your episode calls to mind for me is Franklin Roosevelt who, of course, came to office with a very serious physical disability and, more troubling, when his heart was failing at the end of World War II in 1944 when he was running for a fourth term. He knew that his heart was failing, and the cardiologist had said that he perhaps didn't have more than a year to live. But Roosevelt, he had work to do, and he didn't want to admit, perhaps even to himself, that he was physically in a difficult situation, so he just soldiered on. But he became weaker and weaker and ran for a fourth term with Harry Truman as his running mate. And less than three months after his inauguration, he was dead.

HRISHI: One that really shocked me in your book was the Woodrow Wilson chapter.

MARY: So Wilson's story is important now because we haven't fully resolved the question of what to do when there's a president who lacks the mental or physical capacity to serve. He was never really well. He had a series of strokes when he was a younger man. But in any case, on October 2nd, 1919, he suffered a massive stroke. It paralyzed his left side. He was unable to speak clearly or see clearly. And he was essentially bedridden and unable to work for at least the first two months. He and his wife and his doctor decided not to tell the American people that he'd had a stroke. His doctor, Cary Grayson, was caught in this dilemma that presidents' physicians are caught in where he had loyalty to the president but he also owed a loyalty to the American people. And he chose to follow the orders of Wilson's wife, saying, "The president is improving, he's just suffering" from what he called "nervous exhaustion, he's had, you know, been on a tough schedule." And that just went on and on. When people came to see him, which was very rare, he would be in his bedroom covered up to his neck with blankets. He had grown a beard, so it wasn't so obvious that the left side of his face was drooping. And he would, for the most part, just be silent in this darkened room. So it was a kind of a ruse that would have been possible in 1919. It certainly wouldn't happen, it wouldn't unfold in that way today. But what's instructive and worrisome is that after a couple of months, Woodrow Wilson became irrational. He gained enough strength so that he wasn't completely passive, but he was unable to act as president. He would indulge in angry diatribes against people who disagreed with him. He refused to let his advisers negotiate with Senate leaders to save the League of Nations, which he had hoped would be his most important legacy. He fired his Secretary of State for holding cabinet meetings when the president was bedridden. He was paranoid, he saw enemies everywhere. But there wasn't then and there isn't now a reliable way to make that judgment that the president is not functioning as a leader and to remove that president from office. We tried to solve it in 1967 with the Twenty-Fifth Amendment. But the Twenty-Fifth Amendment requires that a majority of the cabinet and the vice president all agree that a president would be removed from office. It also doesn't allow for or provide for any independent medical judgment. And there's no requirement, for example, that the president do an annual physical. There's no requirement that the president tell us anything about his health.

HRISHI: So let's talk about President Bartlet then. What was your reaction as someone who's an expert in transparency and secrecy in presidents' health? Did it feel like a realistic plot to you the way that it was depicted and the way they handled the administration's reaction to it internally?

MARY: It did. I mean, I have friends with MS, and it's a strange disease because it can be very minor or it can be more major.

[West Wing Episode 2.22 excerpt]

ABBEY: Relapsing-remitting MS can turn into secondary progressive MS, oftentimes ten years after the initial diagnosis, which is exactly where we'll be in two years. Do you know what that's going to look like if it happens?

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I know what it's gonna...

ABBEY: Fatigue, an inability to get through the day...

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Look...

ABBEY: Memory lapses, loss of cognitive function, failure to reason, failure to think clearly. I can't tell you what's going to happen. I don't know if it's going to get better, I don't know if it's going to get worse.

[end excerpt]

MARY: One would hope that that kind of agonizing process and secrecy that President Bartlet went through wouldn't be necessary. One would hope that we would all view it as not incapacitating for the president to say that he had that kind of health problem. But as I say, these are very human stories, and people who are serving as president want to be the world leader, and it's not going to be easy for a leader to admit to what is even a limited health problem. The dilemma we face is that we don't want a president booted out of office on false pretenses just because he has a manageable health problem like MS; MS often is a very manageable health problem. And you don't want his political opponents to be able to use that. On the other hand when there's a serious problem, then there needs to be a way to replace the president.

HRISHI: The fact that they're going to come clean about the MS, does that strike you as almost an unrealistic development in the plot? Because you outline so many examples where there were these health issues that presidents had and the public never knew until years and decades, sometimes, afterwards.

MARY: Yes, but don't you think we're living in a different time? I mean, this is a time when for better or for worse the president has very little privacy, and we all have a lot more information about what's going on than in the past. It's also a time when we've had the Americans with Disabilities Act, and we have other actions that prevent discrimination against people with disabilities or with health issues. So I guess I would say this is a different time. I think for President Bartlet, one would hope that it would be easy to disclose a health problem without a political firestorm.

HRISHI: There's a line in the Wilson chapter that says, "Wilson suffered a massive stroke. Overnight, the nation lost its leader without knowing it."

[West Wing Episode 2.22 excerpt]

TOBY: The National Security Adviser and the Secretary of State didn't know who they were taking their orders from! I wasn't in the Situation Room that night, but I'll bet all the money in my pockets against all the money in your pockets that it was Leo, who no one elected! For 90 minutes that night there was a coup d'état in this country.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: The constitutional lack of clarity and the problems with the process of removing the president from power, do you think all these circumstances lead to a legislative imperative or do you think it's just a moral imperative that presidents disclose things like this?

MARY: I think we're going to have to have an act of Congress that provides the information. So financial disclosure is now routine. Shouldn't we also have an annual health disclosure for a president who so much depends on? Some group can decide if there's something in the report that suggests a developing health problem that might relate to the president's capacity to govern, then that should be revealed. I really believe in the American people, if they have the information they'll then decide what to do whether it's at the next election or making their voices heard in a way that forces the people within the administration to face the issue.

HRISHI: When you saw these episodes for the first time, were you already working on transparency and the stuff that you've been writing about?

MARY: Yeah, I was, and I've always been a sort of *West Wing* junkie both in the fictional and non-fictional sense. [laughter] I'm interested in presidents and how they deal with situations that are crises or that are difficult. I think we learn the most about our own character when we have to deal with times of trouble, and that's no less true for presidents. So, when those episodes aired I was watching Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. And, you know, there's never been anything like *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: Did you feel like when the MS storyline came out, did you get a particular thrill of, like, this subplot was tailor-made for you?

MARY: Yeah, I felt like maybe I should be a consultant on the show! But, you know, it just didn't happen.

HRISHI: You should have been.

MARY: [laughter]

HRISHI: Well, thank you for being a consultant on our show.

MARY: [laughter] Thank you, it's my pleasure.

HRISHI: The book is fascinating, and we'll put a link up to it on our website. Mary Graham, thank you so much for joining us.

MARY: Thank you.

[transition music]
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HRISHI: Joining us now is Lawrence O'Donnell. He's the host of MSNBC's "The Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell." And he was a writer and producer on *The West Wing*. In "Two Cathedrals," he changed things up and went in front of the camera to play Josiah Bartlet's father. Lawrence, we're honored to have you with us. Thanks so much for joining.

LAWRENCE: Hey, this is, it's great to be here. And, yeah, so "Two Cathedrals" was my double entry in the credits. [laughter] And it was as much of a surprise to me as everybody watching. It turns out every once in a while Hollywood runs out of actors, and they did that week, and I got called out of the bullpen to do that, yeah.

HRISHI: Wow! So, that was a big part of what we were wondering is how did it end up happening that you played this role?

LAWRENCE: Well, here's how it happened. At read-throughs of the show, we don't have all of the guest parts cast. So, the regular cast is there, and then frequently writers would read the other parts that have yet to be cast at the table. And I always had one or two of those. Sometimes, Aaron would give me a couple of them to read. And that day I had the Bartlet dad part to read. And I never tried to put much on it. I tried to get out of the way as much as possible, which is an acting technique in itself it turns out. So I was just sitting there doing the father, you know? And there comes a spot, you know, where the father hits the kid, you know. And I do that. And what's interesting about it is you don't actually hit the kid. You're just sitting in

a chair, and you read the lines that surround that moment. And the moment is described. You know, Aaron has described them.

[West Wing Episode 2.22 excerpt]

YOUNG JED: He banned Fahrenheit 451, which is about banning books!

DR. BARTLET: Was that supposed to be funny? That wordplay that you just did there, was that meant to be funny?

YOUNG JED: That was supposed to... [slapping sound]

DR. BARTLET: Anything else?

[end excerpt]

Lawrence: And I do that. And at the end of the read-through, the women in the cast start coming up to me, Allison Janney first, followed by Janel Maloney. And saying pretty much the same thing, which is "Oh my God, that was really scary what you did." And I, I didn't know what I'd done because my take on this, being from my kind of tough-guy Boston-Irish neighborhood was, this is the nicest dad I've ever seen.

HRISHI: [laughter]

JOSH: [laughter]

Lawrence: That's who I was playing, you know? First of all, he's this educated man and he only hit the kid once. That is unheard of in Saint Brendan's parish where I grew up in Dorchester. And so, you know, I grew up in a neighborhood where, you know, the fathers were all cops and plumbers and firefighters. And my father was a cop, a Boston cop, who then had the audacity to try to become a lawyer, which he did by going to college and law school nights when everyone told him that was impossible. He was a very tough guy. And in those days, you know, this is all before, like, any books had been written about childrearing, and nobody knew you weren't supposed to hit them. Nobody knew that. In fact, one of the high schools I went to, three high schools I went to in Boston because I was a discipline problem. But the first one I went to was run by the Irish Christian Brothers, and their pitch to the parents was, "We will beat your kids better than any of those priests over there at the other schools." And it's like, "We will kick the [expletive deleted] out of them. And the parents are just, "where do I sign, where do I sign?" You know, this all boys' school, you know. So, and that's the world I'm from. And so really I mean it when I say to you this guy read to me as a guy of, you know, real erudition and class and all that stuff. And several classes above the class that I grew up in. So the notion that he just, you know, gives the kid a whack and in a moment was no big deal to me. And somewhere in that, of course, was the terror that Allison Janney and Janel were seeing, like "Oh my God, this guy doesn't even, he does it, it's second nature to him, it's like it's nothing." And here's the other part that I didn't know. When Tommy Schlamme saw that, he leaned into Aaron at the end of the episode and said, "That's what I want in Bartlet's father." Now he didn't mean me the actor, not that at all. He just, "that's the performance I want." And Aaron said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah that's what we need." And so they went out to about four or five actors including, by the way, Mark Harmon, to do that part. And they couldn't get anyone because it was a complicated shoot. There were two pieces of it. One was to be shot basically at that school in the East Coast not far from Washington where we were doing our exteriors in Washington. We had to drive up to that school that one day and shoot the exteriors

for the school. And then the other piece of it was gonna be, you know, eight days later or something on the Warner Brothers lot. What happened was every one of these actors, and they all wanted to do it. Mark Harmon wanted to do it, they all wanted to do it because it's *The West Wing*, and everybody wanted to do it. And it was a hard thing for each one of these actors to schedule, and they just couldn't schedule it. And they would all, after 24-48 hours of thinking about it, say no. So I'm in LA and I was planning to go to Washington the next day for the shoot that we were doing in Washington. And I had a bunch of things to deal with that day before I go. And I get a call from Tommy Schlamme at noontime in LA, and he says to me, "Listen, if the next guy turns this down, you're going to have to do it." And he says, "And it shoots first thing tomorrow here at the school." And I go, "Ohhh, jeez, Ok, book me on the 4PM because I have, you know, the flight schedule to DC memorized at this point, you know. So I said to Tommy, "Listen, if somebody accepts this part, even if it's like 4:05PM, call me and I will walk off that plane because I've got stuff to do tonight with my daughter" and blah blah blah. And he says, "Ok," and so I walk onto the plane and the phone's not ringing, you know. I'm in the airport, and the phone's not ringing, I'm in the plane now and the phone's not ringing. And they close the door and the phone hasn't rung. And I'm on my way to Washington, and I look around and there's Melissa Fitzgerald on the plane. And so I tell her my predicament, and she runs lines with me on the plane to Washington that day. And then I find myself in the exterior shots at the school the next morning standing there as if I know what I'm doing.

JOSH: It's a classic understudy-to-star story.

LAWRENCE: Yes, and, you know, here's the only career advice I have for anyone in show business. And it's only for writers because I have no advice for anybody else. And I got this advice from someone else, from my dear friend Mark O'Donnell who I'm not related to. Mark was giving a playwriting course in New York, and I said to him, "Mark, I want to take your playwriting course because I want to write for performance now." And Mark said to me, "No, you don't need that. You can write. You should take acting classes." And he said, "Because if you don't, you will be like someone who is trying to write music who has never held an instrument." Basically, you know, you learn the vocabulary of it, you learn what actors can do that writers can't. One of the most important things you learn is that you don't need a line there. Something that Richard Schiff will teach you if you don't already know. You know, he doesn't have to say "yes" or "no". We can just go to his reaction shot, and he's going to communicate more with that than your very explicit line. And you learn the difficulty of saying bulky lines that people have written for performance that they shouldn't have.

JOSH: I've noticed if one visits your IMDB you have a not unsubstantial resume for a professed non-actor. You have a lot of credits.

LAWRENCE: Well, here's the thing, this is the truth. When I said, "Hollywood runs out of actors," it does. And it does because of directors. So the worst thing that can happen to a casting director is the director turns to the casting director and says, "Ok, who else do you have?" after those ten guys just came in. The answer you can't say is "...no one. That's all we have, Ok?" So that's when I get the panicked call. I swear to you, it's not until the director has rejected everyone else who is perfectly capable of doing the job. I have never taken a job from an actor who was standing in line at a casting thing, it's never happened.

JOSH: Your specialty seem to be lawyers, judges, and playing Lawrence O'Donnell.

LAWRENCE: Yeah, no, that's right. That's exactly, it's always a lawyer or a judge. It's always "sustained" or "overruled." It's just, it's the easiest thing. I am playing the easiest part in every script I've ever been in.

HRISHI: Well, let's go back to the beginning of your time with *The West Wing*. You were a writer starting from season one.

LAWRENCE: Yes, right away.

HRISHI: How did you get that gig?

LAWRENCE: People who used to see me, you know, on C-SPAN sitting on the Senate floor then see my name in the credits of a TV drama, and they go, "How did that happen?" And it turns out, well, I'd been a writer before I ever worked in politics. So I, the first thing I did was write a book called *Deadly Force*, which we're going to be re-issuing this year. Which was turned into a TV movie. And that kind of got me into show business, and I started, you know, the itinerant life of desperate show business writer getting re-writes on scripts and different things and writing things that you hope get produced that don't and all that. What happened to me was there was a Writers Guild strike in 1988, a big and long Writers Guild strike. That coincided with Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's reelection campaign in the state of New York. And they invited me into his reelection campaign I think mostly taking pity on someone who they assumed was on strike and therefore impoverished, and they were right. I did nothing. I just, I traveled around with them. I sat there in awe at this guy. One of the very, very few people other than Josh Malina who backstage is more impressive than onstage, you know, and...

JOSH: Wow, that's a left-handed compliment.

LAWRENCE: [laughter] In your case, yes [laughter]. But, my whole point in engaging in it at all was not just to pay the rent but as a desperate writer trying to find something, trying to get a handle on something to write. And then I'm in the quicksand of it. And of course he wins reelection, and he invites me to join his Senate staff again without any kind of title because it's just some kind of freelance thing. And so there I had to invent my title because you do have to actually formally enter a title in order to enter the payroll of the Senate. And so I entered the title "senior adviser," which had never been, it didn't exist in Senate titles. That's how that began, and I thought that was going to be 30 days. That became, I don't know, about eight years. It just got more and more involving, and I became deeper and deeper, deeper into that quicksand. And ultimately I was running Senate committees. I ran the Environment and Public Works Committee when Senator Moynihan became the chairman, and then I ran the Finance Committee, so-called staff director of the Finance Committee when he became the chairman of that. And that has jurisdiction over basically all of the revenue of the American government and about two-thirds of the spending, and everything in every president's agenda has to pass through that committee. Suddenly I'm in the Oval Office with Bill Clinton and in the cabinet room with Bill Clinton and his cabinet in these rooms that, I don't, how did this happen? I don't belong in here. And yet I did belong in there, and people looked to me for what you'd look for from the guy who has that job that I have, and it was real governing. But for me, it always had a Plimptonian character, I mean George Plimpton, who created a literary career by doing things like going to the Detroit Lions' training camp and training as a quarterback. This is a Harvard guy, you know, who doesn't belong in any NFL locker room. I always felt myself in the room to be the Plimptonian character where I am the outside observer, I'm not one of you guys, I'm the outside observer, and I'm taking all these notes that are irrelevant to the policy we're discussing but I'm also taking the policy notes because unlike Plimpton, I really am the quarterback. Like, I really am, like, I don't, I don't get to leave here after 30 days, you

know? If the tax bill is going to get through the Senate Finance Committee, I'm gonna have to get it through. I'm gonna have to figure out how much we can increase the gasoline tax. And just exactly what level we can push the top tax rate to, you know. In the Plimpton version of this you don't get to do that part, you know, you, I was doing the real thing.

JOSH: Interesting that you mention the outsider view because I think that's something that interests Aaron a lot. Aaron likes to add a newcomer and fresh eyes to a place and a workplace that's already existing, and then usually casts me in the role, which is great.

LAWRENCE: Right, and so what happened in the case of *The West Wing*, you know, is I left the Senate eventually, and then I'm back in the writing business. And I, first deal I did was with Dick Wolf about some cop thing that we were going to do blah blah blah, right? And then my agent sends me a script. He says, "You really gotta read this thing, *The West Wing*, Aaron Sorkin." He sent it to me, and it's the pilot script. And I read it, and I'm kind of stunned. I mean I'm really, really kind of stunned because this was the kind of thing that I was hoping I would be able to do because I lived it. I've been in that room, you know, interior Oval Office day. I've been in there in a governing meeting. Aaron Sorkin never has. He's just imagining this stuff. How did he get this so right? [laughter] That was my sensation turning every page of "Oh my God this is good writing, this is good drama, but how, how, how did he get this so right?" And so my agent says to me, "Look, if this pilot goes, and if it goes to series, they're going to want you, they're going to call you right away. Because you're the, basically I'm the only guy in the Writers Guild with Washington experience at that time. And so the pilot doesn't go. NBC doesn't make it. They don't think there's anything here. And by the way, I get it, you know? There's no gun shots, there's no baby dying in the emergency room, there's no one on trial facing the death penalty, there's nothing in it that hour-long TV does, Ok? So as we now know, a year later John Wells uses a lot of his leverage to force NBC to make the pilot. So a year later they make the pilot. And then my next contact with it is when I am sent the video cassette of the pilot because it's being ordered to series and Aaron Sorkin wants to talk to me as soon as possible. And I'm on Cape Cod at my mother's house, and I stick this video cassette in there, and I am totally amazed at two things. One is I thought the script was great. I didn't see in it what Tommy Schlamme saw in it, and I didn't see these actors in it. And these actors and Tommy Schlamme took this stack of paper that I read and up-converted it into something that was just magical. And here was the other thing that really hit me. I'm watching that script, I'm watching that script now on screen, and Aaron Sorkin, with a year, a year between the time he turned it into NBC and between the time NBC greenlights the pilot, Aaron Sorkin doesn't change a single word. This is word-for-word the script that I read a year ago. He hasn't had a second, [cross talk] he has not had a second thought. And as a writer I am stunned by this. I am absolutely stunned by this. I'm stunned by the confidence of it. As soon as it was ordered, as soon as it was greenlit, Aaron wanted to talk to me. And by that time I was living in LA. And so I went in to see him at Warner Brothers in this little makeshift hovel they had him in, you know, interviewing writers, and I had never been in an interview for episodic TV for being hired as a series writer. And Aaron, this wasn't really, he's not an interviewer, you know? And so, you know, it's one of those things where you sit there and you talk. We talked 45 minutes, and he's a big Moynihan fan and all this stuff, and he's talking to me about stuff that has nothing to do with this TV show, just nothing to do...And I leave and I don't know how that went, you know? I remember giving him a copy of my book because I just wanted him to know there's more dimension to me as a writer than just Washington, and I know all the lawyer stuff and the cop stuff and all that stuff, and he immediately, you know, calls my agent and says, "Yeah, of course, you know, we want him, absolutely." And so I was in that writer's room on the first day. And it was just a fantastic ride, and, you know, the best writers' room I've ever been in. That's easy to say and very, very difficult to achieve.

JOSH: That's incredible [cross talk]

HRISHI: Hmm. It's amazing to me that the advice that Mark O'Donnell gave you about actors, you ended up really enacting with politics. That you lived that life and got to see what those people really do in a way that got to inform your writing in a way that you would never be able to have if you hadn't had that experience.

LAWRENCE: Exactly. And so all of the sources for drama for me on *The West Wing* were real. I always found the drama in the reality of things. Everyone else was finding the drama in, kind of, in ways they would have found the drama on other shows. This frequently created problems because, and I noticed by the end of day two in *The West Wing* writers' room that if I want to, after each writer has said something, I can easily right now say, "That's impossible. That could never happen." Now, that's not helpful in a writer's room because you're eventually going to mute creativity, you're going to shut people up. So here's what I did. By day three this is what I realized I had to do. I would hear some absolutely ridiculous, insane idea being proposed. And I would sit on my hands and I would say absolutely nothing. And I'm telling you that I'd say nothing for a long time, you know? Forty-five minutes would go by, this idea's getting worse and worse and worse and worse and stupider and stupider and if it ever goes on the air, you know, it's going to be an embarrassment to everybody. And I'd let it go and I'd let it go and I would not say a word until I could say a constructive sentence. I wouldn't say a word until something someone at that table said sparked an idea in me that said, "Ok, here's how to do what that person wants to do." You know, basically, that person wants a conflict between Josh and Toby or whatever it is, and I'd have to kind of look generically at what is it this person wants. And you'd see, "Ah, they want that conflict or they want this kind of pressure on the president before he does this other thing." And so then I would just try to come, I would enter positively as you do in show business. The first line of everything has to be "I love it." And then you start to say, "I was thinking if we want pressure on the president, something that could work like that, that's similar to the way that's working is, what if this and blah blah blah." And so I would be pulling things into this scenario that no one's thought of or has the capacity to think of like the debt ceiling or something like that, and here's why that's pressurized, and then they'd go, "Ohhh, wow, OK." Negativity crushes creativity, it just does. And these were all very smart people, you know, these were smart people. And so I ultimately let a lot of things go, by the way, I mean a lot of things, there's a lot of stuff in that show that is just utterly fake. And we got away with it miraculously. By the time we had written a half a dozen of them before we went on the air, I thought, "Ok," and it was "Mr. Willis of Ohio" that was my biggest version of this where I thought "OK, there's going to be a little box in *The Washington Post* every Thursday morning after the Wednesday night at 9PM *West Wing*. And that little box may be on the TV page or may be on the politics page, is going to be what *The West Wing* got wrong last night. And it never happened because there's something that happens in these dramas. For one thing, everything goes by at 100 miles an hour. You know, the stuff you're looking at microscopically in the writers' room is going to go by at 100 miles an hour. And it's not gonna land the way you think it's gonna land. So you're over-worrying it all the time.

HRISHI: And now we're going to take a quick break.

HRISHI: And now back to the show.

LAWRENCE: Do you want the example of "Mr. Willis of Ohio," of the craziest thing *The West Wing* ever did?

HRISHI: Definitely.

LAWRENCE: Ok. And this is so remarkable, Ok? So, this was Aaron's idea, "Mr. Willis of Ohio." He came bouncing into the writer's room, he was all excited about this. He came in with this thing, "I want to have a member of Congress appointed, I want it to be that his wife, you know, was a member of Congress and she died, and then they appoint this guy just to cast this one important vote. That's it, that's all he has to do is cast this one important vote. That's it, that's what I want." And everybody starts contributing, and Aaron stays in the room longer than he usually did, you know, in this case for a good solid hour or so. As this story's developing...

[West Wing Episode 1.06 excerpt]

CONGRESSMAN: *Have you met Joe Willis?*

JOSH: *No, we haven't.*

CONGRESSMAN JOE WILLIS: *My wife was Janice Willis.*

JOSH: *I know.*

CONGRESSMAN JOE WILLIS: *She passed away last month, so I've taken over her seat in Congress.*

[end excerpt]

LAWRENCE: And I'm doing nothing. I mean, I'm throwing in very little because I'm in a panic about how to fix this gigantic problem, Ok? And everybody's throwing, "Well, it could be this, and then you could do this and then you could do that." And I'm just there like, "My God, how am I going to do this?" And I say nothing, not a word. And meeting's over, Aaron's very happy, we get up to leave. At that point, my office was right beside Aaron's downstairs from the writers' room. And so it wouldn't be unusual for us to walk down the stairs together. And we get to this little spot where we just split off in a V, and I go into my room and he goes into his room, literally right beside each other. This time I follow Aaron into his office, which I never do. He sits down, he says, "What's up?" I say, "Well, it's a great idea. Everything that everyone came up with, all the drama dynamics work perfectly. It's a great idea. It could never happen in the House of Representatives. No member of Congress is important enough that when he or she dies we immediately replace them. That only happens in the Senate." And Aaron goes, "Oh, oh jeez" he says. "Oh boy, I'm afraid of putting it in the Senate. No one knows who's in the House of Representatives. But if we put it in the Senate people are going to expect to see Teddy Kennedy. They're going to expect to see, you know, some people who they know. I'm afraid of putting this in the Senate." And I said, "Um, Ok." My attitude toward it was this is an authorial moment. The author has to make this call. I happily stepped out of the way. It stayed in the House of Representatives. And I waited for Washington to go, "Oh, you guys are out of your minds." And no one said a word. Nobody said a word about it. And so I'm telling you for a couple of years after that, when I'd be in Washington, I'd be hearing people raving about the show, and I would bring it up. At a certain point, with people who I know know. I would never bring it up with someone, with someone who doesn't know what a problem this is. And I'd say, "What about, you know, that episode where we appointed a member of the House?" And they'd go "Ah, yeah, that was fine. I didn't care about that." [laughter] It was just, it was, and I'm talking to people who are members of the House, you know, or staff members in the House. And, you know, so I learned so much from that about the author's grip and that the author's grip is everything. And that Aaron had his audience in the author's grip every minute, and they liked that grip. That's where they wanted to be for that hour.

JOSH: So did you stop having those conversations?

LAWRENCE: Yeah, I mean, eventually I did because I, once I got the answer, once I understood that the 30,000 people in America who know how wrong that was don't care. Because drama's more important. And, I mean, when you think about "Two Cathedrals", you know, imagine trying to pitch to a network or a studio on your big hit show, and the second season's season finale, the final dramatic moment, is going to be...when the president puts his hand in his pocket.

JOSH: [laughter]

LAWRENCE: What? There's not a show business executive on earth who knows what you're talking about. "What are you talking about?! That's not drama!" And you say, "well, it turns out drama is what Aaron Sorkin says drama is." And that was the giant exception of *The West Wing* in television. And to a great extent remains that, that no one else in television has tried to create drama with less. I remember walking across the Warner Brothers lot after our fourth read-through, and we're still not on the air, so it hasn't been audience-tested. So we've now created four hours of this. This is two solid movies' worth of this stuff. This is like a movie and a sequel. And I'm walking across the lot with Rick Cleveland who was the co-winner of the first season writing Emmy with Aaron Sorkin. And I say to Rick, "Ok, by now, when this thing gets on the air, by now people have seen four episodes. They're not gonna stay with this. This is just more of the same now." And he didn't have an answer to that. And that was my worry. And so, you know, we were signed, all of us writers, for, you know, the first thirteen episodes. And all of my life budgeting at that point was based on thirteen episodes of the *West Wing* and not a penny more. And so, you know, I had a cheap car because this was a thirteen episode deal, and I was going to, you know, live within my means. And, you know, then we get on the air, and that is when we and television discover that drama is what Aaron Sorkin says drama is.

HRISHI: That's amazing. Lawrence, thank you so much for taking time to talk to us about all this stuff. I hope you'll come back many times.

LAWRENCE: Two things. I could go on and on as you might have noticed. And I'm desperately available.

HRISHI: [laughter]

LAWRENCE: That is my actual category in show business, desperately available.

HRISHI: And you are our perfect guest. [laughter]

JOSH: That's it for this episode of the *West Wing Weekly*. We would like to thank our wonderful guests, Lawrence O'Donnell and Mary Graham.

HRISHI: You can follow us on Twitter. I'm @hrishihirway. Josh is @joshmalina. And the show is @westwingweekly. And our guests are on Twitter, as well. Lawrence tweets, he's @lawrence. And Mary Graham does not have Twitter herself, but she is part of the Transparency Project from Harvard University, and you can tweet at them, @sunshinepolicy.

JOSH: We have a Facebook page, facebook.com/westwingweekly. We have an Instagram account.

HRISHI: @thewestwingweekly

JOSH: And Hrishi, I understand you are celebrating a landmark with your other podcast.

HRISHI: That's right. The West Wing Weekly is part of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of some of the best podcasts around. And Song Exploder, which is my other show, which is also part of Radiotopia, is coming up on its 100th episode.

JOSH: A hundred episodes, that's awesome. Congratulations.

HRISHI: Thanks a lot.

JOSH: If you haven't listened to Song Exploder yet, what's wrong with you? Get on it. It's one of my favorite podcasts, and it is, it shows the breadth of your talent, Hrishi. Because it is in contradistinction to the West Wing Weekly brilliantly and very precisely produced [laughter].

HRISHI: Thanks, Josh.

JOSH: I think we let it all hang out here. But it is a tight ship over at Song Exploder. And it's one of the nice things we get your personality in full-flower here, but you've done an amazing thing with Song Exploder, which is allow the artists' personality and thoughts to take center stage on Song Exploder. And I have enjoyed all the episodes I have listened to, and I have been exposed to a tremendous amount of great music that I wouldn't otherwise have heard.

HRISHI: If our listeners wanted to check out an episode, is there one that, an episode of Song Exploder that you'd recommend?

JOSH: Oh boy, there are a lot that I love. Recent ones I would say, I loved the one, was it, Justin Hurwitz, talking about Emma Stone's huge audition number in *La La Land*.

[Song Exploder excerpt]

EMMA STONE: [singing] Here's to the mess we make.

JUSTIN HURWITZ: So she's singing about how important it is to pursue your art. It's a very dramatic lyric, and it's a very dramatic emotion she's feeling. And the orchestra is equally dramatic.

[orchestral music]

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I found it fascinating to learn everything that went into it and what it took to execute.

HRISHI: Awesome. You can find all the episodes, including the *La La Land* episode, at songexploder.net.

JOSH: There's a great Spotify playlist, too, of all the music that you have analyzed, and where's that?

HRISHI: That's at songexploder.net/Spotify.

JOSH: That makes sense.

HRISHI: Radiotopia's made possible by the Knight Foundation and by listeners like you. This show is made possible with help from Margaret Miller and Zach McNees.

JOSH: Woo. And if you're free on a Thursday night at 9/8 central, please watch me on *Scandal*, only on ABC.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

LAWRENCE: What's next?

[Outro Music]