

The West Wing Weekly
3.00: "Isaac and Ishmael"
Guests: Ajay Naidu and Former Press Secretary Mike McCurry

[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 "Isaac and Ishmael." We're calling it Episode 0 of Season 3 on our show. It's a weird one because it is not part of the continuity of *The West Wing*.

JOSH: As acknowledged by the show itself.

HRISHI: Yeah. There's a difference here if you're watching the show on Netflix — you miss the original intro, which is on the DVD, and if you buy the show in iTunes you can see it, but if you're just watching it on Netflix, you miss this.

JOSH: It's up on YouTube and we can link to it.

HRISHI: That's right. I thought maybe we could even play part of it. The stuff that Bradley Whitford says, I thought, is especially relevant. He says...

[West Wing Episode 3.00 Introduction excerpt]

BRADLEY WHITFORD: Tonight we offer a play. It's called "Isaac and Ishmael." We suggest you don't spend a lot of time trying to figure out where this episode comes in in the timeline of the series — it doesn't. It's a storytelling aberration, if you'll allow.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: The official NBC synopsis, which I was interested in because I was curious how they presented it, they said...

"A special episode of the Emmy award-winning series dealing with some of the questions and issues facing the world in the wake of the recent terrorist attacks on the United States."

JOSH: So this episode was written by Aaron Sorkin, it was directed by Christopher Misiano, and first aired on October 3, 2001, just three weeks after 9/11.

HRISHI: Later in our episode, we're going to be joined by Ajay Naidu, who played the role of Rakim Ali. And we're going to talk to Mike McCurry, who is the former press secretary for President Bill Clinton, and he's now a professor of theology.

JOSH: You know I've been dreading this moment.

HRISHI: [laughing] Yeah.

JOSH: Since, really, your conception of the podcast.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: And then since our agreeing to do it, really is when [cross talk] I've been concerned. It was in my mind, having not seen it again until just recently since the original airing, the one I was really not looking forward to discussing because it was to my memory probably the one Sorkin-penned episode of *The West Wing* that on the whole, I didn't really like.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

HRISHI: Yeah. So that was the NBC synopsis, which is really nothing about the episode itself, so much as a, kind of more of like a meta-synopsis. But in terms of the actual storyline, here's a little summary...

“A group of high school students visiting D.C. are supposed to meet with Josh, when the secret service crash the White House because of a potential security breach. The students are stuck in the White House during the lockdown, as are the staffers, who end up answering questions the kids have about terrorism. Meanwhile Leo gets caught up in an investigation into a staffer who is a potential terrorist suspect.”

JOSH: That was a hrynopsis?

HRISHI: It was. [laughs] Yeah.

JOSH: [laughs] Thank you.

HRISHI: If they're doing a special episode, then I've got to throw down too.

JOSH: Yes, that is true. Yeah, this is a very special episode of *The West Wing*. First I was saying I was dreading the review. That said, on the re-watch, I liked it much more than I anticipated. I've still got some very significant issues with it that we'll discuss, but I was pleasantly surprised, and maybe it reflects on my frame of mind given when it was first aired, but I'm also of two minds in terms of quote-unquote “judging” this episode. It has tremendous value I think in many ways, and then there's also looking at it as an episode of *The West Wing* itself, which I find, given that framework, I find it comes up fairly short.

HRISHI: Yeah. It's funny I had such a different reaction to this episode initially than I did watching it this time. I remember we had to do an interview when we were first announcing the show, and they were like, “Are there any episodes you're particularly looking forward to or not looking forward to?” and you said, “I'm not looking forward to any of the ones that I'm in [laughs] and I'm not looking forward to 'Isaac and Ishmael.’” And I think it was in the context of that phone call that I heard you articulate that for the first time, and I was surprised, and I think [laughs] I even said — I was like, “Oh, really?” Because I was like, I think that that episode is great. And for me it had — it's part of the reason why *The West Wing* was cemented so firmly in my mind as such an important show, as well as such a good show, and I guess I haven't watched it in a while — definitely haven't watched it since we started doing the podcast. Watching it this time, I think [laughs] I found it not to be as good as I remembered it.

JOSH: Yeah, that's interesting. So maybe we're — we've each moved off our initial positions and we're going to meet somewhere in the middle on this.

HRISHI: Yeah, I think, I still think it is impressive and important. The reasons why it stuck with me from the beginning — the things I remembered about it and loved about it the first time I watched it — I still love those things, and they still resonate as extremely powerful for me. But overall, I understand your reaction, and I understand why the general critical reaction of the episode was — it would be generous to say it was lukewarm.

JOSH: Yeah. That said, you and I, since discovering our initial positions, really haven't discussed it off-mike in any kind of substantial way.

HRISHI: Yeah, because we haven't watched it, so, yeah.

JOSH: First, let's start at the beginning. Even the intro kind of bugged me. [laughs]

[West Wing Episode 3.00 Introduction excerpt]

MARTIN SHEEN: For those of you who tuned in tonight to see our season premiere, I'm afraid you won't. That'll be next week.

ROB LOWE: We're eager to get back to our continuing storylines, but tonight we wanted to stop for a moment and do something different.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: [laughing] Our cast of heroes speaking to us, as themselves, telling us — I mean, I like that they're setting it up: This is a non-canonical episode of the show, it doesn't exist in any timeline, we'll understand that we shouldn't look to place it in the natural order of things. They announce that profits are going to go to charities benefitting fire people and police, which I think it wonderful. So already they've got me there. This is a, you know, this is a bold and compassionate and risky move, but even in this intro, there are a lot of "ugh" moments in this episode for me, including Janel Moloney's addition to the intro, which is...

[West Wing Episode 3.00 Introduction excerpt]

JANEL MOLONEY: And I get a boyfriend.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Right. [cross talk] And that's the thing that, when you said, when you're like, "Oh, actors as themselves do this intro." But even there it's like, Is it the actors or is it the characters? Because they're dressed as their characters, and then, yeah, Janel comes in and she says, "I get a boyfriend." [laughs]

JOSH: [cross talk] Ugh. Oh, dear.

JOSH: [laughs] Yeah. It's kind of like — I think it feels to me like the cast and Donna in the intro.

HRISHI: [laughs] Yeah, that is a, that's a bummer, and I know we're not the only ones who feel that way.

JOSH: Also I very rarely say anything about performance, but even in this intro, I'm kind of like, "Ack" because you're really full of yourselves. [laughing] [cross talk] For some reason, Richard

Schiff being, I think, the sole exception. He just kind of reads his thing.

HRISHI: [cross talk] [laughing and clapping]

[West Wing Episode 3.00 Introduction excerpt]

RICHARD SCHIFF: Next week we'll start our third season. That's when you'll see stories about a reelection campaign, an MS disclosure, an embassy in Haiti.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Everyone else is kind of standing there like, "And now here's what we are going to do. It is with [laughing] tremendous humility and a look towards the future," and you know, yeah, it already makes me already, a little bit, get my back up, like, "Ok, [cross talk] ok, you special people."

HRISHI: [cross talk] I know.

HRISHI: I don't know if you remember this conversation that was happening around then. I imagine that you do. Where people were talking about where irony fits in, into our culture in the wake of 9/11, and for at least a little bit, it felt like everything had to kind of be on pause. Like all the late night shows, everything was very serious, understandably. But then there was this question of like, "Are we going to go back? How do things work from here?" And obviously, irony never came back, and everything was changed forever [laughing].

JOSH: Well, *Saturday Night Live* had that famous moment with Lorne Michaels asking then-Mayor Giuliani...

[*Saturday Night Live* excerpt]

LORNE MICHAELS: Can we be funny?

RUDY GIULIANI: Why start now?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: [laughing] Exactly, yeah.

JOSH: [laughing] It was a great moment, and I think there was kind of an "ahh" moment, and in some ways we got back to doing what we do. And *The West Wing*, at least with this episode, it's not there yet, and irony is not abundant. That being said, I also — this is where I'm so of two minds especially on the re-watch. You know, in one way to have conceived this, written it, executed it, shot it, edited it, and put it out within a month of this tragedy and this attack that still reverberates nearly two decades later is an astounding feat, and it argues on behalf of art altogether — you know, and at a time when, you know, federal funding for art, I think, is going down the toilet — to have a primetime network television show take on these kinds of issues is astounding and admirable and impressive. You know, then it comes to the actual execution of it and look, my main issue, and then we'll jump into the specifics, generally, is Aaron's decision to frame this, most of this episode, as a conversation or really more of a lecture, given to high

school students.

HRISHI: Where we're the high school students.

JOSH: Exactly. And I think, "Hey, at least we're honors students — thanks for that." [laughing] But that's what I, a little, bit bridle under. I don't like being talked down to. Look, there's stuff in this, you know, Presidential Classroom, that I learned. I'm not saying I came to the table with everything. There were moments where I thought, "Oh, that's interesting," or "That's an interesting take," or "Here's even a piece of information I didn't know." But the general feeling that, one by one, our heroes are strolling in to talk down to me and lecture to me at a high school level doesn't sit well for 45 minutes.

HRISHI: Right. I think there's two ways you could judge this episode — given the idea that it's a play that's outside of the timeline and stuff like that — that I only thought about after learning a little bit more or thinking about it a little bit more for this conversation, which is it's essentially a 40-minute-long PSA. And as PSAs go, it is better than any PSA that's ever been made. But that's not necessarily the same standard with which you would judge a TV show, and certainly not maybe, you know, one of the best TV shows of all time. But I was thinking about the PSA of it all, not just because of the mention that they were going to donate money to charity, but NBC too lost millions of dollars to put this episode on the air.

JOSH: What does that mean? I didn't know that.

HRISHI: Well, they postponed the season premiere by a couple weeks, because this episode... You know, they were supposed to, I think, start *The West Wing* the week before, at the end of September. But rather than do that, Aaron wanted to make this and have this be something that came before the season started. But he needed two weeks to make it. So he had to ask them to push the whole thing back and air a rerun instead of what would have been the Season 3 premiere. And the Season 3 premiere is like, you know, in terms of ad dollars, that's a huge ad buy and so NBC had to, you know, go back to those sponsors and say, "Hey we're running a rerun instead and so now we're going to give you a discount." They have to give them a discount because it's a rerun. Anyway, it cost NBC something like ten million dollars to make this happen for Aaron.

JOSH: Well, that's a very impressive fact right there. You don't often see commerce kneeling at the altar of art. So that's incredible. As you said with the PSA — that's a very apt way to put it — and I feel like there's about two lines of text that could have made the whole endeavor better for me. I wish, maybe during the intro, one of the actors had said, "Hey, you know, this episode is really geared toward kids between the age of 12 and 17, and if you would sit down with your middle school to high school age kids, you guys might get something out of this together."

HRISHI: I don't think that that's true. I mean, I don't think that it's only 12 to 17 year olds who needed to hear the episode. [cross talk] I think that the lessons in there...

JOSH: [cross talk] No, and if you know a dumber, less-enlightened adult, bring him along too.

HRISHI: [laughs] But that's what I mean, not even that. I suppose you probably felt this way when you saw it the first time too. But I know for a lot of people, and I guess I was closer to high school age at the time when this came out, but, um...

JOSH: You will always be closer to high school age than I. [laughing] That's how it works.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Depending on when I die, I guess. You could outlive me.

HRISHI: Oh, jeez. [laughing]. I think that there were a lot of people who are also smart, who need to hear some of the stuff in here. And actually my favorite part about this whole episode speaks directly to that, which is Leo's storyline and his arc in this episode. If we can just dive right into that.

JOSH: Yeah, absolutely. And look, I like that subplot a lot more than the Classroom because, I guess, largely because it's dramatized. [cross talk] You know, he didn't have to stick us in a classroom. I can understand why he did, especially with time constraints. He had something to say, but a lot of this felt to me like, you know, maybe he should have written a great essay, and then waited until he could fully dramatize an episode of the show. But I'm with you that that storyline works better, although I find Leo so out of character.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right, it's an actual story.

HRISHI: Well, see, I've heard this, and even as we've been getting closer to this episode, I've seen some people's comments on Twitter and Facebook criticizing this episode because they felt like it did Leo an injustice by presenting him that way. But I didn't find that at all. I thought that he... I didn't think that he was out of character. I actually... So much of that story affected me because it showed that even somebody who we have come to learn over two years now, somebody who is principled and smart and moral and a leader is not, like, entirely free from the kind of [cross talk] you know, racism that Leo engages in. You know, and I think that that's an important thing, given like how didactic the rest of the episode is, and the rest of *The West Wing* maybe even is. There's a really important lesson, I think, in the idea that good people are not free from ignorant thoughts or even, like, evil thoughts. That goodness doesn't derive from the absence of racism or prejudice. It comes from what you do with those thoughts when they happen, or with those actions when you commit them.

JOSH: [cross talk] Knee-jerk...

JOSH: Well, I agree with you in terms of the value of that statement. I don't know if I buy it in the incarnation of this story and Leo's reaction. In the 44 episodes of Leo that we've gotten prior to this, would you expect him — forget expect, characters can do things you don't expect. But I'm not sure once I see it unfold, I buy that his initial reaction is so negative. "This is the guy." We know there are, whatever, two others or three others, people with the same name. I don't know if Leo McGarry is one to make that kind of snap judgment.

HRISHI: Well, I'll cite a couple of things that I think, for me, give enough background that I buy it. One is the story about the missile defense shield. You know, he wants to fund that, and he's trying to get the president to invest money into it and make it a real thing, even though it's clearly, you know, not working yet. There's, like, a level of blind faith that he has in what military experts and military intelligence says. Say this is in the context of a world in *The West Wing* in which a terror attacks have happened, and everybody is on the defensive. Maybe even 9/11 has occurred in this weird episode of a parallel universe of *The West Wing*. So everybody is incredibly on edge. And at that time, a lot of people who you maybe would not have expected were heading in extreme directions away from what you might think of these people. Like, "Oh, you're somebody who normally champions civil liberties, you're somebody who normally is a

very reasonable person.” And then all of a sudden, like, in the wake of this attack, different parts of people’s psyche come out.

JOSH: Yeah. Look, that’s convincing. I buy all that. It’s the translation into this specific example where he has a human being in front of him and he’s so transparently, Leo is, sure that he’s got the right person because he’s got a Muslim in the White House with the same name.

HRISHI: I guess I didn’t also think that he was convinced that he had the right guy. I didn’t think that Leo went in being like, “This is the guy.” I thought he went in, Leo being like, “This might be the guy, and we have to take this extremely seriously.” As seriously as, you know, the possibility that it *is* the guy. And if it *is* the guy, this guy is so devious and clever that he has managed to make his way inside the White House.

JOSH: Right. He’s treating him like a one-man sleeper cell.

HRISHI: Yeah, exactly.

JOSH: Well maybe I’m misinterpreting altogether then. I don’t know, somehow in the... When I watch it, it seems to me from the moment that Michael O’Neill — as soon as Butterfield says...

[West Wing Episode 3.00 excerpt]

RON: There are three Rakim Alis. One’s a software designer in Spokane. Another is a caterer in Los Angeles.

LEO: Who’s the third?

RON: He works in the White House.

LEO: It was only a matter of time, huh?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: To me that feels like [cross talk] you know, I’ve convicted him in my mind already, and now I’m going to question him [cross talk] although I know what I need to know, now I need to get him to say it. I don’t know; that’s how it felt to me.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah, yeah.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yes.

HRISHI: That’s true. No, I understand that. If you look for patterns, patterns will emerge. And so if you’re looking for, “Who are the people who are out to try and get us?” and if you’ve got three Rakim Alis, and one’s in Spokane and one’s in LA, and one works in the White House. I agree that it is the wrong... As the character, he is wrong to do this, but, again, I understand the idea where he’s like, “Well who’s attacking us? They’ve come this far.” So...

JOSH: Right. Look, also, it almost in a sense goes back to our conversations about backstory and character, and what creates the character. And, look, this is the writer telling us what happened. So, you know, the same way I as an actor would say, you know, I wouldn’t say if I were playing Leo, “I can’t do this — it’s out of character.” I would figure out how to make it work.

As a viewer I guess I have to say, “Oh, here’s an aspect of Leo that I’m discovering.”

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: You know: “This is what Leo did; this is how he reacted. So maybe, maybe my preconceptions of Leo... Maybe I was giving him credit where credit wasn’t due. Like, ok, there are some flaws to this guy; maybe I’m seeing one of them now play out.”

HRISHI: Yeah. I think the thing that put it into context for me that made sense is also like, I think the worst thing that he says — if that makes sense. Like the thing that’s almost... If this is Leo being out of character, the thing that he says that is like the deepest throw from that part of his character is also the part that in the whole, made me feel like it makes sense.

[West Wing Episode 3.00 excerpt]

RAKIM: It’s not uncommon for Arab-Americans to be the first suspected when that sort of thing happens.

LEO: I can’t imagine why.

RAKIM: Look...

LEO: No, I’m trying to figure out why anytime there’s terrorist activity people always assume it’s Arabs. I’m wracking my brain.

RAKIM: I don’t know the answer to that, Mr. McGarry. But I can tell you that it’s horrible.

LEO: Well that’s the price you pay.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And that line... I think whatever esteem I have for this episode, it boils down to this exchange. He says, “That’s the price you pay.” And Ajay Naidu, who plays Rakim Ali, [cross talk] says...

JOSH: [cross talk] Mm-hmm.

[West Wing Episode 3.00 excerpt]

RAKIM: The price I pay for what?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And that — I’m of course bringing some of my own life into this reading, which I can’t help but do — like, that hits so hard for me. Because that, I think, goes right to the heart of the question of, like, what level of erosion of civil liberties are we ok with? And part of it is like, you go up and you hear legislators saying, “Look, I would much rather be searched and detained if it means the security for everybody, the greater security...” And it’s like, yeah that’s fine. You’re not the one who’s going to be searched and detained.

JOSH: Exactly right. And in my mind, I tied that moment, because I felt the same thing too —

the dramatic high point of the episode [cross talk], and I tied it to the lesser iteration of the same theme, which is just C.J. discussing with the [cross talk] students and with her colleagues...

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right

HRISHI: [cross talk] Oh, yeah.

[West Wing Episode 3.00 excerpt]

TOBY: Maybe this would be a good time for a chorus of "Our Maligned Little Brother's Civil Liberties."

C.J.: Liberties, shmiberties.

TOBY: C.J. Cregg, ladies and gentlemen.

C.J.: You know of a way to do this without tapping some phones?

TOBY: What about illegal searches? What about profiling? You know what Benjamin Franklin said?

C.J.: He said, "Hey, look. I've invented the stove."

BILLY: He said, "They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."

[end excerpt]

JOSH: It's much more powerful when it's dramatized in the context of [cross talk] this subplot than it is simply discussed in the Classroom.

HRISHI: [cross talk] [laughs]

HRISHI: Yeah. I think there's even something really wonderful about, like, a commentary about this idea that is in the casting of Ajay Naidu as an Arab-American. You know, like, he's Indian.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: And so, when Leo says...

[West Wing Episode 3.00 excerpt]

LEO: That's the price you pay for having the same physical features as criminals. That's what I was going to say.

RAKIM: No kidding.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: There's this, like, beautiful thing, because I, you know... The idea of how unspecific whatever racial profiling in the name of, whatever, security. And the thing that I love about it, is

that it goes so much with the beginning of the episode when Josh says...

[West Wing Episode 3.00 excerpt]

STUDENT: What's the deal with everybody trying to kill you?

JOSH: Well, it's not everybody, and they're trying to kill you too.

STUDENT: But mostly you.

JOSH: No, both of us the same.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: That there is this blindness to terrorism, where it's like, there's no nuance, you know? It's like, "I'm going to go into this building, and I'm going to blow up everybody in it, and I'm not stopping to check who are the people in here, and are they, you know..." And in the name of eradicating something that is so blind and without nuance and without concern for who it's actually affecting, the countermeasure is to do the exact same thing.

JOSH: Mm-hmm. Very well put.

HRISHI: We got to talk to Ajay Naidu about playing the part of Rakim Ali. He was in London, and we talked to him by Skype.

AJAY NAIDU: Man, I'm so excited to talk to you guys. Should I just like relentlessly barrage you with how that week went so that you guys know all the good stuff first [cross talk] so that you can ask questions later?

JOSH: [cross talk] Yeah.

HRISHI: Yes.

AJAY: So this is what, man, the week of 9/11? I was in a really strange sense of denial that week and thought I had auditions. That was my coping mechanism. Everyone was like, "What the [expletive deleted] is wrong with you? You think you have meetings, and the world is exploding." But the weirdest thing was like two days after, I get a call from NBC, and they were like, "Aaron Sorkin really wants you to come do the wrongly accused guy in an episode that they're writing now." He had to write me a note so that I could get on the plane. There was no one flying and I flew, and I was, like, really, really scared because there were people were, like, they kept making comments at me. So I told them this and then they put me at the Chateau Marmont while I did it, which was [expletive deleted] awesome. And then I went to the table read, and I had worked with Martin Sheen on a sitcom, like, a few years earlier, and I walked up to Martin Sheen, and I was like, "Oh, my God." And he goes, "Hey, Ajay!" He recognized me before I recognized him. And he goes, "Hey, Ajay, remember me from *LateLine*?" And I said the best thing I've ever said, which was, "No, I remember you from *Apocalypse Now*."

JOSH AND HRISHI: [laughing]

AJAY: So that was [cross talk]... That was how it all started. And Rob Lowe remembered me from when I was a kid, and, like, it was... John Spencer and I had... It was the best — one of

the best acting experiences of my entire life. And it was more watched than anything else, and I'll leave it there by saying that it was probably one of the best things I've ever, ever done. So that is how I would like to pre-empt all of your questions.

JOSH: [cross talk] Good line.

JOSH AND HRISHI: [laughing]

HRISHI: Maybe we can go back and start with you getting the gig. You got a call saying that Aaron wanted you for this role.

AJAY: Well, yeah. At that time, casting at NBC... I was doing pretty well at that time, and I had a few things coming out, and he had somehow seen me or something like that. And I know that they were like, "Let's look around." And he was like, "No, I know the guy I want."

HRISHI: Huh.

AJAY: And it was me.

JOSH: Was the script already written? Was he able to send you...

AJAY: No, they were still working on it. They asked me to come in just so they could, like, have me take a look at, like, what the material was. And it was a little unshaved at that moment, because he was — they were writing furiously around the clock, until we even were like, shooting.

HRISHI: And, how long did it take to make the episode?

AJAY: I was there a week. It was quite fast. And most of my stuff was in one room with John Spencer, so I got finished quickly.

JOSH: Was there a sense of urgency to the endeavor?

AJAY: Absolutely. They wanted everything yesterday. That's why it was so weird for me to fly. No one was flying, and I flew.

HRISHI: How did you feel about this role in particular?

AJAY: I was so glad, because I've never, ever, ever had to do a terrorist since, or before. You know, all the people that I know that are Middle Eastern or, you know, Indian or everything like that — they go up for those roles, and I was so honored to be able to put that role away. And his name was originally something else, but because my favorite rapper is Rakim, I named him Rakim Ali.

JOSH: [laughing]

AJAY: So it was originally some other name, like Mohammed-something-something, but I was like, "Can he be Rakim Ali?"

HRISHI: That's amazing.

JOSH: [laughing]

HRISHI: Originally he was named Eric B.

AJAY: [laughing] Right, that's right.

HRISHI: [laughing]

["Eric B. Is President" by Eric B. and Rakim excerpt]

RAKIM: [sung] Eric B. is on the cut and my name is Rakim...

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Not a lot of people can claim to have rewritten Aaron Sorkin.

AJAY: [laughing] It wasn't like that, it wasn't like that. I was just like, Well, maybe this name is more... I think it's more poetic.

HRISHI: Yeah, because... It's amazing because you managed to both put away the terrorist role on your résumé, while also not actually having to play a terrorist.

AJAY: Yeah, I feel very honored about that. I've never really had to do one. I've tried out for many of them, but I guess I'm just, like, too "dakalakalaka" to make it happen.

HRISHI: [laughing]

AJAY: I think I'm too swarthy for it.

HRISHI: [laughing]

AJAY: They're like, "You're guilty, man, you can't... There's no way that this guy isn't guilty." [laughing] You know? I actually once met Sidney Lumet for a part as a terrorist, and he was like, "You're a great actor, but no matter what you do you're guilty." And I was like, "What does that mean?"

HRISHI: [laughing]

AJAY: You know? So I was very deeply, deeply honored. And it came out on a night that another film of mine, that I was in, was premiering. And the producers of the film got really mad at me because they said I did really well in *The West Wing* and that I didn't do as well for them in their movie.

HRISHI: [laughing]

AJAY: And the role in their movie was wildly different to Rakim. And so it was like... I couldn't really explain it. I mean, you can't make bad material be better, you know, by simply acting it. Sometimes you can, but I wasn't able to with their movie versus *The West Wing*. So, that was a... I remember pretty vividly the day it came out. You know what I mean? The entire job was like one of those ones that I'll never — I'll never really top again because it all coincided in such a way that made it, like, very magical and very, very dignified, you know, which rarely happens.

Usually it's quite the opposite. But this one was like, the material was spot-on, the character was vulnerable and strong, the cast was amazing, the show was brilliant, the notoriety of it was cool. It was like one of those, you know, once-in-a-lifetime *pings* that happened, you know?

HRISHI: Yeah. Was there anything in that process that was difficult?

AJAY: What is always difficult, which is nailing the Sorkin beats, you know what I mean, which are difficult for any actor if you haven't played in that style, or if you're, like, just joining up for a one-off. And, you know, I had to jump up on the vibe like a tire on the rim, you know what I mean, and kind of just roll. Because they were like machine guns and stuff like that. And John Spencer was so cool, man. He'd take me out and drill with me. He'd be like, "No, man, I do this all the time." And I was like, Oh, wow. So, you know, I loved him, and it was such a sad thing when he went, because he held my hand all the way through that, you know.

JOSH: Yeah, that's a recurring theme when we talk to actors who worked with him, just how warm and helpful he always was.

AJAY: God, like, he made me be good, man. It wasn't me, it was him. I just, like, reacted, you know what I mean?

JOSH: I'm curious — when the camera stopped rolling, what was the conversation about? Was there a lot of... There may not have been enough time, because it was made under such pressure, so maybe it was all the material. But were there political discussions going on? Was there a lot of conversation about what had happened?

AJAY: Well, yeah, I mean, everyone there was really... It was a new... You know, the new pro-America feeling was happening at that very moment? [cross talk] I remember, the set was littered with political cartoons of, like, an eagle sharpening its claws. You know, kind of, it was kind of like strange, sort of a "We're going to get everybody now" kind of sentiment. But beyond that, though, the thing that people said to me was that, like, because *The West Wing* was so wonderfully bipartisan and brilliant, they took a sort of a more avuncular teaching tone with that episode is what I've heard, you know what I mean? That was the criticism that I heard about it. The political sort of backdrop for it was exactly what you might have thought at the time. People were freaking the [expletive deleted] out. You know what I mean? People were in shock, people were in... You know, it was just a really strange time. But, I know this sounds really horrible, but it was really the only thing I could see myself doing as a piece of activism at the time was to play that [cross talk] because that was the feeling I was having, you know what I mean? The feeling that I had was that, "Man, you can't go around [expletive deleted] blaming people that are here, that are American, that have been here for..." I still feel that way, and I still I feel that's like the main... That's so poignant right now that, like, I can't even tell you how much I'm honored that the message of that kind of reverberates, you know? So, that's that part.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

HRISHI: Yeah. You said that John Spencer was so helpful and warm in terms of getting you up to speed and working lines with you. But, this is just me talking as a non-actor; maybe this is a naïve question. But was it hard to then go from that kind of rapport, to then... You know, the antagonism and the tension between the two of you in the scenes is so palpable. Did it take a little bit of revving up to go from, like, "Hey, let me help you out" to suddenly where...

AJAY: No, no, no. That's a thing that, I guess as a non-actor you would think that that would be in conflict to being helpful. But what's amazing is that the more you are open with someone, the more friction you can cause. The more, like, danger and sort of anger you can cause, because you build up a sense of trust.

HRISHI: Hm.

AJAY: You know what I'm saying?

HRISHI: Yeah.

AJAY: I felt like we were playing at it. The theater, or the effect is happening outside of ourselves. It's happening to you guys, you know what I mean? But what we're doing is just [expletive deleted] enjoying tearing each other a new [expletive deleted]. You know what I'm saying?

HRISHI: [laughing]

AJAY: So that's that part. He was like, "Oh, man, I [expletive deleted] loved it when you told me you were going to get angry," you know what I mean? [cross talk] "I really thought it was so cool when you told me to shut up," you know what I mean? It's one of those things you get off on, you know?

HRISHI: [cross talk] [laughing].

JOSH: [cross talk] [laughing] Yeah.

HRISHI: Yeah.

AJAY: So, quite the opposite. If anything, that stuff helped us to get "fighty" with each other, you know? It helped us to get punchy.

HRISHI: Yeah.

AJAY: That's what I mean by that — I mean he helped me to fall into where I felt like I could bash him up, or he could bash me up, you know?

HRISHI: Right. Do people talk to you about that episode? Has it come up a lot since you shot it?

AJAY: They do talk to me about it, and it's very, very gratifying, you know what I mean? Of all the things that people recognize me or talk to me about, people that are fans of *The West Wing* that are bingeing it or watching it all the way through are always like... I have gotten a lot of people writing to me, like, "Dude!" You know, it's been a really sort of Tinkerbell story with me and *The West Wing* when it comes to them having watched it.

HRISHI: Awesome.

JOSH: Will you tell us... You're speaking to us from London; we know you're out there doing a play. Will you tell us a little bit about what you're doing?

AJAY: Yeah, I'm doing a stage adaption of Robert Evans' *The Kid Stays in the Picture*.

HRISHI: Wow.

AJAY: Yeah, yeah. Simon McBurney is directing, and it's a really, really, really fun thing.

JOSH: I hope we get a chance to see you in it here.

AJAY: Oh, me too, guys. I really do too. This was... I was really looking forward to this interview, and it makes me happy.

HRISHI: Awesome.

JOSH: Of course. Well, thanks for the performance. It's an incredibly subtle... I think you and John Spencer share some similarities in your approach to the material, anyway in this episode, and you're both... I like that you're both very subtle and underplaying and there's a lot going on, unspoken.

AJAY: That's a very, very high compliment man, I deeply appreciate that.

HRISHI: Thanks so much, Ajay.

AJAY: Yeah, yeah. Thanks, guys. I'll speak to you soon, I hope.

HRISHI: Ok, thank you. Bye.

JOSH: Break a leg.

[music break]

HRISHI: After 9/11, I remember talking to some of my friends from college, and I had to travel, and at the time I had a beard. And we were talking, and there was an email thread going around, and we were just kind of talking about what we were all going through, and I was saying I have to go back to New York and I was like, "I'm going to shave my beard." And they kind of were all like, "You don't have to do that. You shouldn't feel like you have to do that." And I'm like, "Yeah, I get that I shouldn't have to feel like I have to do that, but I feel like, I do think that I have to," you know? And for months after that, just going to the airport, not even getting on a plane or anything like that — like waiting to pick somebody up... I remember going to pick up my friend who was coming back from Ireland and being in the terminal, and like, the number of dirty looks that I would get just standing there. And I would get so, you know, like to the point where I would, like... There was a guy who was looking at me too long, where I finally turned to him and said, "What?" It was a... Anyway, this idea of "that's the price you pay" really affected me.

JOSH: And that speaks to the value of this episode altogether. Sometimes things need to be stated in a very simple way. You know, I'm backtracking now on what I said about being talked down to. But I do think there are things in this episode that need to be stated, need to be stated simply.

[West Wing Episode 3.00 excerpt]

TOBY: It's worth covering twice, don't you agree?

JOSH: *I do.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: [laughing] You know. It's 16 years out, nearly, from 9/11, and so little has changed in very many ways. And we're dealing with Trump and the Muslim ban and... One of my son's best friends, his dad is named Mohammed, and this kid has described to us what it's like to travel when your dad is named Mohammed [cross talk] in 2017. It's a nightmare every time they go anywhere.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Oh, yeah.

HRISHI: Yeah. My friend from college, his brother is named Usama.

JOSH: Oh, great.

HRISHI: Yeah. With a "U" but like you know, it's not really...

JOSH: [cross talk] Subtlety is lost on the TSA, I'm guessing.

HRISHI: Yeah. I think that's also why I wanted to push back on the idea that like, this is an episode for children and for people who are not very smart. Because I think there are plenty of people who are very, very smart who can still come to these conclusions.

JOSH: No, I agree with you, and really... Maybe I misspoke. It's the way much of it is communicated.

HRISHI: Totally fair.

JOSH: I'm not saying this is content for children and this is content for dumb people. Too much of the time during this episode, I feel like it's being dispensed as if it's appropriate for kids. So that's [cross talk] an important distinction. I don't think any of this... You know what, it's good for me to watch this episode and be reminded of things that, you know, I already believe and feel, but, you know, they're not always right at your fingertips. And it's important to remind ourselves of certain truths, and this episode does that, but often I want it to be at a different level or through a different mode.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

HRISHI: Right. And I also think that I am guilty of being so enamored with the power of the Leo part that I kind of gloss over the Presidential Classroom — or whatever the kids are called — part of it. You know, like, because I'm kind of skipping over some of the parts that are definitely not so great. I mean, not even... There's some pretty bad stuff. But just my last thing about the Leo part, is that I love that once the moment kind of passes, John Spencer, I think, does an amazing job of portraying, like, his own horror at what he had just kind of said and done. And that's, for me, what I was trying to say about, like, that's what... You know, I ultimately forgive the character for what he does because he is able to, like, recognize and learn from it, and he can't even kind of express himself fully to apologize to Rakim Ali. He's just like... But you can tell he understands the gravity of what's gone on.

JOSH: There's a moment when Mr. Ali is told he's free to go, that John Spencer does one of those kind of ineffably brilliant things that the finest actors do that are almost impossible to articulate, but I watched over and over [cross talk]. You know, it's a simple shot of Leo, of John Spencer with Ali, I guess, in the forefront of the frame. Basically Ali is cleared, but there's still a defiant kind of look in John Spencer's eyes, like, you know, "I had reason to believe" — you know, I'm reading into it. This is what I take out of it, you know — "Well, ok, I was wrong, but I'm still not ready to admit that I was wrong on the level that I was wrong. I was wrong on the facts, but there was every reason to believe." And then Ali gets up and walks out, and without really doing anything, there's, at least in my viewing of it, a slight transition to shame and [cross talk] introspection about how he came to this. And it's a moment I looked at over and over and over, and I don't know what it is; I wish I had it as an actor, but there's sometimes certain things that just [cross talk] happen in a tiny look or in someone's face, the slightest adjustment that speaks volumes, and John does it there.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Hm.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Huh.

HRISHI: [cross talk] [laughing]

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I agree with you, I really like the subplot. I think the greatest dramatic value of the episode obviously plays out in this storyline. But then the very final moment of their interaction:

[West Wing Episode 3.00 excerpt]

LEO: Hey, kid. Way to be back at your desk.

[end excerpt]

JOSH AND HRISHI: [laughing]

JOSH: So rough. It's rough on a couple levels. One, the fact that he calls him "kid" after what they've been through just kind of makes me cringe a little. And then it's really, really weirdly reminiscent of a Coca-Cola commercial from the late seventies, with Mean Joe Greene. There's this famous Coca-Cola commercial where Mean Joe Greene is hobbling to the locker rooms after a game, and he's really down. And a kid runs up, "Mr. Greene!" And he gives him his Coke. And then Mean Joe says, "Hey kid," just like John Spencer does. [laughing] Just like, "Hey kid." And then, you know, Mean Joe Greene throws him his dirty game jersey. And the kid's like, "Hey, thanks!"

HRISHI: [laughing]

JOSH: And so, it was really unfortunately reminiscent of that commercial, to which we will link [cross talk] — that final moment.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah. [laughing]

JOSH: I was like, "Oy vey." [laughing]

HRISHI: [laughing]

JOSH: And this was only one of two 1970s palpable references to me. The other being... You know, well, there's a series of hard-for-me-to-believe questions asked by these high school honors students.

HRISHI: [laughing] Yeah.

JOSH: "So what's the deal with everybody trying to kill you?" and, "Where do terrorists come from?" that already are...

HRISHI: Paired with...

[West Wing Episode 3.00 excerpt]

BILLY: I mean, isn't that why they made the legislative branch, or people's branch, the most powerful?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It's like, you kids are all in the same program, and you're supposed to be pretty smart. How is there no consistency to the level of [cross talk] discourse, you know?

JOSH: [cross talk] Right!

JOSH: Right. Billy Fernandez is clearly the [laughing] cream of the crop here.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: But yeah, so then there's an interchange...

[West Wing Episode 3.00 excerpt]

STUDENT 1: So why is everybody trying to kill us?

JOSH: It's not everybody.

STUDENT 1: It seems like everybody.

STUDENT 2: It's just the Arabs.

STUDENT 3: Saying "the Arabs" is too general.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Immediately I thought, again — and it kind of goes into your whole, the PSA of it all — there's a seventies PSA that I also grew up on, where there's a grandpa and a kid in a boat on a lake. They're fishing, and then the kid says — and they cast a kid who has trouble getting the lines out — but he says, you know, "Yesterday Jimmy called me prejudiced."

[PSA excerpt]

GRANDPA: Do you know what prejudice is?

Kid: No.

GRANDPA: Prejudice is when you react to someone because of their religion or their color.

Kid: But I don't do that.

GRANDPA: Who's Jimmy?

Kid: Jimmy's one of my Jewish friends.

GRANDPA: Then you are prejudiced, because you think of Jimmy as your Jewish friend and not your friend.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: [laughing] It's kind of very much this moment in the "Presidential Classroom."

HRISHI: Yeah. [laughing]

JOSH: Anyway, too much of this show reminded me of 1970s commercials and PSAs.

HRISHI: It's funny, because I understand they're leading toward the point that they want to make about — the actual very interesting and enlightening point about the KKK and Islamic fundamentalists. But there are so many places where I also wanted, like, where they could have stopped to be like, "Uh, hey, how about just the term 'Arabs'?" You know, you're not even talking about a country, you're just, like, the brush is so broad that you have just painted an entire region as, like, a group of people under one umbrella.

JOSH: Yeah, no, that thought occurred to me too. It stays very surface, because these kids are so unsophisticated in certain ways [laughing] that you're right; we don't get to the finer points. It's a very broad-brush interaction [cross talk] we're having.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

JOSH: By the way, I mean also... Our heroes stroll in, each one at a time like rock stars, and boy are they prepared to have this conversation. [laughing] Josh didn't even know it was on his list, but, man, are they ready. Oh, yes, 11th century? Sure. [laughing]

HRISHI: [laughing] That's the part that's crazy to me, where I feel like, "Ok, how do these kids know these things? But then, yeah. How do these characters know this stuff?" Not only do they have it at their fingertips; how do they have it at all?

JOSH: Right! Oh, Al-hassan Ibn-al-Sabbah? Sure. [cross talk] Let's talk about him...

HRISHI: [laughing] Exactly. "Oh, I might be getting this name wrong, but here it is." Here, luckily we've got Rob Lowe who's all of a sudden an expert in terrorism. [cross talk] Since when?!

JOSH: [cross talk] Right.

JOSH: Right. And, oh...

[West Wing Episode 3.00 excerpt]

SAM: Temptation. I have named thee and thy name is woman.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: [cross talk] Ok.

JOSH: [cross talk] What the what?!

HRISHI: Ok, that was the [expletive deleted]... That was so crazy.

JOSH: Oof!

HRISHI: And that's his first thing? That was like the biggest WTF line from Sam Seaborn of many that have, you know, [cross talk] we have encountered where I've been like, "Hey, you know..." When we started this podcast I was like, "Oh yeah, Sam Seaborn — one of my favorite characters." And then I keep coming across lines where I'm like, "Oh, I forgot that he said that — that was problematic at best. [cross talk] And then this one; it's just garbage.

JOSH: [cross talk] Right.

JOSH: [cross talk] No kidding.

JOSH: I wanted someone to say, "Hey, there's high school girls in here. Get out!"

HRISHI: Yeah!

JOSH: Take your math and you get out of here, sir! [cross talk] That was really inappropriate!

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah. [laughing]

JOSH: We're a Presidential Classroom. What the hell is going on? [laughing]

HRISHI: I know.

JOSH: And then, there are a couple more, you know... Josh says to C.J...

[West Wing Episode 3.00 excerpt]

C.J.: Shouldn't you be thinking of ways to find aid and comfort for our boys in intelligence?

JOSH: You know, they many need some comforting right now. When this crash is over, you'd best get in some fishnets and head to a bar.

C.J.: I will.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: There are just some moments where I'm like, "Wait a minute!" I know they put this together [cross talk] quickly, but...

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah.

HRISHI: But there are children. [laughing] There are literally children in the room.

JOSH: Right. What is going on?

HRISHI: Uhhh. [laughing]

HRISHI: I also found it hilarious that, speaking to a group of kids, Josh uses Irving Berlin as a cultural reference.

JOSH: [laughing] That's right.

HRISHI: I mean, I know they're supposed to be nerds, but I don't think they're going to go home and, like, jam out to some ragtime.

JOSH: Right. "Who the hell are you talking about?" "Oh, Irving Berlin? He's my Jewish friend." [laughing] "Well then you are prejudiced." And then there's a rough shot at Donna and her college-girlish response.

HRISHI: Uh huh.

JOSH: Josh calls her out for being college girlish, which is just not a great put-down.

HRISHI: Right. But I love her response that he sets her up for:

[West Wing Episode 3.00 excerpt]

DONNA: Watch now as he's going to put me down and make my point at the exact same time.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I thought that was great.

JOSH: That is good.

HRISHI: So, the other part about this episode as it relates to the canon of the show as a whole that I really loved, was Josh's digression about his mom and the Joe Pepitone hat [cross talk] that his dad signed.

JOSH: [cross talk] Right.

HRISHI: I love the way that Josh in that moment, and Brad, the way he plays it, is what I think is a beautiful piece of acting.

[West Wing Episode 3.00 excerpt]

JOSH: But she keeps thinking of things to add to it. She'll call and say "I found that cap that Dad got Joe Pepitone to sign for you on your birthday. You wore it to school everyday in 7th grade. Do you want me to send it to you so you can put it in the box?" [voice breaks] So I'll say, "Yeah, Mom, let's put it in the box."

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: He starts off the sentence totally fine, and by the time he gets there, he chokes up in a way. And then he recovers shortly thereafter. But I thought this was beautiful how he seemed to be caught off guard and, like, surprised himself by his own emotional reaction to both thinking about his mom and thinking about his father. And it made me think about how much, like, Josh being on the go constantly and just being the character that we've come to know, probably doesn't make room for himself to grieve and, like, feel sadness. Just like when he was going through PTSD and he was like, it doesn't seem like something you can have if you work at the White House. That, like, the processing of his... He's probably brushed off most of the real emotional work. And so then it ends up coming out in a moment like this that's completely inappropriate. But he doesn't get to linger on it either. Anyway, I just thought that was a really beautiful bit.

JOSH: No, that's a good insight into that moment. I agree.

HRISHI: I wanted to read a quote from Aaron that I found in the *New York Times* where he talked about his intentions with the episode.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: He said:

"We have these eight characters who have been our friends for two years, and we want them to live," Sorkin says. "And in order to do that they have to bow their heads for a moment to what concerns the rest of the world. Once we've done that, it'll give us permission to go back to telling the kind of relatively trivial stories I like about the NEA and soft money and big tobacco."

JOSH: Interesting.

HRISHI: The reporter for the *New York Times* was there when Jeff Zucker from NBC and the president of Warner Brothers had come to set, and Aaron said to Zucker that he thinks the episode might be a disaster, a colossal disaster.

JOSH: Did he say what Zucker's reaction was?

HRISHI: The quote from Zucker was, "You're crazy. It's going to be great. It's going to be landmark television."

JOSH: Yeah. And I think it falls between being a disaster and landmark television. I think it's of great value. Somebody wrote to me and said that she uses it for her students.

HRISHI: Mm-hmm.

JOSH: And I think it would be a very powerful educational tool, to be used in that way. You

know, in the end I find it falls short as an episode of *The West Wing*, although I still think it has, you know, great value and it was a brave and bold endeavor. Look, and I like a lot of what he has to say. It also wasn't lost on me — I guess this is going back a little bit maybe to something we already wrapped up — but that as our... This sort of a hagiography of our main cast that we often get, they're just so [cross talk] right and so compassionate. And they have little differences of opinion here, especially with C.J. and the CIA conversation and national security versus civil liberties. But, while our super-evolved main cast is teaching these kids, Leo is being less tolerant out in the real world. Here, in this... The door's closed, they can espouse pluralism and tolerance and not rushing to judgment, and nuance. And then out in the real world, Leo's not living it.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Uh-huh.

HRISHI: Yeah. I think the fact that you decided to use "hagiography," I think: one, kudos. But I think it gets to the heart of people's main objection about *The West Wing*. And I think also *The West Wing* at its best defied that idea that these characters are perfect. You know, I think that part of the reason the MS storyline at the end of Season 2 is considered, like, the best arc of the series is because you see there is this little insight as the president is knocked off of his perch. He's no longer this perfect person without any character flaws. He has done this very grave and potentially criminal act. And pitting the, like, very good intentions against bad actions is a really great, interesting, rich conflict. Here, it's only Leo who gets to have that — engage with that conflict — and everybody else is kind of left to be the saints.

JOSH: Yeah, well, I've said before... Actually, you actually put your finger on it. I have said before that it's one of my favorite ongoing arcs and storylines with President Bartlet's behavior vis-à-vis his medical condition. And it's for that very reason, you're right, because we see the cracks in the character. And normally they are presented to us as these just, sort of superlative people of moral upstanding. And I like to see the... I guess what I'm feeling is that, in calling Leo's actions in this episode out of character, I guess I'm wondering whether, do we see it again ever?

HRISHI: I think so.

JOSH: We do, ok. So maybe I'm not remembering beyond this as well as I might.

HRISHI: Yeah, maybe in more subtle ways. They're a little harder to call out so specifically because they're couched in larger plot things to come. But I felt like it... I guess it kind of sets things up for him. But whatever my overall sense of his character, it didn't seem so insane. But you're not the only person to think so, because, like I said, a lot of our listeners... Several of them mentioned that they felt like they hated Leo's storyline in this, because they felt like he wouldn't act that way.

JOSH: Yeah, I'm just wondering. I'm open to maybe what I'm calling out as a weakness is perhaps a strength. So maybe I'll reevaluate as we move forward.

HRISHI: Yeah. I wonder, for people who did feel like Leo was acting extremely out of character and that they disliked the episode for that. I would like to put it to them: if there was ever somebody who they thought was a good person who either subjected them to or they witnessed engaging in some very, like, either casual or blatant racism. You know, and if you can allow for those people to have that, then maybe Leo can too.

JOSH: Yeah, absolutely. That's very well put.

HRISHI: One of the things that they — I don't know if this is too mean to say.

JOSH: Please, don't leave me hanging out here.

HRISHI: Ok, so here's one thing I wanted to point out, is that the theme song, which is one of the most beloved theme songs out there and is so great. It is important to recognize how much the quality of the theme song relies on the orchestration. Because, in the alternate intro for this, you know, where they have the charity instead of the full credits, it's just played on piano. And from the first couple notes, it is like you are in a dentist's office.

[West Wing theme on piano excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, I wrote down, "Maudlin version of *The West Wing* theme."

HRISHI: Right. Or I thought, "Muzak." The notes are all the same [laughing] but when you play, like, the piano-bar version of it versus the powerful orchestra version of it, there's a huge difference. And I thought that's... There's some greater metaphor there as well, that even if the notes are the same, how you choose to set it up and present those notes [cross talk] makes an enormous difference.

JOSH: [cross talk] Right. You can vitiate the power of it.

JOSH: Yeah, I wrote down, actually, even going back to the PSA, it sounds like [theme music excerpt plays underneath] "The More You Know," NBC's PSA theme.

HRISHI: Exactly. What did you think about the Charlie part about gangs?

[West Wing Episode 3.00 excerpt]

CHARLIE: Gangs give you a sense of belonging, and usually an income. But mostly they give you a sense of dignity.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I thought that was really interesting too. I thought it was interesting in terms of both the idea of giving some insight and humanity to people who would join a terrorist cell, as well as, like, the metaphor that he's actually using, about people who are in gangs because [cross talk] it gives you a sense of dignity. [cross talk] That was the word that he said, that they give you a sense of dignity. I thought that was really, incredibly poignant.

JOSH: [cross talk] Inclusion.

JOSH: [cross talk] Yeah.

JOSH: Yeah, I agree with you. I like the content of it. It was another one of those moments where he strolled in just ready to go off, and I liked the content of what he had to say. But, again, I bump on the kind of credibility of the moment as it plays out. I mean, I guess a lot of this episode ends up making me feel like, "Wow, there was a really great episode to be done here with a couple weeks more time." Or, you know, it's the exigencies of having to get this out as the

first episode of the season, I think, limited what they ultimately did with it.

HRISHI: Right. One line, specifically, that has changed for me in the way I hear it now versus the way I heard it then. When I heard it then I was like, “Oh, snap! That is so good.” And now I’m like, “Wow, that was a convoluted setup.” Which was the line where one of the students says...

[West Wing Episode 3.00 excerpt]

STUDENT: What do you call a society that has to just live every day with the idea that the pizza place you’re eating in could just blow up without any warning?

SAM: Israel.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: The setup is rough. [laughing]

HRISHI: Yeah, that is like you are walking me down the gangplank to get to the punch line.

JOSH: I guess in a way some of my complaints about this episode really just highlight how great the show usually is. The art is normally a bit more subtly executed on *The West Wing*, and so when it’s not, you really notice it. I watch an episode of *The West Wing*, and I judge it against *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: Yeah. It’s hard not to when it takes the form of a *West Wing* episode.

JOSH: Indeed.

HRISHI: It would be like somebody watching the “knowing is half the battle” PSAs from G.I. Joe and saying, “That was a terrible episode of G.I. Joe.”

JOSH: Well, there you go. Yeah.

HRISHI: How do you feel about apples and peanut butter?

JOSH: Even that annoyed me.

HRISHI: [laughing] I thought it would.

JOSH: [laughing] Did you?

HRISHI: And I like apples and peanut butter. But even I was like, come on.

JOSH: Ugh, and then we’ve got to watch them all eat them.

HRISHI: [laughing]

JOSH: Richard Schiff. It’s almost, it’s something... I know I’ve overly sensitive to it, but I don’t like the rock star, like, getting to sit there, kind of have a little snack in front of you and just reel off this stuff that somehow I have right at the tip of my tongue.

HRISHI: [laughing]

JOSH: It just bugs me.

HRISHI: [laughing] That is amazing, because I did not, I didn't even catch that. I didn't pay attention to the fact that he was eating apples and peanut butter, [cross talk] like, I...

JOSH: [cross talk] Oh, yeah. And then C.J. does it too, and they're just sort of like...

HRISHI: That's funny.

JOSH: Look how [expletive deleted] cool [cross talk] I am. I can snack while I lay down some knowledge.

HRISHI: [cross talk] I didn't notice it this time.

HRISHI: Because I liked the idea... I liked the original version introduction of it where Josh says, "Why don't we get these guys some apples and peanut butter? I've gotten whole pieces of legislation through Congress on apples and peanut butter." I thought that was, like, the kind of wonderful detail that I want from *The West Wing*. But then, oh, it turns out the president likes apples and peanut butter too, and [laughing] everybody likes apples and peanut butter. It's just...

JOSH: This episode brought to you by the apple and peanut butter association.

HRISHI: [laughing]

JOSH: I also think it's right around, this is right around Rosh Hashanah, where apples and honey... The Jewish New Year is right around this time [cross talk] in the fall, and apples and honey figure as a symbolic way to almost toast to what we hope is the sweetness of the new year.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yes.

HRISHI: Yes, and I am very grateful to my friends — sorry, my Jewish friends — [laughing] for introducing that to me [laughing].

JOSH: This might not be worthy of mention; this might be playing the "no, I'm a bigger victim" game. But I didn't love the moment when Toby drew the parallel — the Taliban to the Nazis in Poland, and citizens of Afghanistan to Jews in concentration camps. I thought that one was slightly off. But, again, maybe I'm being overly sensitive on behalf of my own people.

HRISHI: It's interesting that you brought that up because there's a writer named Tamim Ansary. And in the same week as the 9/11 attack — it was Friday, September 14 in 2001 — he wrote an article for *Salon* speaking as an Afghan-American about the American attitude toward Afghanistan. I'm just going to read a little bit of it, but he says:

"I speak as one who hates the Taliban and Osama bin Laden."

HRISHI: And we'll link to this in the shout-outs. And he says, you know, people have been talking about bombing Afghanistan back to the Stone Age, and some say, Why don't the

Afghans rise up and overthrow the Taliban. And he says:

“The answer is they’re starved, exhausted, hurt, incapacitated, suffering. A few years ago, the United Nations estimated there are 500,000 disabled orphans in Afghanistan, a country with no economy, no food. There are millions of widows. And the Taliban has been burying these widows alive in mass graves.”

HRISHI: And it was in this article he says, “When you think Taliban, think Nazis. When you think bin Laden, think Hitler.” And I’m pretty sure... It’s pretty well acknowledged, I think, that that was the inspiration for that.

JOSH: For Aaron’s use of it.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: That’s the aspect of the analogy that I liked more. The part that got my back up a little bit was “citizens of Afghanistan to Jews in concentration camps.”

HRISHI: Yeah?

JOSH: Yeah. It’s just a subtlety of difference that I think is worth noting. I don’t know, I don’t know if that aspect of the analogy that Toby makes entirely holds up.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: That said, also I think maybe if he was going to use this analogy, a little bit more of what Tamim wrote in it would have been useful. [cross talk] A greater explication of what he was going for.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yes.

HRISHI: That’s true. There’s definitely...

JOSH: I’m not being articulate.

HRISHI: No, but I... It feels like some context is being taken out in order to have the more dramatic punch.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: And, again, as far as PSAs go, that is a very worthwhile PSA, and certainly... Twenty million people watched *The West Wing*. Twenty million people did not read the Ansary piece in *Salon*. But yeah, at the price of the rest of the, the other five paragraphs surrounding those sentences.

JOSH: One other quick thing where... You know, Sam at one point during the episode says, “Terrorism always fails.” And I wrote, “Does it?”

HRISHI: Yeah, that... I did not buy that argument [cross talk] that there’s a 100 percent failure rate, because if your intention... I mean, he seems to be measuring it based on a criteria that doesn’t apply to terrorists. You know, like, they’re not out there nation-building and trying to

create government entities. You know, that seems to be the kind of... He's looking at wins the way that a traditional government might.

JOSH: [cross talk] No.

JOSH: Yeah, that's true. I think that's part of the problem in combating it. Just what the objectives or goals of the terrorists are in contrast to what we think they are, and keeping people in terror is one of the end games of terrorism, in which case it's almost always successful.

HRISHI: I also think that it takes a huge amount of arrogance to put terrorism in a kind of basis that leaves America completely out of it. Because, like, even this idea of "What do you call a society where you don't know if the pizza place is gonna blow up?" Like, when the idea of air strikes and collateral damage and the amount of completely innocent bystanders who have been killed by American forces or American drones — to say that that is absolutely unrelated to terror — if you're someone who lives there, and things are getting blown up around you for reasons that have nothing to do with you, because somebody's trying to make a political point or seize some kind of power from somebody else, it seems incredibly short-sighted to demarcate terrorism from acts of war in a way that they are separate, and we're on one side and these guys are on the other.

JOSH: Wow. You make a very good point, and chillingly, it overlaps with some of the justification of the Oklahoma bomber in his act. [cross talk] Again, not to justify it or create equivalence, but part of his argument — and this is where it gets really uncomfortable when you sometimes see some merit in the argument of somebody who's done something colossally horrible. But part of what he said... You know, he was making similar points in American acts of war and the death of innocents compared to his act of what is universally accepted as terrorism.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah.

HRISHI: Right. And Sam even makes the... There's even this distinction here about like, "Weren't we terrorists at the Boston Tea Party?" And Sam says... This, by the way...

JOSH: Yeah, he really shrugs that one off, right?

HRISHI: Ahh... The way he says...

[West Wing Episode 3.00 excerpt]

SAM: The only people who got hurt were some fancy boys didn't have anything to wash down their crumpets with.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: The line is silly, but the delivery of it really annoys me. It's almost like he dips for a second into like, a George W. Bush-Texan kind of delivery for that one line. I was just like, what is that?

JOSH: Right. But also the content of it is, "Well I don't care about those people who took a hit." [cross talk] And it's not, whatever... It's not murder there; there are differences. But what he's saying is, "Oh, but I don't care about those people." Which, of course, is, [cross talk] what... All this stuff is about is perspective.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

HRISHI: Despite this not being necessarily a terrific episode of *The West Wing*... I don't have to say "necessarily." This is not the best episode of *The West Wing*. It's neat to think about the difference between the value of something versus its quality. That something doesn't have to be the highest quality to have incredibly high value. And I appreciate this episode for its value, even just, like, being able to have this kind of rich conversation with you.

JOSH: Very well articulated. Yeah.

HRISHI: Ok, let's take a quick break, and when we come back we'll talk to former White House Press Secretary Mike McCurry.

[sponsor break]

HRISHI: Joining us now is Mike McCurry. For three and a half years, he served as the press secretary for President Bill Clinton. He's now professor of public theology at Wesley Theological Seminary, focusing on the discourse between politics and religion. Mike, thanks so much for joining us.

MIKE MCCURRY: Great to be with you.

HRISHI: Had you seen this episode before? Did you happen to see it in the wake of 9/11 when it first aired?

MIKE: Oh, I remember distinctly seeing it when it first aired. Now, before we had a chance to talk, I went back and looked at it again. And it's just so amazing how relevant it is today and, of course, how incredibly relevant it was in the aftermath of 9/11. I consider it an extraordinary piece of journalism as much as entertainment, just because it was dealing with the issues that were sort of at the heart of what the country was worried about in the aftermath of that attack.

JOSH: And it's interesting you mentioned its timelessness, and as we discuss this now we're getting updates of a potential terrorist act that happened outside the houses of British Parliament this morning. And during your time at the White House, did you experience this kind of crash scenario and lockdown?

MIKE: No, we actually had one or two drills, but it's just, like, you know, it's kind of like doing fire drills when you're in elementary school; everyone sort of goofed off. [laughing] There's a super-secret mountain that's off in the hills of Virginia where we would all go to if there was a nuclear attack, and they gave us different scenarios about what would happen, how we would evacuate the White House. But they gave us scenarios so if we had happened to be in the middle of the night and we were at home, that we would get this emergency call. We were to leave our families and go to a designated point where we would be airlifted off and, you know, the implausibility of that, like saying, "Ok, we're going to all be annihilated by nuclear war, so I'm going to leave my family and my kids now." You know, give me a break. [laughing]

HRISHI: I'm really curious about the transition that happened between serving as press secretary and now being a professor of public theology. We wanted to talk to you about this episode specifically because of that, this idea of the discourse between politics and religion. But

maybe before we get into that in the context of the episode, could you fill us in on how you went from the White House to your current professorship?

MIKE: Yeah, well, it's a simple story. When I got out of the White House... I had always been active in my local Methodist church here in suburban Maryland. And my pastor said, "Well, now that you've finished that job as White House press secretary, we actually have a real job for you to do."

HRISHI: [laughing]

MIKE: "We want you to be in charge of our Sunday school." And I said, "Wow, I'm very flattered. Why did you pick me?" And he said, "Well to be honest, we haven't been able to get anyone to take that job for 10 years." [laughing] So anyhow, I got involved in my local church and one thing led to another. I showed up at Wesley Seminary to get some training in Christian education so I'd at least have an idea of what I was doing. And I was recruited by the then-president of the seminary and his executive assistant to get active on their board of governors. So I actually served on the board of governors at Wesley Theological Seminary and got more and more interested in what we were doing there, and decided to take courses, ended up getting a master's degree in theology, and then we had a vacancy on our faculty in this area that we call public theology, which is, How do faith traditions have a really direct measured impact on public policy, politics, governance. Which if you think about it is right at the heart of what this episode, "Isaac and Ishmael," is about.

JOSH: Had you felt previously in your political life that you had had to compartmentalize your own faith, separate from your political life? Or was that something always integrated?

MIKE: I did, you know, it's really interesting. I didn't, you know, wander around the White House bragging about what a Christian I was. In fact, I probably didn't talk about it much. And interestingly, I sat next to George Stephanopoulos throughout the entire 1996 campaign. He was my seatmate on Air Force One and in the motorcades. He's the son of a Greek Orthodox priest, and in his book *All Too Human* he really writes a lot about his own spiritual struggles. And yet I thought about it... I told him one time, I said, you know, "We sat and talked about everything under the sun for a whole year while we were traveling around the country, but we never really talked about how our faith informs what we felt we were doing at the White House." And I said I guess I didn't really think about it too much because, to be honest, Sunday was my day off. But in retrospect, you know, some of the values and what we were dealing with — and you remember we had some fairly zesty material to deal with during the Clinton [cross talk] White House years. So, you know, telling the truth, and the nature of human relationships and how they can go wrong and how they can be corrupted sometimes — those are all pretty profound issues.

HRISHI: [cross talk] [laughing]

HRISHI: Well, looking at this episode, when you're thinking about it now as a professor, do you feel like there are any lessons that you use yourself when you're teaching? Or are there any things that they say that you would disagree with?

MIKE: Well, there's a lot that rings true. Now, remember I'm teaching at a seminary that's obviously a Christian institution. One of the things that we try to get our students to understand, that maybe while we are passionately Christian in our faith perspective, we also have to be compassionately interfaith. And I think one of the primary messages of this episode is really... It

kind of starts with Josh on the white board saying...

[West Wing Episode 3.00 excerpt]

JOSH: Islamic extremist is to Islamic as blank is to Christianity.

[end excerpt]

MIKE: He fills it in with “KKK,” so that there’s extremism in any faith tradition, and we have to understand how that corrupts some of the basic sanctity of these religious traditions. But the message at the end, which comes through very clearly is...

[West Wing Episode 3.00 excerpt]

JOSH: Remember pluralism. You want to get these people? I mean, you really want to reach in and kill them where they live? Keep accepting more than one idea.

[end excerpt]

MIKE: And I think we have to keep testing, you know, what our faith beliefs are against what we see in the wider world around us. We believe what we believe in the context of how we intersect with people in other communities and from other nations and in other faiths. And that we have to keep our minds open about that and not become rigid and not succumb to hatred and division and sectarianism.

HRISHI: You talked a little bit about pluralism and how that’s an important tenet. Wesley is Methodist, right?

MIKE: Yes — Methodist-affiliated, although we’ve got different denominations.

HRISHI: How do you account within pluralism for a point of view — maybe even a point of view that’s based in Christianity — that is fundamentally close-minded to pluralism, if that makes sense? How do you make room for people who have decided not to make room for other points of view?

MIKE: Well, that’s a very good question because lurking behind that question is the fact that sometimes religion is used as a political weapon in our politics. And I like to remind my students that the example that we have is of Jesus himself, who was, you know — sent his disciples to all nations, and very specifically rejected the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the people who were insisting on strict adherence to the law and were not open-minded. And he congregated and associated with people who were, you know, sometimes dissenters. You know, looking at that example kind of introduces you to a new flavor of Christianity that I think is important. But every religion has got its purists and its orthodoxy and the people who, you know, insist on strict adherence to dogma, and that’s... I think we try to overcome by teaching people to be a little more open-minded.

HRISHI: Does it feel at all like a contradiction for you — and I’m speaking here as an atheist — when one of the tenets of religions is that there’s some aspect of truth being taught, the things that people believe. If you’re a Christian and you believe that Jesus Christ was the incarnation of God, the Son of God who walked on earth, doesn’t that necessarily kind of exclude the possibility of the validity of other religions? How do you balance these things teaching pluralism

in your classes, while still holding the idea that Christian truth and the Gospel is truth, but that there are other truths that are also possibly true? [laughing]

MIKE: Well, that's a great question. Now, we... As the Apostle Paul wrote, we see through a glass darkly, because we really cannot be certain — that's what the nature of faith is. It's the belief in the things that are unknown. It's why in the Christian liturgy we always talk about the mystery of faith, because we don't understand these things. There's nothing about... The vast traditions in the major religions have got all some concept of a divine, some concept of a way in which we relate to something that's larger than our individuated selves. These are things that are not exclusively Christian. They are reflected in Buddhism, they are reflected certainly in the Abraham traditions that we've talked about, the Jewish faith, and Islam. But respect for that comes from all understanding that at the end of the day, we are creatures of a God who created us in God's image. And that's a beautiful and powerful thought, and I, you know, we believe as Christians that there is an access point into that divine relationship that comes to us because God came to us in the human form of someone named Jesus. Now, you know, you don't have to buy that to be a good person. You know, anyone who says that they're an atheist or agnostic, it's not like... We don't say you're wrong or, you know, we don't castigate those people and cast them out as devils or something. Although, actually, you know, in truth sometimes that has happened. But I think we also sort of say it's too bad that you're missing something we think is precious, and, I mean, that's the way we approach it. And I hope we don't do that in a way that sounds dogmatic or heavy-handed because that's not what I think pure religious belief is about. You got a whole sermon there! I'm sorry. [laughing]

HRISHI: [laughing]

JOSH: [laughing] No, that was fantastic. I was going to say a brief shout-out to the Jews. We have a concept in this area of the Sheva Mitzvot B'nei Noach, which is the Seven Laws of the Sons of Noah. And this is considered how the rest of humanity aside from the Jews are, I guess, judged, if you will, or what is expected of them. And the idea is that they are still bound to the same moral laws, but it's not expected of non-Jews to worship in the same way, if I'm articulating it correctly.

MIKE: Now, there's another thing that we draw from, you know, the Hebrew tradition, which is "hesed" — the idea of the unmerited and uncompromising love that God has for us, which we then turn into another great Hebrew concept, "tzedakah," which is really righteousness. And what is so beautiful about tzedakah really is, How do you relate to others if you are reflecting this love — this hesed love — that's eternal from God? How is that then reflected in how you relate in your community?

HRISHI: So, let's get back to the episode for a second. Are there any moments that didn't strike you as well-done when you watched it this time?

MIKE: The episode opens with the moment...

[West Wing Episode 3.00 excerpt]

JOSH: When did this get on my schedule?

DONNA: It's been there.

JOSH: No it hasn't, it just... There isn't anybody else who can do this?

DONNA: *It's supposed to be you.*

[end excerpt]

MIKE: Man, that rang so true to me. [laughing] Because there are a lot of times when, you know, you're roped into something that you didn't necessarily want to have to go do. But then you go ahead and do it, and, like, it's what happens here, of course, it opens up... He becomes a great teacher for these students. They have this incredible experience because they're locked in together. And that always has struck me as being the strength of this program generally. It presents really very believable interactions when it's the staff relating to the staff. Can I tell you guys one other really interesting story? Because one time the cast came, most of the central characters came, and they shadowed their counterparts for a day. So Allison kind of walked around with me, came to the briefing, and she was a much bigger hit at the White House briefing that day than I was. At the end of the day I, you know, I was a little bit pumped up with myself, and I said, "Well, you must have really enjoyed hanging out with the real press secretary today." [cross talk] And she kind of nodded and had a nice smile on her face. But she then said, "Well you know, we were talking to each other — the cast members were talking to each other — we got a lot more out of talking to your deputies and to your assistants, because they have a little more of that fresh idealism that we bring to our characters." I just thought that was one of the most interesting observations — that we were a little too cynical and hard-bitten in Washington, like, for, you know, what they were looking for.

HRISHI: [cross talk] [laughing]

HRISHI: That's funny. That is a really interesting idea. I was just wondering if you could put your original watching of this episode into some historical context. Do you remember where you were when you saw it? What was your life like around the time of 9/11?

MIKE: Well, I had, you know, I left the White House at the end of 1998, and I was beginning to settle into a role as a Washington consultant trying to make a little more money, but I was also traveling a lot, because of... You get your 15 minutes of fame working at the White House and that entitles you to go out and give speeches to the International Widget Association for a good chunk of money. [cross talk] So I had been traveling a lot. And, of course, one of the immediate things that happened in the aftermath of 9/11 is the almost complete shutdown of the air traffic system in America. I remember my first thought, you know, after 9/11 and what happened, was I'm not going to be going anywhere for a while. And I think for that very reason, I mean, I used to... This was in the old days of VCRs, and I used to tape *The West Wing* and then watch it when I was back home after traveling or something. But I remember, you know, sitting and watching the show. And my kids at that point were old enough — my oldest son was like, in fifth grade. I remember watching it with him and just how taken he was by — because of the students that were in the class. Now he would have been younger than the Presidential Classroom kids that are in this episode. But he had many of the same questions. Because it was so current and so vivid and, you know, the wounds of 9/11 were so fresh, it was just... I just remember being overwhelmed by the episode itself, you know, saying, "Wow, that was really, really extraordinary." Remember, you watched the show in the context of who was president at the time, and this episode aired at the moment in which the country really rallied behind George Bush. You know, most of the time we sit around thinking, "Why can't we have a president like Jed Bartlet?" But that happened to be a moment in which Bush, I think, had probably as high a popularity rating as he ever had through the remainder of his presidency, because he probably went pretty much downhill after that.

JOSH: [cross talk] Hah.

HRISHI: Well, speaking of President Bush's popularity, there's a part where C.J. in this episode, basically prefigures the Patriot Act...

[West Wing Episode 3.00 excerpt]

C.J.: Look, I take civil liberties as seriously as anybody, ok? I've been to the dinners. And we haven't even talked about free speech yet and somebody getting lynched by the patriotism police for voicing a minority opinion. That said, Tobus, we're going to have to do some stuff, we're going to have to tap some phones, and we're going to have to partner with some people who are the lesser of evils.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I know you said that the crashes you guys did were just drills, but were these discussions happening while you were in the White House as well — the idea of possibly invading people's civil liberties for the sake of national security?

MIKE: Yes, there were significant debates but they kind of ran in the opposite direction which is in the name of, you know... Of course, remember 9/11 had not happened yet. We had had episodes of terrorism; we had had the Murrah Building bombing in Oklahoma City. We had, you know... Our terrorism was more domestic. And there were huge debates in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing about how far should we go in allowing law enforcement to really penetrate extremist groups in the United States. In most of our debates, you know, we were good civil libertarians for the most part. So most of it was being very, very cautious about giving unbridled power to law enforcement agencies to do surveillance of people. But you're right, in this episode C.J. makes a really, you know, very, very blunt appeal: Why do we have intelligence? She kind of is very, very gung-ho. I mean, she's pretty adamant about it.

HRISHI: Yeah, and that's what I found so interesting — trying to reconcile her views in this episode with what we know about C.J., and really the liberal administration of President Bartlet in general. I was trying to figure out if this seemed like it was out of character for C.J., and if she was giving a speech that didn't quite mesh with what I knew of her. Or maybe you could tell me if it seems like, in the wake of 9/11, yeah, you saw people — Democrats who were civil libertarians — who were changing their views and really running the other way towards protection at all costs.

MIKE: Well, you know, remember there was a lot of anger in the country in the aftermath of 9/11. I think that this episode is very careful about provoking that. But there were people who were, you know... We were ready to go to war, we were going to go find the bad guys and get them, and strike back, and the law of vengeance would prevail.

HRISHI: That wasn't something that was divided along partisan lines?

MIKE: No. It was not a universal feeling, and it was felt more strongly probably in some corridors than others. And there were some people who, you know, really wanted to kill the bad guys and go get the terrorists and hold them accountable. And then there were other people who maybe were a little more moderate in what they thought the retaliation should be. But people wanted, you know, people wanted either to be — to get some kind of guarantee that they were going to be made safer and this would never happen again, or they really wanted retribution for this act

of violence that, you know, had really given America the worst moment in some ways it has had since Pearl Harbor. And that's what, frankly, is what makes this episode so brilliant. Because it doesn't scratch any of those itches deliberately, but it really accounts for what the mood in the country was during that particular moment.

JOSH: Yeah, that's what I was going to say, that it's such an audacious endeavor within a month of this massive attack, to be creating a piece of art that speaks on behalf of moderation, at that time. I mean even, you know, 16 years later, we're still having the debate and the discussion. But to so quickly have put out a message of tolerance is really quite an achievement.

MIKE: Yeah, and the other extraordinary moment for me in that episode is, you know, President Bartlet has only a brief encounter...

[West Wing Episode 3.00 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: A martyr would rather suffer death at the hands of an oppressor than renounce his beliefs. Killing yourself and innocent people to make a point is sick, twisted, brutal, dumb-ass murder. Let me leave you with this thought before I go searching for the apples that were rightfully mine. We don't need martyrs right now. We need heroes. A hero would die for his country, but he'd much rather live for it.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: One thing I really appreciate from this conversation is one of the first things that you said, Mike, where you called this episode "journalism." I think that there have been a lot of different views of the value of this episode — people have criticized it for how different it is from regular *West Wing* episodes. I'd never thought of it that way, that it could function as journalism, but I think that's a really fascinating interpretation. Mike, this has been awesome. Thank you so much for talking to us.

JOSH: A great conversation.

MIKE: Well, it was great being with you guys.

JOSH: And that's it for this episode of *The West Wing Weekly*. Thanks for joining us.

HRISHI: If you want to talk to us about this episode — I'm sure you have a lot to say, as we did — you can leave a comment for us on our website, thewestwingweekly.com. Or on our Facebook page, facebook.com/thewestwingweekly.

JOSH: You can follow us on Twitter. Hrishi's @HrishiHirway. I'm @JoshMalina. The show is @WestWingWeekly.

HRISHI: And our guest, Mike McCurry, is on Twitter, @MMcCurry, but he has a protected account so you'd have to request access to follow what he says.

JOSH: Give it a shot.

HRISHI: So, I'm not really sure what his status is.

JOSH: [laughing]

HRISHI: But @MMcCurry.

JOSH: The West Wing Weekly is a proud member of Radiotopia, a curated collection of the very best podcasts.

HRISHI: It's a project of PRX, and it's made possible from a grant from the Knight Foundation, and from support from listeners like you. Learn more at radiotopia.fm.

JOSH: There are some nice ways to support the endeavor that is The West Wing Weekly podcast. You can go buy a pin at westwingweekly.com/pin. There will be other merch available in the weeks to come. You can make a donation at our website at westwingweekly.com/donate.

HRISHI: It's April now, and if you're listening to this and you have any relatives who are graduating from high school or from college, the pin makes a fantastic gift. It's smart and sophisticated and sharp, and it asks the question that they need to be asking anyway: "What's next?"

JOSH: God, you're good.

HRISHI: [laughing] This show is produced by my co-host, Josh Malina, and myself, Hrishikesh Hirway, with help from Zach McNees and [audio clip of Leo shouting "Margaret!"] Miller.

JOSH: If you like what you're hearing, you can go to iTunes and give us a nice 5-star review — that would be appreciated. If you don't like what you're hearing but continue to listen, your name is Logan.

HRISHI: [laughing]

JOSH: And I'll see you on our website.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

AJAY AND MIKE: What's next?

[Outro Music]