

The West Wing Weekly
3.19: Enemies Foreign and Domestic
Guest: 99% Invisible

[Intro Music]

JOSH: You're listening to *The West Wing Weekly*, I'm Joshua Malina, the co-host of this podcast.

HRISHI: And I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Wait, what was that?

JOSH: You obviously didn't watch the 'Previously on *The West Wing*'

HRISHI: Oh right [laughter]

JOSH: It was one of those, I don't know how they decide, 'Every 25 episodes, let's cut together a reel where every single member of the cast of characters announces what his or her job is.'

[West Wing Episode 3:19 excerpt]

LEO: I'm Leo McGarry, White House Chief of Staff.

CHARLIE: Well, I'm personal aide to the president.

TOBY: I'm a speechwriter.

JOSH: I'm the Deputy Chief of Staff.

DONNA: Which I guess makes me Deputy, Deputy Chief of Staff.

C.J.: I'm the (Trails off)

[End excerpt]

HRISHI: Right, sorry OK, and I'm Hrishikesh Hirway, Deputy, Deputy co-host of this podcast.

JOSH: There, you did watch it didn't you?

HRISHI: I actually wrote down, 'Josh's favourite kind of cold open.'

JOSH: It plays a little bit like a comedy. I mean it's cut together so quickly and it's so obvious what the expository needs are that are being met that it makes me laugh.

HRISHI: As I said before, many of my favourite episodes on *The West Wing* began with these kinds of generic introduction of the characters for the cold open because it means that it's more likely to be a standalone episode.

JOSH: Ahh, that's a very good point.

HRISHI: uh-huh.

JOSH: I wish other shows would do that though. 'I'm Khaleesi, my kids are dragons.' Just the idea of every single person introducing themselves.

HRISHI: I'm Tyrion, Deputy, Deputy Khaleesi. Today we're talking about the episode "Enemies Foreign and Domestic" from season three. It's episode 18 or 19 depending on how you want to enumerate your episodes from the season.

JOSH: It first aired on May 1st 2002. It was written by Paul Redford and, not ampersand, but the word 'and' Aaron Sorkin. And it was directed by Alex Graves.

HRISHI: Here's a little recap of the episode. I'm going to break it down by character. C.J. calls out Saudi Arabia in a press briefing and gets hate mail as a result, including a very serious death threat. While all this is going on there is a summit happening in Helsinki which will include the first meeting of President Bartlet with the new Russian President Chigorin. So Sam is meeting with a Russian logistical negotiating team to try and figure out the protocol details. Toby is trying to get press credentials for a Russian reporter who's been critical of the new Chigorin administration. And while this is going on it turns out the Russians seem to be helping Iranians build a reactor to make Plutonium. So the President, Josh, Leo, and Fitz are all trying to deal with that. Separate from all of these other plots Carlie is trying to solve the mystery of a letter that was sent to the President and he can't figure out exactly what's going on.

JOSH: I didn't remember any of those strands so that was a good little refresher for me.

HRISHI: When I was watching this episode, I had forgotten that all these different storylines appeared in the same episode because for me there are so many big ones happening at the same time. I started watching and I was like, this is the episode where this happens, well this is the episode with the death threat. And I was, Oh right, this is also the episode- I didn't even mention in the recap about Anteras the computer company. I don't know if you remember when we were doing the US Poet Laureate, in the synopsis for that one from [Crosstalk] Warner Brothers.

JOSH: [Crosstalk] Oh Right.

HRISHI: There was a little mention of the President contemplating bailing out a computer company and I was like, 'Oh that's not for this episode,' it's for this episode. So that's happening on top of it. There's so many storylines in this episode and so many really good ones.

JOSH: Yeah, I agree, this one snuck up on me. I kind of was watching it and before I knew it there were several, palpable significant strands and storylines happening. It kind of crept up on me. It's the kind of thing where even what I'd file away as the sort of comic C plot of Sam chatting with these two Russian guys in the Roosevelt room/

[West Wing Episode 3:19 excerpt]

NIKOLAI: Why must every American President bound out of an automobile like as at a yacht club? While in comparison our leader looks like, I don't even know what word is.

SAM: *Frumpy?*

NIKOLAI: *I don't know what frumpy is but onomatopoeically sounds right.*

SAM: *It's hard not to like a guy who doesn't know what frumpy is but knows onomatopoeia.*

[End excerpt]

JOSH: Also that turns out to be incredibly significant and powerful and dramatic which I did not see coming at all. I thought it was funny and the language play is hilarious and I loved it.

HRISHI: Right

JOSH: But I did not remember, if I have seen this episode before, I didn't remember that it pays off in the huge significant and dramatic way at the end. Very, very clever, catches you off-guard.

HRISHI: It absolutely seems like it's another instance of a season three Sam comic relief subplot.

JOSH: Yeah, it almost plays off of the expectation that's been built up by past episodes because normally that is what this would be.

HRISHI: Exactly.

JOSH: This would be the, just sort of, OK lets a little air out, gives Sam a little something to do. We get our laughs, you got a good guest actor, and it's just kind of, we've seen it before.

HRISHI: Yeah. I feel like there was another example of this when we had Bob Angler where again it seems like it's going to be played for a joke because he's a UFO conspiracy theorist but then it ended up having this emotional chord to it. Here, there is a similar, like you said, there is a similar sneak attack where it seems like it's going to be a joke but then it really ties into everything in a substantive way.

JOSH: Yeah, it's a good Sorkin sucker-punch. Or Sorkin-Redford, or Redford-Sorkin.

HRISHI: You mentioned the guest acting in this episode, let's talk about that. Let's talk about Sam meeting with Ian McShane.

JOSH: Ian McShane, fantastic actor, I enjoy hearing his Russian accent.

HRISHI: This was interesting to me, Ian McShane is an English actor playing a Russian here and I started thinking about how often I see movies where Russian characters are played by non-Russians. So here Ian McShane is playing a Russian, then I was thinking about Viggo Mortensen gives a fantastic performance in Eastern Promises.

JOSH: Yes, very, very naked.

HRISHI: Very naked.

JOSH: I remember that well, because, he was very naked. But also on one plane ride, I watched that movie, and the movie *Bronson* with Tom Hardy, both of which feature significant full-frontal male nudity. I don't like to watch anything I might be embarrassed by [Crosstalk] That I might be embarrassed to have someone else, exactly, observe.

HRISHI: [Crosstalk] On a plane

JOSH: *Game of Thrones*, I'm kind of half closing my computer so I can watch certain scenes. And then this one I was like I like movies with male nudity, judge me if you must. These are fine films

HRISHI: So Viggo Mortensen is a Dane and he plays a Russian in *Eastern Promises*. And then I was remembering in *John Wick*, Martin [Name incorrect- actor's name is Michael] Myqvist, who is a Swede, may he rest in peace he just passed away recently, he plays a Russian named Viggo.

JOSH: Oh is that right?

HRISHI: Yeah, And then in *John Wick 2*, Viggo's brother is played by Peter Stormare, another Swede.

JOSH: Interesting. I wonder if there is a gang of Moscow art theatre actors who are pissed that they can't play Russians in American films?

HRISHI: I would imagine that to be the case. I mean I would be.

JOSH: I suspect so. While we're on names, do you know the name of the character that Ian McShane plays and any possible significance?

HRISHI: Oh I definitely won't know the significance. I'm not even sure that I can actually remember his name.

JOSH: As spoken by Sam in that, I think ultimate scene in the Oval, his name is Nikolai Ivanovich.

HRISHI: Ivanovich, that's right, yeah.

JOSH: Which, this is pure conjecture, but I've got to believe is a reference to the Tom Lehrer song *Lobachevsky*. Are you a Tom Lehrer fan?

HRISHI: I'm not familiar with his work.

JOSH: OK, so first of all, it's music so you'll hate it, even though you're a musician, but it's not a musical per-se. There he remains, Tom Lehrer, Harvard professor of mathematics and then I think he actually also taught Musical Theatre and had quite the musical career in the 50's and 60's, I would say, composing and performing incredibly funny.

HRISHI: Oh my God.

JOSH: What?

HRISHI: I'm just reading that he sets the names of the chemical elements to the Major General song from the Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance*. I mean this really sounds like my Kryptonite.

JOSH: I will be shocked if you don't actually like, when you listen to Tom Lehrer's work, if you don't like his work. It's dark and it's political and it's biting and still relevant and hilarious today. I've actually been listening again because there are all sorts of songs of his that are apt for this moment in American politics. I think you will actually love his work. Are you a Randy Newman fan?

HRISHI: Eh.

JOSH: Oh God.

HRISHI: Hold on, I'm going to write a Randy Newman song right now [a note plays in the background, Hrishu puts on a gravelly voice] 'Me and Josh we're singing a song'

JOSH: Wow. That's what you think of Randy Newman. Wow.

HRISHI: [same voice] Hey, hey, hey.

JOSH: Wow, you know, I don't have the musical vocabulary to fight back other than to say you're wrong and the things I'm saying are good are good and of value. A friend to the podcast Tommy Kail said he would come in some time and

HRISHI: Fight me?

JOSH: Basically yes. And discuss music and musical theatre and hopefully beat you down with his talent and knowledge. I want that to happen soon.

HRISHI: I'm open to it.

JOSH: Anyway the whole point I was trying to get to is that Lehrer has one song that he sings as if he is a great Russian mathematician, Nikolai Ivanovich Lobachevsky, and he talks about having learned that the path to success in mathematics is plagiarism and it's a very funny song. We'll drop in a little bit here.

[Audio clip; song]

TOM LEHRER: Plagiarise, plagiarise, plagiarise. Only be sure always to please call it, research. And ever since I meet this man my life is not the same and Nikolai Ivanovich Lobachevsky is his name. Ai, Nikolai Ivanovich...

[End clip]

HRISHI: There are a lot musical references just in the cold open. C.J. goes full Marks brothers.

[*West Wing* Episode 3:19 excerpt]

SAM: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania.

C.J.: Not Fredonia, We're gonna leave Fredonia out there?

TOBY: Point is the zero option is off the table.

C.J.: Hooray for Captain's father.

[End Clip]

JOSH: Please don't tell me you don't appreciate the Marks Brothers?

HRISHI: Of course I do.

JOSH: Alright.

HRISHI: I do have a sense of humor.

JOSH: That I know.

HRISHI: In the cold open, we have Carol, she's really the person who pulls the story and bring it to C.J.. She's really the person who sets off the chain of events so if C.J. dies, Carol it's on you.

JOSH: Yeah, it's on Carol. It's a nice opening on our friend Melissa Fitz.

HRISHI: Yeah it is.

JOSH: The whole show, the whole launch of the episode is, it's on Carol.

HRISHI: She is no nonsense in this episode.

[*West Wing* Episode 3:19 excerpt]

CAROL: Whoever is on the printer, get off. Now!

[End clip]

JOSH: Actually I also thought there was a fine performance from the offstage voice. It's just something funny about it

[*West Wing* Episode 3:19 excerpt]

Unknown male voice: That's me.

[End clip]

HRISHI: It's the guy who says

[West Wing Episode 2:13 excerpt]

MALE VOICE: *Sam Seaborn, everybody.*

[End clip]

JOSH: I think it is the same guy and you know what, he's good.

HRISHI: Mr Helfer?

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: There is a moment when, just to stay with Carol, even though I'm jumping way ahead, when Simon Donovan the secret service agent first shows up in C.J.'s office. C.J.'s kind of giving him a bit of a hard time as he says he knew that she was going to be reluctant. But what's great is Carol is right there with her. She doesn't say anything but she comes in, hands something to C.J. and as she walks by it's just a little moment of non-verbal acting but she just gives a withering look to Mark Harmon as she passes by him. I love it. It's just, it's a great stink eye. I'm going to try and take a still so we can post it.

JOSH: Subtle piece of acting from Melissa Fitzgerald.

HRISHI: Yup. Anyway so C.J., her ire with Saudi Arabia, feels like it has a precedent from the *Women of Kumar*, you know, she's set up before. That she is particularly that she is attentive to and enraged by oppressive practices towards women and so I like that they're building on that same thing. And I also like, it seems that they heard my note retroactively about saying, 'Hey if you're going to call out Saudi Arabia, don't make up a fake country and say, oh Kumar, just say Saudi Arabia.' Here they actually go ahead and-

[West Wing Episode 3:19 excerpt]

C.J.: 17 schoolgirls were forced to burn alive because they weren't wearing the proper clothing. Am I outraged? No Steve, no Chris, no Mark. That is Saudi Arabia, our partners in peace.

[End excerpt]

JOSH: I think a couple of people when we were riffing on that said, 'Hang on, it's going to happen in a couple of episodes,' so hat tip to them.

HRISHI: Yeah, so it feels as if C.J. has both learned from that episode and maybe Aaron as well. But C.J. does not hold back. You know in the *Women of Kumar* she's going around sort of trying to find room for her voice. She says, how can we be doing this, you know we've got this arms package that we're selling to Kumar and there are these serious human rights violations. How can we be doing this? And she gets shut down and eventually you know when she finally does have to take the podium she tows the party line really.

JOSH: She pulls her punches.

HRISHI: Yeah, but here she's like you know what, nobody has said anything. Nobody has told me I can't say this so unless you want to tell me explicitly not to I'm gonna speak my mind in my own way and she really makes room, she says, 'I haven't spoken to the president, haven't spoken to the chief of staff, this is just me.'

JOSH: And I'm guessing that's a no-no in the world of the press secretary. Am I right or- we don't really drop- I was expecting a greater storyline in terms of having to pay a price for what she had said. It just doesn't really [Crosstalk] materialize.

HRISHI: [Crosstalk] Yeah. This thread really, it just leads towards the death threats. It doesn't actually go anywhere in terms of real political blowback you know or any kind repercussions within, you know from Leo's office or anything like that. Even Toby, who is the communications director, you know, technically her boss. He just says to Sam, 'Let's go get a good seat.'

JOSH: Well he's really just ready to flirt with the next woman that they can put him alone with. He's on a little run.

HRISHI: What is going on with Toby?

JOSH: Seemingly he's just horny, is the thought- To be candid, is the thought that I had during this episode. He just goes doe-eyed any time he's alone in his office with a woman.

HRISHI: Oh man. Toby here is an echo of Josh in *A Proportional Response* Way back in season one, Josh announces:

[*West Wing* Episode 1:03 excerpt]

JOSH: I have nothing to do

[End excerpt]

JOSH: Ah, yes, right

HRISHI: And Toby here again

[*West Wing* Episode 3:19 excerpt]

TOBY: I have nothing to do

[End excerpt]

HRISHI: This is a Sorkinism as it turns out.

JOSH: It made me think, as we have heard Aaron tell us that he likes to pass the ball around and he feels a certain guilt if he doesn't have something for everyone and each character and he treasures these actors and always wants to give them something to do and I think occasionally he doesn't come up with something or he's so dry that he has the character deal with the fact that

they're dry and they have nothing to do and out of that comes a little something, you know? He just goes there when he needs to.

HRISHI: That's true he could have just gone with Toby needs to deal with credentialing this Russian reporter but instead he sets it up with this other context and it gives Richard Schiff really an emotional context to work within for these scenes. It's pretty interesting. It's a different look for Toby when he finally meets with Ludmilla, she's quite prickly and unfriendly and he's completely unfazed by it.

[*West Wing* Episode 3:19 excerpt]

TOBY: And it's hard to tell whether that's because of your reporting, your editorials or the naked women on page three.

LUDMILLA: We did not invent this thing, nor did we invent the comic strip Solato.

TOBY: Touche madam.

[End excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, no, I a little bit thought like he likes her, at least at first initially and he opens up to her in a way. I was touched by his little riff on how it looks like fun when he looks in a magazine and sees people doing things and scuba diving, which he just mentions offhand.

[*West Wing* Episode 3:19 excerpt]

LUDMILLA: You like diving?

TOBY: I've never done it, I've never done anything but I've seen pictures and it looks fun. I've seen pictures of people out there in the world and they all look like they're glad they are.

[End excerpt]

JOSH: He actually seems genuinely to think that it kind of does seem like fun. It's sweet, there's something, he's opening up to her like, yeah, I haven't heard him say anything this intimate to any of our regular characters.

HRISHI: Right, even asks her, kind of asks her out, 'Wanna stay for a little and look at pictures of scuba diving?'

JOSH: That's right, it was kind of, made a little pass at her and she's like no.

HRISHI: Yeah she's not having it at all. It feels like she's geared up for a fight and Toby's just trying to cuddle her.

JOSH: Yes. And then that also is another storyline that had a great little turn that I was not expecting when he comes back having-

HRISHI: Actually done his homework?

JOSH: Gotten her all credentialed up and then he turns on her because he finds her work to be of no merit.

HRISHI: Yeah, I particularly found the little bit about the twelve-year-old, like publishing the twelve-year-old's failing report card or whatever. That seems both very believable and particularly awful.

JOSH: Yes. It made me think about Barron Trump and going after him rather than the excrescence that is his father.

HRISHI: And Chigorin, the Russian president that she is critical of does not actually seem to be this, like, iron-fisted tyrant. In fact, in the cold open, Toby refers to him as a reformer. He says:

[*West Wing* episode 3:19 excerpt]

TOBY: The Russians finally elect a reformer...

[End excerpt]

HRISHI: All I could think was Putin ay-ai-ai.

JOSH: Nice. Nice, is there a Russian equivalent of Ay-ai-ai?

HRISHI: I feel like it would be Ay-ai-ai in Russia too

JOSH: Yeah, perhaps so. I thought that might be an auditory shout-out to Trigorin, Chekov character from *The Seagull* who is a writer and I thought maybe there's a little connection there.

HRISHI: Back to C.J. for one second and the cold open. There's a great moment before C.J. goes fully into the briefing room. You know, she's gotten the news, she's given Toby and Sam, you know, fair warning to try and stop her, you know, with the suggestion they're going to fail even if they try and she's kind of worked up and then right before she steps into the room she takes a second and she kind of settles herself and then goes to the podium and starts her briefing in a kind of reserved way and she even deflects a few questions about Saudi Arabia. I just loved that little moment from Allison Janney, the way that she performed that breath and kind of collected herself.

JOSH: I agree and I think that's also the kind of thing that Alex Graves as a director elicits. Little moments that you might rush past that add dimension to a scene or a beat within a scene. I also like- a lot of the shots in this episode are subtly pretty great and tee up the moments well. As they come into the press room we stay with Toby and Josh, we're kind of excited to have their front row seats to see her and then we just see her take her place at the podium through the monitor that's next to them. It's just a great little framing device and then we go back into the room with C.J. herself. I like how that's handled.

HRISHI: No, I think you're right. I do feel like Alex Graves kind of takes a moment you would expect to go by really quickly and pauses. You know, like you've been trained by other TV shows to have something like that just go really, really quick. He basically says I'm going to do it differently

even though there has been this- all these faster paced examples from earlier in TV history. Basically are all these rushing precedents that came before and he's just like forget about all the rushing precedents [Sounds like 'Russian Presidents].

JOSH: I felt, I sensed you were working towards something, I was with you.

HRISHI: It took me way too long to get there.

JOSH: No, well worth it, well worth the journey.

HRISHI: Was it? Was it?

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: Seriously though, there was a shot that he had you know where Fitz first comes in with the information about the heavy water reactor.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: And as the president takes in the information then there is the shot of the seal and they all cross as they take their seats.

JOSH: An overhead shot, yeah, exactly. And then they just look like little scurrying ants going about their business. I'm remembering that shot which I did like but another effective piece of work from Alex Graves and Thomas DelRuth. I like the way they shot the reveal to C.J. of Butterfield's photographs.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: When President Bartlet and Special Agent Butterfield are trying to convince C.J. to sign the memo that will allow them to provide her with personal security, secret service agent they clearly want to do it with a light hand. Eventually she's not having it so they have to show her the pictures and rather than sort of hitting us with the pictures we get a nice low shot and it's almost as if we are the pictures and we see C.J. looking down at the table and we see her reaction rather than forcing the reaction on us. We see that she's something that's stopping her in her tracks and then eventually she picks up one picture and it's semi-translucent and we can see a little bit of the image but we never really have to see the images themselves. I like the way they chose to shoot that and give us her reaction rather than showing us personal shots of her and having us have the reaction.

HRISHI: Right, yeah that's true because our reaction is less important. It's really about the turn for her

JOSH: Right, what it means to her .

[*West Wing* Episode 3:19 excerpt]

C.J.: That's me leaving my house on Monday. This one's at a restaurant where I had dinner with my niece. This one's from this morning, was taken from about 20 feet away.

[End excerpt]

HRISHI: And I love at the end of that scene after, you know, after they've had to resort to actually showing her these awful pieces of evidence, the President's reaction when she signs the piece of paper and then she leaves the room and he almost can't bring himself to look at her. He doesn't say anything. You can tell he just feels awful about the whole thing. He tried to play it a little more lightly but he knew the gravity. The thing that was hardest for him was ho have to let her in on all of the facts.

JOSH: Yeah, and Michael O'Neill always great as Mrs. Butterworth is getting the pictures back into the folder rather quickly so as not to-

HRISHI: Get his sticky fingers on them.

[Laughter]

JOSH: There you go. By the way Mrs Morello lives. We have to stop announcing the deaths of people who are alive, it's a terrible habit. I mean, it's easy to fall into but it's just not good manners it's not pleasant i'm sure for the people who are continuing to lead happy fulfilled lives to hear through maybe a friend or who knows. Maybe Mrs. Morello or, I don't know I'm trying to remember now who else, who else's death did we announce?

HRISHI: Well, so for people who are trying to catch up here-

JOSH: Oh, Paxton Whitehead and Mrs. Morello, we're two for two.

HRISHI: Just a reminder: Paxton Whitehead is the actor who plays the distinguished gentlemen who tells C.J. that her necklace is a monument to Bourgeois taste.

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: And when we were recapping that episode, Josh, you made a bit of a faux-pas.

JOSH: Yes, I made a very significant faux-pas which was to state that he had passed away when in fact he is very much alive. Not something I would want someone to do about me, so yes, that was embarrassing and oops, we did it again.

HRISHI: Oh, we have a question actually for you Josh about that. I'm going to play you this question we got.

[Audio clip]

PAXTON WHITEHEAD: How did you come to this conclusion that I have passed on? I would suggest that it is a grave error. I'm most grateful to those people who contradicted this rumor. I can relax now and I blame it on the French.

[End clip]

JOSH: Wait a minute so this is gotcha journalism. What in God's name, explain to me what just happened. Im covered in sweat. It's largely because I worked out before we hopped on the mic but partially the shame of what you just did to me.

HRISHI: That's Paxton Whitehead himself. He asks another question actually.

JOSH: Wow, this is the worst kind of- I've never been on 'To Catch A Predator' before.

HRISHI: He asks one more question.

[Audio clip]

PAXTON WHITEHEAD: What is a podcast? You are throwing peas to catch fishes? Anyway, whatever it is it's obviously a monument to bourgeois taste.

[End clip]

JOSH: Are you kidding me? Now did somebody reach out to him or did you spend hours and hours putting that together from previous performances of his.

HRISHI: It turns out that his daughter is friends with our very own Zach McNeese.

JOSH: No kidding.

HRISHI: And so when he found out that you had delivered news of his demise, we got a reaction from him.

JOSH: That is awesome. And now if you'd like you can play the Mrs. Morello clip that you no doubt have. [Hrishi laughs] You don't have that one tee'd up?

HRISHI: I don't have that one.

JOSH: Well, shout out to Paxton Whitehead's daughter for arranging that. That was delightful and alarming. And let me add huge fan of Paxton Whitehead's. I'm sure I mentioned in the original podcast, if I didn't I'll add it here that he was in the original cast of 'Noises Off,' was brilliantly funny it, think it's the loudest I've ever laughed in public so he gave me major major belly laughs so I'm doubly ashamed to have made the mistake with this particular actor. That is hilarious.

HRISHI: Eli Attie told us that Mrs. Morello, Donna's teacher, was named for a real Mrs. Morello his actual teacher. But then in our episode he said that she had passed away when, in fact, it turns out she is alive and Eli, that's on you.

JOSH: Yes, that one's on Eli.

HRISHI: What did you think about the title of this episode? We already had an episode called "Enemies" but now we have an episode called "Enemies Foreign and Domestic."

JOSH: I didn't as usual give it much thought so hit me with, if you have anything deep hit me with it.

HRISHI: Well, it's part of the oath for federal officials: "I [blank] do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic." But I was wondering, did we actually have any domestic enemies in this episode?

JOSH: Yeah, I thought there was going to be a killer housekeeper. I was a little- Really my only problem with this episode. Built up that expectation from me.

HRISHI: Or at least some marital problems for the president.

JOSH: Sure, yeah right, a big Abby/ Bartlet scene sure. I guess I took it as a little tease, and this of course could be entirely wrong because of course I don't remember anything that comes after this episode but I thought perhaps C.J.'s stalker.

HRISHI: Oh right, what am I talking about? Of course that's who it is. Right. We've got the secret service there.

JOSH: You know what, something else I noticed, I actually really loved this episode, huge thumbs up from me but there are a couple things here. This is my now meta watching of the show where I'm not only watching the show but I'm watching it to critique it but I'm also watching it and looking at how I'm watching it so I can critique myself. It's exhausting, it's a nine hour process. Two of the major storylines that I do find very affecting turn on moments that I could criticise It's quite a buy I think to accept that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and everyone who's assembled in that Oval Office is going to make such a momentous decision based on some word play that Sam has noticed in his meeting in the Roosevelt Room.

[*West Wing* Episode 3:19 excerpt]

SAM: Now I have to tell you Sir that both of these negotiators, had conversational English but they didn't have idioms. I promise you.

BARTLET: Stem the tide is an English idiom.

SAM: Yeah, and they don't have 'surely once is enough' either.

[End excerpt]

JOSH: I both like it and, you know, part of me is like, 'Really?' And I think Aaron and Paul Redford are slightly acknowledging it when they have Fitz say something like, 'Wait a minute, foreign policy goes now goes through Sam?' It's almost like a little, are we doing this? Is this real? It's a little bit of a buy and yet at the same time I kind of love that these comic scenes of cultural miscommunication turn out to be the key that unlocks the puzzle so I kind of love it at the same time as I have to give it a little bit of a pass.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And then at the same time with, you know, Charlie's on this quest to figure out what the story is with this letter and there's never been a-

HRISHI: Budget speech in Pittsburgh.

JOSH: Right, and then he happens to be in the office when it comes up.

[*West Wing* Episode 3:19 excerpt]

BARTLET: Charlie, FDR gave a budget speech in 1932 in Pittsburgh? Can you get your hands on a copy?

CHARLIE: I'm sorry Sir

[End excerpt]

JOSH: Quite a coincidence on that day at that moment and Charlie's in the room and he puts it together and yet I also really like that storyline.

HRISHI: Oh my gosh yeah. Well, just to get back to the Sam one for a second. I totally hear what you're saying but I really like the stretch that they're trying to take with that story, you know, because I feel like that is part of the story, the idea that this seems so unlikely that it would come through this source, you know, and Sam says if you think I sound like an idiot just know that I feel the same way. But he's got something, you know, and they want to dig into it. I really like that part and I also think that Fitz has some, as always, has some of the best jokes in the show and the full line of that, he's like:

[*West Wing* Episode 3:19 excerpt]

FITZ: Wait a second, hang on, you're telling me that foreign policy of this magnitude is conducted through Sam and I'm still alive?

[End excerpt]

HRISHI: Isn't that great?

JOSH: He's great.

HRISHI: He's really great. That's such a dark joke about the line of succession but it's so good.

JOSH: True. I also enjoy President Bartlet's attempt to...

HRISHI: That's my favorite, be one of the fellas?

JOSH: Yeah exactly, you old muckety muck, you old horse-thief. [Crosstalk] It's like wow.

HRISHI: [Crosstalk] Yeah, exactly. But then Fitz's reaction to that where he says

[*West Wing* Episode 3:19 excerpt]

BARTLET: Fitz, you old polecat, you old so-and-so.

FITZ: Trying to be one of the fellas, sir?

BARTLET: Yep.

FITZ: Well, well done Sir.

BARTLET: Thank you.

[End excerpt]

JOSH: I'm trying to figure out during these moments, is it he's trying to hang with the military or is it like a cross-cultural thing where he thinks that's how African Americans interact with each other? Whatever it is it's very awkward and hilarious but I'm not even sure what it is that is putting Bartlet into this mode.

HRISHI: Okay, but then Charlie's storyline, that little moment where it's, like, 'Oh yeah, FDR had one of the greatest speeches and it was in Pittsburgh,' I mean that was just crazy that it happens to be the same week? That was too much. And yet, and yet, I knew that was going to happen and I rolled my eyes a little bit and I know- I've seen this episode so many times but something happened at the end of this episode when the man who wrote the letter, when Mr Tatum-

JOSH: Which I think is a reference to Channing Tatum.

HRISHI: Right yes, when the young Channing Tatum now played here by the old Channing Tatum. When Alan Tatum says

[*West Wing* Episode 3:19 excerpt]

ALAN: I'd like my picture taken with that young man if you don't mind.

BARTLET: Charlie

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And Charlie goes over and they take a picture, I don't know what happened. I got choked up. I knew what was coming, I knew I'm like, 'Oh I like this part,' and in my mind, I have some fondness for it but it's not like necessarily one of the most deeply affecting moments of the show, but for me. I got a little teary eyed while watching this y'know not that long before we started recording this and I was like, 'You bastards, How did you get me like this?'

JOSH: I like that moment too, but also the one that really got me was I was just starting to feel a little bit like the worm was turning a little bit for me as I felt that President Bartlet was kind of patronizing them.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: And then what really got me was, oh no, he asked them to stay because there's something he wants from them and he wants the story and he's- So that's a sign of respect and that's one I was really touched by. I'm, like, I was so happy that President Bartlet didn't just do his kind of 'Oh no, welcome to my office and look around. No, we're going to take a picture.' You know, I thought it really saved it for me, that, 'No, no, sit down, you've got a story to tell and I need to hear it.'

HRISHI: Yeah, and I loved that they also let us experience that feeling through Charlie too. Charlie is surprised by that as well and we get to have that and then he has that beautiful moment with Alan Tatum. I don't know, and it's really lovely.

JOSH: Yeah, I agree, Thoroughly compelling.

HRISHI: I therefore wave all objections to the insane coincidence of the FDR speech.

JOSH: As do I and I think really what I'm saying is that I have grown in my ability to- Why rob myself of the rich enjoyments and great payoffs by focusing on whether it's really that likely that at that moment, that piece of information was going to come through? On the unkind side, but I think we don't know who she is, nor do we see her face, there is, I think, a piece of not very effective background acting work. In the oval office there at the end, I do not believe the woman taking the pictures is a professional photographer. I mean, you have to take a look at it too, she's like really putting her finger up and down and up and down as she takes pictures and it just does not seem like any photographer I've experienced before. I don't buy it.

HRISHI: Well look, this is before your digital cameras and your iPhones and whatever else you're using, you kids.

JOSH: That's true, I wish she'd had one of those exploding flashes, we're going to go under the cover here. [Mimics old-time camera flash noise]

HRISHI: You don't remember how much manual labor was required to-

JOSH: Perhaps, Mr. Moto.

HRISHI: -take a photo back then.

JOSH: Mr. Moto, by the way, I think we lightly ridiculed you for your Motorola theory and then every person who listened to the podcast was like, 'No that is exactly what that was about.' And apparently there was like a whole 'Hello Moto' ad campaign right at that time and so I think you were completely correct and I was wrong to mock you.

HRISHI: I knew it but I just didn't want to say anything then. Okay, so Mark Harmon.

JOSH: Ah, cutie!

HRISHI: I mean there's so much in this episode, it's really- I really can't get over how densely packed this episode is. We get Mark Harmon comes in for just the last few minutes for a very, very brief guest role and it's really interesting that they brought in such a big named actor just for a few lines and that's all we'll ever see of him.

JOSH: Yeah. That's right. I can't believe they wouldn't hire him and do a little arc.

HRISHI: Yeah, that was the end of the story.

JOSH: Even I remember that he comes back. He's got great presence. I like him immediately. I'm intrigued by this guy and there is a somewhat unorthodox way he interacts with C.J.. He kind of makes one little slightly off-color reference to:

[*West Wing* Episode 3:19 excerpt]

C.J.: What does that mean?

AGENT DONOVAN: I don't need to see you naked or anything.

C.J.: Ok

[End excerpt]

JOSH: But, he seems interested immediately in a perhaps slightly unprofessional way.

HRISHI: Let me ask you this, does Mark Harmon resemble Kevin Costner to you at all

JOSH: Yes there's a little *Bodyguard* flavor there

HRISHI: That's what I thought.

JOSH: Maybe it's just because C.J. is the spitting image of Whitney Houston

HRISHI: Same voice too

JOSH: Well they're both willowy.

HRISHI: Whitney Houston also the original performer of "The Jackal."

JOSH: What?

HRISHI: No.

JOSH: That's bad. I can't believe you said that, I feel I would say that and you would shake your head. No, they have a similar look and they do a similar thing.

HRISHI: Another interesting thing about ark Harmon showing up is, if we are to believe Lawrence O'Donnell, Mark Harmon was originally going to play the role of President Bartlet's father, Headmaster Bartlet. And then he wasn't available to do it and they asked Lawrence O'Donnell to do it. So he'd been on the minds of the producers as a potential actor for the series before and then they brought him in for Simon Donovan.

JOSH: Right.

JOSH: Yeah. So Simon Donovan says he would like to see C.J. naked. He doesn't have to but it seems like clearly he wouldn't mind seeing C.J. naked. Another bosom buddy

JOSH: Nice. Peter Scolari as the head of Antares. Yes very good, very well done

HRISHI: Was it?

JOSH: Yeah, it was pretty well done. That whole storyline gave me the Trump Ay-ai-ai's because Bartlet is particularly concerned that even the appearance of impropriety would touch any attempt to have the federal government-

HRISHI: Absolutely.

JOSH: -Guarantee a loan. So the idea of being so concerned about cronyism or not even about cronyism, but the appearance, how it's going to play.

[*West Wing* Episode 3:19 excerpt]

BARTLET: They were HUGE contributors, how the hell am I supposed to-? They were HUGE contributors.

[End excerpt]

JOSH: Huge.

HRISHI: One of the rare moments when President Bartlet and President Trump actually tread the same ground.

JOSH: There you go, yeah, just one word.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: But I was struck by that and actually the implications of accepting major contributions and what that could mean, even when doing the right thing may be prevented by the public's perception or misperception of motivations behind what's being done.

HRISHI: Right, no, I definitely had a case of the Ay-ai-ai's there, too.

JOSH: I also had a little bit of Bob Ay-ai-ai. When my Dad was the coach of my little league team one season, I've never played less because he felt it didn't look good the coach was putting his

son in. I was always like, 'Dad you can play me occasionally. I'm actually not that bad, I don't think anybody's, and also I'm your son, why are you coaching if it means I don't get to play?' Don't do me any favors.

HRISHI: There should be a term for that: nepotism.

JOSH: There you go

HRISHI: I really like this idea of like showing particularly unfavorable treatment to someone whose related to you as an over correction of nepotism.

JOSH: Which by the way I get. I, even as I think I was irked I wasn't getting much field time I admired in my dad the same thing I admired in President Bartlet in this episode, which is, this is just what good people do.

HRISHI: And this is the same reason why no blood relatives of the President work in any kind of high...

JOSH: Right, it would be entirely unacceptable.

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: Ay-ai-ai

HRISHI: Peter Scolari, Mark Harmon, Ian McShane.

JOSH: This is the small casting of this episode.

HRISHI: Peter Scolari of course would go on to have a huge career in HBO on *Girls*.

JOSH: Yes, as Hannah's father.

HRISHI: And Ian McShane is basically on every single HBO show there is.

JOSH: Yes *American Gods* currently.

HRISHI: Is that HBO?

JOSH: No, American

HRISHI: That's Starz.

JOSH: It's Starz, you're right

HRISHI: But he was a star of *Deadwood*, he was on a recent episode of *Game of Thrones*

JOSH: He's very good in the film *Sexy Beast*.

HRISHI: Yes he is. I love that movie.

JOSH: He's a fantastic actor.

HRISHI: Yeah. This is actually a pretty light episode for Josh and Donna as well.

JOSH: Yes, indeed. I think that's why I liked it so much. Just kidding Janel, I mean because Brad didn't have much to do.

HRISHI: Yeah, I mean right now the ay-ai-ai's are pretty intense as they talk about nuclear proliferation and avoiding it at all costs and-

JOSH: Oh yeah.

HRISHI: I mean, it's been hard to watch the show wrought being just riddled with the dramatic irony or something.

JOSH: Yeah, no, this one in particular, this episode is just rife with it.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: There is a great song by Tom Lehrer about Nuclear Proliferation called "Who's Next?"

HRISHI: Okay, okay.

JOSH: Very good. "Who's Next?" And then there are a couple of great songs about the apocalypse as brought on by nuclear disaster.

HRISHI: Oh jees

JOSH: And I think maybe that's why we have the sly nod to Tom Lehrer.

HRISHI: Let's take a quick break and when we come back we're going to have something special for you guys.

[Ad break]

HRISHI: So as you know, one of the sub-plots from this episode involves this letter that Charlie gets that was meant for the President and I started thinking about who we might be able to talk to about how this process really works in the White House. When someone sends a letter to the president, what really happens?

JOSH: It is fascinating to ponder.

HRISHI: And then I remembered that really this work has already been done because there is a terrific episode of *99% Invisible* that came out on Election Day last year in 2016 where they do this very thing. It's an episode called "10 Letters for the President" and it was an episode that Roman Mars and the team from *99 P.I.* made in conjunction with Slate and the team from the *Working*

podcast. And so rather than try and do our own version of it, we thought we would play it for you in its entirety here on our episode.

JOSH: Awesome. And if you guys don't know about *99% Invisible* – it's one of the other wonderful podcasts under the *Radiotopia* umbrella. It's hosted by Roman Mars. I have listened to many, many episodes. I'm a big fan. It's a podcast that looks at design in all areas of life and American life that you might not have pondered before. And this is a particularly interesting and apt episode.

HRISHI: Here we go.

[*99% Invisible*, "Ten Letters for the President" episode]

ROMAN: This is *99% Invisible*. I'm Roman Mars.

[Intro Music]

ROMAN: When you send a letter to the president, it first passes to the office of presidential correspondence. The office was started under President McKinley in 1897, who had been receiving about 100 letters per day. By the time Herbert Hoover was president, the number had gone up to about 800 letters per day. Today, the president of the United States gets tens of thousands of letters, parcels and emails everyday – that president as we produced this story is still Barack Obama.

[typewriter keyboard clicking sounds]

Woman's voice: Dear Mr. President...

Man's voice: Dear Mr. President...

Child's voice: Dear Mr. President...

Woman's Voice: We met once when you came to my hometown of Tuscaloosa, Alabama...

Man's Voice: I am writing in regards to our relationship with Canada...

[typewriter ding]

JACOB: And if you are one of those letter writers you must imagine that the odds of the president actually reading your letter are pretty slim.

ROMAN: That's Jacob Brogan, a writer for Slate.com and host of *Working*, a Slate podcast.

JACOB: And you would be right. Those chances are pretty slim.

FIONA: People often begin with a reflection on, "I know no one will read this..." I mean, that is a really common open.

JACOB: But someone does read your letter or email and sometimes that person is Fiona Reeves, Director of Presidential Correspondence at the White House.

FIONA: We are the office that handles all of the incoming correspondence from regular people to the President in the White House. So we're a group of small offices made up of 45 staffers, 35 interns, and about 300 volunteers who come and go.

JACOB: Everyday, Fiona and this small army of people read through thousands upon thousands of letters addressed to the president.

ROMAN: President Obama has requested that 10 letters be passed on to him to read every night and it's Fiona's job to decide which 10 it will be.

[music]

FIONA: The president has asked since day one to read 10 letters from regular people that represent what's coming in.

[Audio Clip]

PRESIDENT OBAMA: These letters I think do more to keep me in touch with what's happening around the country than just about anything else.

[End clip]

ROMAN: That's a clip from a 2009 video put out by the White House.

[Audio Clip]

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Some of them are funny, some of them are angry, a lot of them are sad or frustrated about their current situation.

[End clip]

ROMAN: Sometimes people reach out about being fired, or when they are down to their lasts scraps of savings. Or their concerns about gun violence or climate change

[Audio Clip]

PRESIDENT OBAMA: So, a lot of the stories are heartbreaking. People who work hard, a lot of times they will say, "I've never written to a president before," "I'm not looking for a handout," "All I want is just a fair shake." and it ends up being a powerful motivator for me.

[End clip]

FIONA: You know, it is crazy to think you are holding this piece of paper that was in the person's hand when they were reaching out to their government, and it is crazy to think that then the president holds these pieces of paper.

ROMAN: Of course, these days letters don't always arrive on paper. Fiona and her staff also have to sort through all the emails that come in through the White House's web form at whitehouse.gov/contact.

FIONA: Truth is, we're an email office for the most part but we have a room that really looks like what you think of as mail at the White House. It's boxes and boxes of mail and shelves of topics and lists of what's going to agencies.

ROMAN: Fiona works in the executive office building located just west of the White House.

FIONA: We are sort of scattered throughout this building in whichever rooms happen to be available. I can tell you we are tightly packed here. We sit very close together.

ROMAN: And the staff sitting side by side in the Office of Presidential Correspondence carries on an old tradition of opening, reading, and sorting letters for the President

FIONA: I would say our paper processing system cannot be very different than it was 100 years ago.

ROMAN: Before letters arrive at the White House they go through a screening process so when the Office of Presidential Correspondence receives them, they have already been opened by secret service. You know, checking for anthrax or explosives. Paper letters are clipped to the envelopes they arrived in.

JACOB: But then it's up to the staff and interns and volunteers to dig through the letters and emails and figure out which ones to pass up the chain to Fiona. [To Fiona] How many do you have to read a day?

FIONA: It varies depending on the day but I would say on a general day the number that gets sort of passed to me can be from 200 to 400 emails and letters.

JACOB: And you read that many emails and letters every day? Roughly?

FIONA: Every day that the president is in town. He only gets the 10 letters a day when he's in Washington.

ROMAN: Fiona and her team are looking for a range of opinions and styles that express what Americans are thinking about.

[background music plays]

FIONA: We want to give him mail that is representative of incoming, mail that is geographically diverse. We also look for different writing styles and different levels of writing and ways of communicating.

ROMAN: The office also puts some thought into where the President is heading in the coming weeks and what issues he'll be discussing.

FIONA: To try to maybe make him better equipped to spend time in that community or to discuss an issue that maybe he doesn't have a personal perspective on. Sort of a way of giving him more advisors.

ROMAN: And the letters don't just inform and influence the President. Fiona makes sure the entire White House gets a chance to see what people are writing in about.

FIONA: Each day, our team does something with the help of volunteers called a random daily sample. So we will look at all the email that just came in and put together a list of topics and for and opposed and we circulate that list throughout the White House to a pretty broad distribution group to give folks a sense of what the American people are saying that day.

ROMAN: They also put together a word cloud to show the most commonly used terms across all the forms of communication.

FIONA: The biggest word is 'help' because generally when you are reaching out to your government you are looking for help with the issues that matters most to you. There are times though, like you can see right now, the biggest word is gun where there's a conversation that has arisen above every other topic.

JACOB: So in that case, Fiona will make sure the President gets a letter about guns.

FIONA: When we do that, we make sure he sees both sides and we think a lot about the order in which things are given to him. You know, how you read something I think affects the way it hits you.

ROMAN: And after Fiona chooses the ten letters, she hands them off to someone who scans them and then hands them to the person who puts together the President's briefing book.

FIONA: So each night he takes home sort of a homework binder and it has information on what he'll be doing the next day and every night includes the ten constituent letters.

ROMAN: Unlike almost everything else that reaches the President, these letters have not been fact checked or committee reviewed. They are some of the most direct communication he receives.

FIONA: When people are writing a memo to the President, you know, if they are touching on a policy topic, then everyone who has a hand in that or who may have information to add that can add value will look at it and add their two cents. And so by the time the President sees it, it has gone through so many eyes. But our correspondence is really like, someone sits down at their kitchen table and they send in a piece of their mind. And then there is basically two sets of eyes in the White House; it's this volunteer who thought, "Hey, the President should read this" and then it's me saying like, "Yeah, I agree with that."

ROMAN: And because these letters are so direct and unfiltered, a lot of them are pretty intense and deeply personal.

FIONA: Our office deals a lot in emotion and empathy because we are absorbing so much of what people hope and fear and what they are expressing to both the President of the United States, but

also Barack Obama and the way they see themselves in Barack Obama and that I think makes our workplace quite an emotional one.

ROMAN: A lot of people write about where they are writing from or what time they are writing.

[background music plays]

FIONA: You know, “I’m staying up late at night because I can’t stop thinking about this...” is a sort of an open that transports you immediately into what are they going to say? Or “from my kitchen window, I can see these mountains that we call...” and you’re like in this person’s kitchen with them. We also recently have seen more and more letters that begin with something like, “I’ve been meaning to write this for 7 years.” I think, yeah, as the days dwindle down we are getting a lot of under the wire, “here’s what I’ve been meaning to tell you...” There is one letter that went to the President yesterday from a man who wrote that he feels like because of the presence or pervasive nature of gun violence in the U.S., despite being a gay man in the United States, felt like he would rather somewhere that didn’t recognize same sex marriage than a place where he could be discriminated against at the end of the gun was sort of his angle there. We just gave that to the President last night so I don’t know how that hit him when he read it. But when I read it, it hit me hard.

JACOB: Are there any other that are funny, that are the kind of other side of things?

FIONA: [laughs] Yeah. Um, we get some funny letters. One that I have with me is from a young woman who was running for class president of her junior class and she wrote in that she wanted some speech writing advice.

[Jacob laughs]

ROMAN: President Obama actually responded to that letter. His advice: “Keep speeches short.”

FIONA: And some of them he responds to by hand. Some of them he writes something like, “Neal, can you look into this?” That is sort-of to ask someone on his team to look at it. And on others he writes ‘reply,’ but then he writes some sort-of some writing guidance.

JACOB: The White House has a team of writers who elaborate on the President’s notes and turns them into letters, which they hand back for the president to sign.

ROMAN: And because he’s responded personally to so many letters over the year, the writers have a really good sense of his voice. And often his margin notes are so extensive that he is practically responding to the letter himself.

FIONA: We end up serving really more as typists than writers.

JACOB: When the President does engage with a letter, whether by replying, or by extending an invitation to a White House event, or to highlight a specific letter in a public way, the White House usually gets in touch with the author. Sometimes Fiona gets to be the one to make that phone call.

FIONA: And the truth is, we don't always need to make those phone calls. We make them because they are really energizing. It's just so exciting when someone has taken this crazy long shot of you're writing something to Barack Obama and putting it in a mailbox.

JACOB: Do people flip out when you call them?

FIONA: Sometimes people flip out. I generally make those phone calls and I sound sort-of more serious than I feel when I make them. You know, I say, "I'm calling from the correspondence office, I need to confirm your address." When in my heart, I'm like – "CAN YOU BELIEVE IT?"

ROMAN: Fiona's excitement is palpable. She has been a part of this administration a long time and it has played a huge role in her life. She met her husband while they were sorting Obama's mail. And the job has had a real impact on the White House and the people who work there.

FIONA: I think it shapes policies that the White House pursues. I think also it shapes the humans who work here. You can't help but think about it. When I think about the outputs of our office, one is we have this pretty big team of young people who will go on to do other things and will go on with this much broader perspective and in some cases, a very deep and personal perspective on what people who they haven't necessarily met feel and expect from their government.

ROMAN: And Fiona is going to be one of those many people who have passed through the office because her job is ending with the administration.

[music plays]

JACOB: And what's next for you?

FIONA: I don't know – are you guys hiring? I have no idea. I have truly no idea. I think it's a funny place to work because the institution has existed for so long, but you begin again every four or eight years and so then when you are getting ready to leave, you feel like you've just figured it out and are nailing it.

ROMAN: The White House is keeping their 'Contact Us' form until the last day of the administration – January 19th. Even if you write a letter on January 19th, it can reach Obama. He will be receiving 10 letters on his last night in the Oval Office.

[outro music plays]

ROMAN: A version of this piece original aired on Slate's *Working* podcast as part of a series on "Jobs at the White House" produced by Jacob Brogan and Mickey Capper. The *99% Invisible* team who worked on this episode includes Avery Trufelman, Sharif Youssef and Katie Mingle. With Kurt Kohlstedt, Sam Greenspan, Emmett Fitzgerald, Taryn Mazza, Delaney Hall, and Me, Roman Mars. We are a project 91.7 KLAW San Francisco and produced on Radio Row in beautiful downtown Oakland, California.

[outro music]

HRISH: And that's it for this episode. Big thanks to Roman Mars and the rest of the *99% Invisible* and *Working* podcast teams for allowing us to play that episode for you. How much were you hit with by the ay-ai-ai's listening to that "10 Letters for the President" episode?

JOSH: Oh, I was wondering whether our current president could name ten letters. [both laugh] how President Obama read ten a day. It's a great story and a great podcast episode it's just a beautiful thing to hear him speak about one way to keep in touch with Americans and with the people whom he represents and serves.

HRISHI: it's a really beautiful story and I love the passion and the dedication of the staff there. It's a really it's a beautiful it's a perfect companion to *The West Wing* I think.

JOSH: Yeah that's the other thing the fact that President Obama would choose to read ten letters is wonderful, touching, and beautiful. But that this infrastructure would be built so that they are a relevant ten letters, the whole process, it's almost too hard to believe that that really was in place and that happened day after day.

HRISHI: Yeah it really feels like a slice out of an episode written by Aaron Sorkin.

JOSH: Indeed.

HRISHI: Well, if you want to talk about this episode or anything else, leave a comment for us on Facebook at [Facebook.com/thewestwingweekly](https://www.facebook.com/thewestwingweekly). You can find us on Twitter or on Instagram. And we have a website, [thewestwingweekly.com](https://www.thewestwingweekly.com), home of all things related to this podcast.

JOSH: And another thing you can do to support this show is to check out the goods and services of our sponsors because it's good stuff and that helps us out.

HRISHI: And as we wrap up this show, let's bring in Roman Mars's mellifluous voice again.

JOSH: Okay

HRISHI: Okay

ROMAN: What's next?

[Outro music]