

The West Wing Weekly
5.13: "The Warfare of Genghis Khan"
Guests: Fmr. Congressman John Tierney and Jacob Keaton

[Intro Music]

JOSH: You're listening once again to *The West Wing Weekly*. I'm Joshua Malina

HRISHI: and I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Today we're talking about The Warfare of Genghis Khan. It's episode thirteen of season 5.

JOSH: It was written by Peter Noah. It was directed by Bill D'Elia. And it first aired on February 11, 2004.

HRISHI: Here's the NBC synopsis of the episode: "When the flash of a secret nuclear detonation is detected over the Indian Ocean, the president scrambles his inner circle to investigate which nation now has the atomic bomb--and since conventional thinking favors Iran, Bartlet orders bombers into the air to destroy that nation's most likely uranium-enriched targets. Elsewhere, Josh tongue-lashes NASA eggheads on the future of space exploration--until he is introduced to wonders of heavenly bodies..."

JOSH: Wow. [Hrishi laughs] Wow. Shameless.

HRISHI: [laughing] by an attractive female administrator. In addition, C.J. fumes when a combative TV talk-show host, denigrates her on the air, and Will suggests to the vice president that he is considered a buffoon by the White House staff."

JOSH: And Will, while no longer integral to the show, does at least show up ensuring that the man who plays him gets paid for another episode.

HRISHI: [laughing] You're sort of like the vice president yourself, you are contractually obligated to have a pulse.

JOSH: Yeah, that's exactly right. It's funny, one of the things I thought about as I watched this is I kind of remember the feeling that Will kind of no longer mattered.

HRISHI: Really?

JOSH: Yeah. It was around this time that the show was kinda like, eh, all right. It wasn't, and it wasn't because of the way I'm built. I'm like, uh, I've got a job and that's the important thing. So, I don't remember caring deeply. But I remember thinking, wow, they don't really know what to do with me.

HRISHI: Yeah. I just keep waiting for Will and Toby to make up. I'm a little bit over their separation.

JOSH: I felt the same way, too. There were two things. I felt, enough already! [indecipherable] One was the Will and Toby tension.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Although, I will say, it reflects, in my eyes, worst on Toby.

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: It's like dude, get over it!

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Will works for the vice president now. I don't know how many months ago that happened in *West Wing* time, but enough time and enough episodes that we've seen that like, dude, get over it.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And also off-camera Ben. Very tired of off-camera Ben.

[West Wing Episode 5.13 excerpt]

C.J.: It's him again.

CAROL: Him who?

C.J.: Ben. Take a message.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah. That's a running joke that ran a little bit too far past the finish line. Which I think was behind us by a couple episodes.

JOSH: I think so, too. Although, it's giving us an opportunity to see a funny side of Melissa Fitz. And I love that Carol's always the one to come in and tell us about Ben. But I felt watching this episode, like this, oh this must be the episode where we met Ben. But of course I have no memory [laughs].

HRISHI: [laughing] It's interesting...I like this episode a lot for a lot of reasons. I thought the main story about the, um, nuclear detonation was pretty riveting. And there were things I liked a lot about the, um, Josh NASA story as well. And how the vice president plays into the nuclear story, you know, the way that the sort of domestic ends up tying into the international stuff I thought was interesting. But I did feel like C.J.'s whole plot line came from, not only a different episode, but an entirely different show.

JOSH: Yeah, I agree. I have a feeling I like the episode a little bit less than you did. Altogether, it felt less than the sum of its parts and things felt a little more [bleep] jammed together than perfectly, mellifluously interlocking. I mean, I, yes the NASA aspect and the nuclear aspect, at least they attempted to kind of play off and reflect on each other. One hopeful. One dire. There's a, you know, kind of worked-ish. Um, but yeah, the C.J. thing felt like, 'well, we gotta give C.J. something.'

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And Jay Mohr, uh, TV within a TV...

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: All of a sudden.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Like what? It was just odd. It really didn't pay off in any way, although it gave us a nice sort of Sarah Huckabee Sanders moment.

[West Wing Episode 5.13 excerpt]

TAYLOR: Now when you work for a man like the president, who's got what I think you could generously characterize as a casual relationship with the truth, when you...

[end excerpt]

JOSH: He's, you know, accusing C.J. inside a little Sanders [IAI] moment.

HRISHI: Absolutely. It could have been lifted from any contemporary pundit talking about the contemporary press secretary.

JOSH: Indeed. Anyone other than a Fox News personality.

HRISHI: Right. I guess what I was thinking was the NASA plotline had some kind of loftiness to it. The nuclear detonation plotline had some high stakes diplomacy and...

JOSH: For sure.

HRISHI: ...just, you know, geopolitics. And then the way that the vice president played into that has some good kind of palace intrigue stuff. But meanwhile, C.J. seemed to be on, like, a RomCom about a woman balancing work and romance.

JOSH: Yeah, that's true, but I would also, I would extend that analogy to the Josh, uh what's the name of the NASA hottie? [sniggering] I think it might be "NASA Hottie."

HRISHI: It's Alex.

JOSH: Oh, Alex I mean. The attempt to a little RomCommoditize that part of the story was, I felt, a little odd. I mean, the romance of space has already been touched on in the series.

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: And there is a great romance to the idea of space exploration, and I like revisiting it. But the idea of somehow sort of tying it to actual romance [chuckles] and, like, going on a star-gazing date, I thought was a little cheesola.

HRISHI: Give me one second, I'm gonna grab my guitar for a musical aid.

JOSH: Fantastic!

HRISHI: [playing guitar and speaking] C.J. Craig lives in Washington, DC. By day, she's the press secretary, boo boo. By night, she's just trying to find her man. And she's got the whole town wondering, "Who's that girl?"

JOSH: [laughs out loud]

HRISHI: I'm ready for the, uh, 27 Dresses version of the C.J. story. [both laugh]

JOSH: [while laughing] Yeah, no, there's no question this episode is kinda going in that direction...at times.

HRISHI: [while chuckling] But I did really love her exchange with Carol. When she tells her about Ben.

[West Wing Episode 5.13 excerpt]

C.J.: Ben. Take a message.

CAROL: Gets any more persistent, they're gonna open a case file. Can I just tell him you're not worth it?

C.J.: We used to date. He knows better.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, she has a great expression on her face, too. [both laugh] Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

HRISHI: There are a few moments of really nice writing that I wanted to talk about. That was one of them. The other also comes early in the episode, when Donna and Josh first appear and Donna's prepping Josh...

[West Wing Episode 5.13 excerpt]

DONNA: So you have to eat something...

JOSH: I already ate.

DONNA: ...or else it's rude.

JOSH: I'm not hungry.

DONNA: Or else it's rude.

JOSH: [sighs]

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: She repeats, which is great, but then what makes it extra special to me is the way that it plays into the next set of lines. Josh says, "Why am I even meeting with some geeks from NASA?" And Donna says

[West Wing Episode 5.13 excerpt]

Donna: I'm sure they're not geeks. I'm sure they're not all geeks.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That is good.

HRISHI: And her delivery is so great.

JOSH: Subtle. I also thought there's a very good bomb swell to the cold open.

HRISHI: Ohhhhh.

JOSH: I thought, there's a new member of the club is a, was a good moment.

HRISHI: I thought the fact that Leo was talking about a nuclear detonation when he says "there's a new member of the club." This has gotta be the closest thing to a literal bomb swell that we may ever get on this show.

JOSH: Oh! I didn't even see it! You're *exactly* right.

HRISHI: [chuckles] Um, yeah, let's go to the beginning of the episode. We start in the Situation Room.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: Well, actually, we start with the president being woken up by a phone call at 3 am, and then he's in the Situation Room, basically in his pajamas. And it turns out there's a nuclear detonation that's been detected...

JOSH: "Nu Det," as the guy responds, [chuckling] nu det.

HRISHI: Uh, yeah, because...

JOSH: I wanted the president to go like, yeah, I surmised...

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: ...that that's what that stood for.

HRISHI: Right ...because there's not enough time to use the full words. You need to

JOSH: Yeah, right, exactly.

HRISHI: ...need abbreviations.

JOSH: I'm sorry. Thanks for clearing that up. I thought there was a new dentist. [both laugh] Ah, now I see. This is, this is pretty serious.

[West Wing Episode 5.13 excerpt]

MAN 1: The Russians and the Chinese have satellite detection capability for an atmospheric nu det.

MAN 2: Nuclear detonation, sir.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: You then have to explain what the abbreviation means.

JOSH: Right. Then it's a little bit longer than saying nuclear detonation in the first [expletive deleted] place.

HRISHI: Exactly.

JOSH: Cut to Omarosa with a tape recorder. That's all I can think of when I see the Sit Room now. [both laughing] It's been defiled with reality stars, both in the form of the president and...

[Both laugh]

JOSH: God!

HRISHI: I also thought, this little joke was pretty funny even though literally no one reacts to it at all.

JOSH: It does sound like Chris Schrager to me every time you say it...

HRISHI: I'm leaning into it.

JOSH: Okay. I just wanted to make sure.

HRISHI: Saying it that way, because I've been thinking about Sam a lot in this episode, which I'll get to later.

JOSH: I miss Sam.

HRISHI: But no one reacts to the president when he says, you know, Charlie's handing out coffee.

[West Wing Episode 5.13 excerpt]

CHARLIE: The mess isn't open yet, sir. This is from the Secret Service Command Post.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: If it's too hot, they wrestle it to the ground.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: [laughs] That *is* funny.

HRISHI: It's pretty good. No one, no one even turns to look at him when he says it. Nothing.

JOSH: Well, there's a nu det.

HRISHI: Yes, yes, tough Situation Room.

JOSH: Serious times, yeah. Yeah, woo, tough Situation Room. [laughs]

HRISHI: Then we get to, uh, we move out of the Situation Room into the Oval and, uh, I am so impressed that everyone is there in their suits, you know, Charlie's got his suit on. Leo's got his suit on. Dr. McNally. Everybody is all dressed up.

JOSH: But it would've been funnier if they'd been in suit pajamas.

HRISHI: [laughing] Oh, ho, ho...what a missed opportunity!

JOSH: If I were directing. Yeah.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: Okay, so they have the meeting and then the president tells Leo that he's gotta, uh, brief the vice president and apologize for him. Was the vice president supposed to be there at the meeting and they forgot him like Kevin in Home Alone?

[insert iconic scream from Home Alone]

JOSH: That is the sense that I got. Abso, yeah, that is [chuckles and mimics Home Alone scream]. Gary Cole doing that face. Uh, yeah, I, I thought that was odd.

HRISHI: Someone forgot to...

JOSH: And, yeah, [role-playing] I thought you invited him. I didn't invite him. You said you were gonna...

HRISHI: Yeah, cause aren't there, you know, security protocols about who has to be briefed in a situation like that?

JOSH: I don't know.

HRISHI: Pretty funny that they forgot the vice president.

JOSH: Yeah, it's got "president" in his name. You'd think they'd remember.

HRISHI: Yeah. [chuckles] And then when Leo finally does brief Russell, I also enjoyed this scene very much because I felt like I was watching, you know, your mother-in-law try and guess who the murderer is in the first two minutes of the movie.

JOSH: [laughss]

[West Wing Episode 5.13 excerpt]

RUSSELL: Pakistan's attacked India.

LEO: No, sir. This was a test.

RUSSELL: Pakistan's being provocative. Shot across the bow sort of thing.

LEO: It wasn't Pakistan. If you'll just let me finish. No nation has claimed credit. We're trying to ascertain who was responsible. But it appears there's a new player on the nuclear stage.

RUSSELL: Is India mobilizing?

LEO: It was 1,200 miles from India. India has no idea that it happened.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: [laughing] Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think that scene ends with him saying, let me go back to the beginning. Let me try this again. Well that's also, I think, the brilliance of Gary Cole, who,

we've now almost gotten used to the bar being set very low and then being surprised by how sharp Bingo Bob is. And, I think Gary Cole gets us every time. He's been very, he's really, really great at playing both sides of it.

HRISHI: Yeah. Oh, I also wanted to mention something that people to us a while back, um, when this first aired, but I only just recently watched it. In Season 2 of *The Good Fight*, Gary Cole has a romantic rival for Christine Baranski played by Tim Matheson.

JOSH: Oh, oh, really?

HRISHI: Yeah. Continuing their *Very Brady* rivalry.

JOSH: I guess so.

HRISHI: I love that these two just keep appearing together.

JOSH: That's fantastic. I wish I had another actor who'd bring me along when he works.

HRISHI: [laughs] Isn't that...that's not...

JOSH: It's not Nick Kroll [chuckles]

HRISHI: It's not Brad?

JOSH: I mean, we look similar, but it's not getting me any work. Brad has done nothing for me.

HRISHI: What about that Funny or Die video?

JOSH: All right, maybe I...let me rephrase... I wish I had someone to bring me along for paid work.

HRISHI: [Laughs] All right. But I love that the two of the keep working together in this sort of way of mirror images.

JOSH: Do they play with that on *The Good Fight*? The fact that they're kind of similar?

HRISHI: There's only actually one scene where the two of them are in the same room.

JOSH: Ah.

HRISHI: But it's a great loaded moment and I thought 'vices president'...

JOSH: Ha! President vices president.

HRISHI: Hmmm, sorry my mistake. So, I was mentioning earlier that I was thinking about Sam a lot in this episode. And, in fact, you even mentioned one of the things that made me think of Sam. Jay Mohr's character says the words "casual relationship with the truth" and it felt like an echo of Sam Seaborn. He said "I don't think it's such a good idea to be casual about the truth."

JOSH: Mmm, I thought you were going to say you were thinking about Sam because Sam's in love with the majesty of space exploration.

HRISHI: I will and then there's that as well. This was the second Sam Seaborn invocation, I thought. The whole exchange between, well not just Alex and Josh, but Josh and really the everything that goes on with the NASA crew. I just felt like "dude, did you not watch 'Galileo'?"

JOSH: [laughing] Did you not watch *The West Wing*? [both laugh] Dude.

HRISHI: There's even a specific argument that is kind of a rehash from "Galileo"...

[West Wing Episode 5.13 excerpt]

ALEX: The Republican Congress isn't the problem. It's liberals who killed the space program.

JOSH: Yeah, cause we like to use government money to, I don't know, help people.

ALEX: Space travel's inspirational. You think that doesn't help people?

JOSH: Not like feeding them or getting them jobs.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Hmm I just wanted to play him "Galileo." Here's Sam talking to Mallory.

[West Wing Episode 2.09 excerpt]

SAM: There are a lot of hungry people in the world Mal, and none of them are hungry because we went to the moon. None of them are colder and certainly none of them are dumber because we went to the moon.

MALLORY: And we went to the moon. Do we really have to go to Mars?

SAM: Yes!

MALLORY: Why?

SAM: Cause it's next. Because we came out of the cave and we looked over the hill and we saw fire. And we crossed the ocean. And we pioneered the west. And we took to the sky. The history of man is hung on a timeline of exploration and this is what's next."

[end excerpt]

JOSH: What's next?

HRISHI: I don't know. This kept pulling me out of the episode. This feeling of, uh, we've been here before and the White House was on the other side of this issue.

JOSH: Yeah. We've been here before and, uh, kinda got there more elegantly. And also, as you just said, we already got there.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: So we cut to, cut to Josh just bashing these people, like, NASA's an embarrassment!

HRISHI: Yeah. This was in 2004 so the Columbia Space Shuttle disaster was recent history.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: And...uh...I don't know. It felt harsh, I think, to me or somehow, I don't know, a little disrespectful.

JOSH: That's interesting. That flitted through my mind and I thought 'I'm glad they didn't deal with it.' But it even would've been interesting to make it a very serious, you deal with it and make it a serious plot line.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: It couldn't have found its way anywhere in here. You're right. The specter of it looms somewhere behind this story line.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Which was kind of rom-commy.

HRISHI: And played for laughs sometimes.

JOSH: And played for laughs.

HRISHI: I mean, there are all these space puns throughout the episode. Oh, I'm thinking about starting a new government task force. Space Puns.

JOSH: [laughs] I'm in.

[Excerpt from Trump speech]

TRUMP: To establish a Space Force as the sixth branch of the Armed Forces.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: You know, even bad ones, I mean I guess none of them are good here. From the opening, when Josh says

[West Wing Episode 5.13 excerpt]

KARL: I recommend the scones. They're...

JOSH: Out of this world?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Oof. I wanted the guy to look at him...guy gives him a look like 'yeah'...that was the joke he was going to make...I want the guy to look at him like 'no, I'm not a [expletive omitted] idiot. I was gonna say the scones are good. They're from Beverly's Place. What's wrong with you?"

HRISHI: Me, too. I felt the same. And then when Alex comes to visit Josh in the office he says...

[West Wing Episode 5.13 excerpt]

JOSH: You guys are lost in space.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Oof. Danger Will Robinson.

HRISHI: [laughs] I think that this idea of like, oh, you're on the front page, but it's all bad news.

JOSH: um hm

HRISHI: Yeah, it's hard to watch that from the real world and not feel like, well, you can't...I don't know...it was complicated for me.

JOSH: Yeah that there is a massive tragedy...

HRISHI: Yeah, that's kinda being...

JOSH: Well, it's not being referenced at all, but it's part of the national consciousness...

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: ...so it's weird to go there and deal with the situation in such a light manner.

HRISHI: Yeah. Well, for a little more on this story, let's turn to our first guest, his name is Jacob Keaton and he's a NASA space policy expert. He's actually been on a detail to the Senate Commerce Committee trying to tell them how to approach the issues. And, um, he had some feelings about this plot line.

JACOB: My name is Jacob Keaton. I'm a program analyst with the International Space Station Program at NASA headquarters in Washington.

HRISHI: You told us that, ah, there were some issues with how Josh Lyman handled things in this episode.

JACOB: Yeah, this is not one of Josh's better episodes in terms of keeping an open mind, I think.

HRISHI: How so?

JACOB: Well, the portrayal of the NASA people, first of all, is just about the lowest stereotype I think you could pick up for NASA people. We don't all wear name tags. Uh, we don't automatically look like nerds. And that's certainly not the way we would approach a meeting at the White House.

JOSH: Do you make a lot of space puns?

[laughter]

JACOB: Aw, that was the other part. That part was pretty brutal. We do not...maybe when we're among ourselves, but not, not in front of other people, sir.

JOSH: Fair enough.

HRISHI: Alex wasn't a nerd though.

JACOB: No, she wasn't. And it was nice to see a, ah, especially in that time, a female in a position of power at NASA as an actual scientist.

HRISHI: Was that rare at that time?

JACOB: I don't think so. But on TV it did strike me that, oh okay, and yeah they played her a little bit of a love interest I suppose...

JOSH: Yeah.

JACOB: ...even though it never went anywhere. But it was still nice to see.

JOSH: How about communication in general between NASA officials and White House staff? How does that *really* work?

JACOB: So, that meeting would not have went that way in real life. NASA staff rarely, if ever, talks to the White House senior staff. We interface through the Office of Management and Budget, OMB, and through the Office of Science and Technology Policy. Those are our two avenues into the executive branch and the Office of the President. We wouldn't ever be talking to the senior staff there.

HRISHI: Let's talk about the issue itself and step away from the process for a second. What do you think they got right and got wrong about, you know, the Mission to Mars and the Webb Telescope...all the NASA projects they talk about in this episode?

JACOB: Sure, well as a space station guy I will take immediate issue with Josh's, ah, portrayal of it as...what was the exact wording he used? Do-nothing ISS? This episode was in 2004, which was squarely between, it was almost a year and a week after the Columbia accident in 2003...

HRISHI: Right.

JACOB: ...which kinda put a halt on the construction of the ISS. The ISS at the point was, uh, about 25% built. It's kinda hard to say that, uh, your house is a do-nothing house when you've only built the garage and half of the kitchen. We just hadn't finished it yet. We didn't finish until...the major pieces...until 2011 and we're still adding pieces today and the amount of research we've done has skyrocketed since then. It was pretty unfair to criticize it in 2004.

HRISHI: Do you want to take a second and brag a little about the ISS?

JACOB: [laughs] Sure.

JOSH: And you, in fact, you worked on the program, yes?

JACOB: I do. I do currently work on the space station program. The space station is, in my opinion and other people's opinion, is one of if not the greatest engineering achievement in human history. It was put together by 15 countries and five space agencies, a lot of whom, within living memory, were not particularly good friends. All the pieces were assembled, almost entirely, in these different countries and they met for the first time in orbit, where they all hooked up completely perfectly every time. Which is what really good engineering can get you. And we've been living there continuously for about 17-and-a-half years now. So, if you see a kid who is starting his senior year in high school or his or her first year in college, for that kid's entire life, not all of humanity has lived on the planet Earth.

JOSH: Hmmm

JACOB: And that's due to the space station program.

JOSH: That's an inspiring way to put it.

JACOB: Yeah, and so what we're doing up there is a lot of, uh, there's a lot of different research we're doing on the space station. A lot of it is Mars focused; is flying humans in deep space; how the human body reacts to the microgravity environment and the radiation environment; how our machines react to those kind of stressors. So that's one part of what we do. The other part is looking for what we call benefits back to humanity on Earth. Things like protein crystallography, which lets you create new types of vaccines. Different kinds of metal. We're learning even how combustion works, which might have applications in fire control here on Earth.

JOSH: Is it any easier to lose weight? Asking for a friend.

[laughter]

JACOB: Actually, um, the astronauts come back, they go through, they shed calcium from their bones while they're in microgravity because they don't have the kind of structural loading that, you know, I'm sitting in a chair. Of course gravity is pulling my spine down. It's pulling on my legs. It's pulling on my arms. They don't have that up there so the body's response is to shed calcium because it doesn't need it. So essentially they get osteoporosis in space.

JOSH: Huh

JACOB: And they come back and their bones are a lot thinner than they were when they left. Our astronauts are mostly in their 40s and 50s. When they come back, between nutrition and exercise, the bone regenerates. Why does it do that? Can we figure out what that mechanism is, because the body clearly knows how to do it? If we can figure that out, we might be able to come up with a therapy to help some of our older folks, ah, who are suffering from osteoporosis.

HRISHI: Huh.

JOSH: Huh. That's fascinating and, uh, but some of this work with Mark Kelly and his twin brother?

JACOB: Yeah, Scott Kelly was up there for almost an entire year, which was almost a record for how long anybody has stayed in space. It was a truly...it's not easy up there. It seems like there always having fun. It is a very difficult environment to live in. You're isolated. Your body does a lot of unexpected things. It's um, I personally haven't been, but the ones I've talked to, the astronauts I've talked to...it is a challenge. It's kinda like a deployment. And he was up there for a very long time. When he came back...when I started with the space station program in 2003...when the astronauts were landing in Kazakhstan, they'd have to be helped off, out of their capsule. They'd need to be carried. Things like that. And we've come so far now in understanding how humans live in space that Scott Kelly, having been there for almost a year, basically climbed out of the capsule on his own. I'm not going to say we've beaten microgravity because we most certainly haven't. But we have come a long way to keeping humans healthy and productive in space.

HRISHI: What about the Webb Telescope? As I mentioned, this was in 2004, and Josh and Alex talk about it as if it's gonna be, it's an impending development. But the Webb still hasn't launched. Right?

JACOB: The Webb still has not launched. They recently announced a slip to either 2020 or 2021, I don't remember which one. But it's in that timeframe. They had some, ah, technical issues in the, ah, final testing and assembly phase. I think they have it now and when this thing launches, you know, Hrish, you and I are almost the same age, you're about a year older than me. When we were in high school, what we knew about the universe were that there were a lot of stars, a lot of galaxies, and there were nine planets. And then it went down to eight planets, but whatever, that doesn't matter.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JACOB: What we've discovered since then is that there are planets everywhere. NASA launched the Kepler Telescope which discovered thousands of what's called exoplanets. These are planets that are around other stars other than our sun. They are everywhere in the universe.

HRISHI: And they are named that because they're planets we would like to hug and kiss.

[Josh and Jacob laugh]

JACOB: Yes. Sure.

[laughter]

JOSH: I think so. I like it.

JACOB: So these exoplanets are everywhere in the galaxy and if we, ah, take a statistical analysis there are probably a trillion planets just in the Milky Way galaxy alone. And the Milky Way is one of a hundred billion other galaxies. There are planet everywhere and so now the question becomes, of course, where is everybody? Where are other signs of life? Why haven't we seen anything? What the Webb is gonna be able to do when it launches, it will be able to detect the atmospheres of nearby exoplanets...nearby in galactic terms obviously. They're still very, very far away. And it'll be able to sense the atmosphere of those planets and see is there methane? Is there oxygen? Is there water vapor? Are there signs of life?

JOSH: And all this will have come about because one NASA staffer decided after hours to go to on a semi-romantic lobbying/date.

JACOB: And by the way, violating any number of federal gift-giving rules.

[laughter]

JACOB: I don't think that telescope was under \$25 dollars.

JOSH: [laughing] Yeah, no, I suspect you're right. And also, wouldn't it take longer to set up?

[laughter]

JACOB: I don't know where they drove to outside of Washington to get such a dark sky. They must've been in the car for a while so she had plenty of time to talk to him.

JOSH: [laughing] That's a good point.

HRISHI: Jake, you serve as an advisor on the, ah, Senate Commerce Committee. Are you telling me you've never taken a Senate staffer star-gazing?

JACOB: [laughing]

JOSH: Come on...

JACOB: I can unequivocally say I will not, especially because my wife will listen to it later. Yes, I was on a rotation with the Senate Commerce Committee, which was a very interesting way to see the other side of how NASA gets its funding. Some of my coworkers sometimes lament that the American public doesn't value space exploration the way they used to. And I don't think that's true. I think the American public values space exploration an enormous amount, to the tune of more than \$20 billion a year. And some of our biggest supporters are in the U.S. Congress and they make sure we have the resources we need to do things, like, ah, launch the Webb Telescope and keep humans in space for extended periods of time.

HRISHI: What's the feeling within NASA about Space Force?

JACOB: [chuckles] Space Force is more of a...it's kind of a Defense Department thing. It doesn't directly impact NASA. There's not a whole lot I can say about it from a position of authority. I would like to talk though about towards the beginning of the episode, if you jump back for a second, where Josh is telling us:

[West Wing Episode 5.13 excerpt]

JOSH: Telescopes can't launch. They can't focus. Planetary probes that crash because engineers mixed up meters and feet. The only time NASA makes the front page anymore is when something goes wrong. You need to get off the front page.

[end excerpt]

JACOB: What he was talking about there was the Mars Climate Orbiter which, in September of 1999, basically missed the planet Mars on its way there because one computer was programmed in metric and one was programmed in imperial. That was a pretty bad mistake. Three months later the Mars Polar Lander crashed into Mars. Ran out of fuel on the way down. Didn't land. That was two back-to-back black eyes. That was in 1999. I should note, since then, in April 2001 the Mars Odyssey Mission went into orbit around Mars. In January 2004, so a month before this episode aired, NASA landed back-to-back mission on Mars. The Spirit Rover and the Opportunity Rover, so the writers should have known that we had figured Mars out again and since then we have had six or seven successful mission to Mars with no failures. I'm not gonna say we figured this out. Half of every mission that's ever gone to Mars has failed. But we have a string of absolute successes that tell us more about that planet than I think we could have hope for in 1999 when those failures happened.

HRISHI: Right now are there people in a room at NASA trying to figure out how to pull off a manned mission to Mars?

JACOB: Absolutely there are. The mission architecture she mentioned, the Mars Direct, was a proposal in the 90s to go directly to Mars. Its proponents of course were intelligent people that had thought about this. I personally don't think it ever would've worked. There was a ton of risk

involved. Conservatively, to land humans on Mars you would need 20 to 60 tons. So you're talking orders of magnitude more than we have ever done and with people on board. One of the things the space station has taught us is that systems you think work properly on the ground don't work that way in space. So what we're doing with the space station really is figuring out what works, what doesn't. We've already realized that some of the things we thought weren't gonna work, work really well and we now don't need to take as many with us to Mars as we might have otherwise so we can save a lot of weight and mass there. Other things we know, wow we haven't figure that out and thank God we're finding this out 200 miles from Earth and not 2 million miles from Earth when we don't have a way to get home. So, in the future, what we're learning is how to do this properly and how to do it safely.

HRISHI: With a layover.

[Josh laughs]

JACOB: Possibly with a layover at what right now is called The Gateway, which NASA is planning to build in an area on the moon. Which is a great way to test communications with greater comm delays, communications delays, because of the speed of light. And the radiation environment is very different. It's much more like what you're gonna find on the way to Mars.

JOSH: Working in NASA for this long, and you speak so articulately about these ventures, do you wish you actually be involved in a, you know, go to the International Space Station?

JACOB: I would fly in a heartbeat. Absolutely. I would love nothing better than to go to see in person the vehicle I've dedicated my career to flying. But it's hard to say that when, you know, our astronauts are just, they're absolutely the most qualified people...anywhere.

HRISHI: Here's my last question...an episode like this, for you as a fan of *The West Wing*, when they have a NASA plot, are you excited about this episode despite, the issues you have with it or does it make you cringe?

JACOB: It's interesting. As a *West Wing* fan, you know, I was in college, my freshman year in college was the second season of *The West Wing* and, uh, I lived on a floor that had a theme that was dedicated to politics. So the whole would get together every Wednesday night and watch *The West Wing*. WE just all loved the show. And, towards the beginning of that was, ah, Galileo. Uh, you know, the Galileo 5, and that episode haunts all of us who write policy statements and public affairs statements at NASA. We're always, this really does happen, we always say to each other, well this very historic or is it extremely unique?

[laughter]

JACOB: We say that a lot. It really haunts us. That was about the only episode I feel that did NASA well. Sam's speech outside the Kennedy Center, I have definitely cribbed from that. I'm consciously not doing it here, but I've definitely cribbed from that because it's a great speech about space exploration. The rest of the time, I don't know, I feel like Aaron Sorkin and the writers had a bad run-in with an astronaut or something. We just never seem, NASA never seems to get the respect I think it deserves. I don't know if it's a product of the times or lack of interest. Even though Josh came around at the end of this, you know, his initial dismissal of NASA was kinda brutal and unwarranted.

JOSH: Pretty bad.

HRISHI: So is this when you, you know, when you're watching with your in-laws maybe, you skip over this episode?

JACOB: [laughing] Yeah, pretty much. And just tell them what's wrong with it and then they say, "Why do we do this again, this we don't invite the nerd over."

[laughter]

HRISHI: Alright Jacob, thanks so much for joining us and giving us the inside scoop.

JACOB: Absolutely. And I would like to let everybody know, if you've never seen the space station, you don't need a pretty NASA scientist to come and take you out to a field. You can see it from anywhere in the United States. There's a website called SpotTheStation.NASA.gov. People tell you when to go out and look and see it from Manhattan. See it from Los Angeles. There's no reason, ground pollution, ground light is not a problem, so you should see it.

HRISHI: SpotTheStation.NASA.gov. Yeah, we'll put it on our website.

JOSH: Thank you so much Jacob. This was great.

JACOB: All right. Thanks a lot.

[Transition music]

HRISHI: Thanks so much to Jacob for joining us. What did you think of the Blind Willie Johnson discussion? Oh, you're making a face already.

JOSH: I wanted it to work. I wanted to stay with it. I don't know. I'm of two minds. I guess the answer is it didn't quite work for me obviously or I would be saying I LOVED IT. I wanted to love it, but it was...one it was the whole story coming from Josh at that moment. It felt a little contrived and it just didn't quite work for me.

HRISHI: You were not like Donna at the end, unconvinced at the beginning, but then...

[West Wing Episode 5.13 excerpt]

DONNA: Okay, that got me.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, no. I guess, you know, I think some judicious trims to that speech would've helped a lot.

HRISHI: Hmmm...

JOSH: It was just so going for it and I think that, uh, a little bit less, like the idea that his music just left the solar system...I got jazzed by that idea. I dig it, but doing the *whole* story felt a bit, a little much. It felt schmaltzy for me.

HRISHI: Yeah. So Carl Sagan really masterminded the golden record on the Voyager Mission. He chose this song specifically. [music starts low] He said that Johnson's song concerns a situation that he faced many times...nightfall with no place to sleep. This is the song, "Dark Was The Night, Cold Was The Ground."

[music excerpt]

HRISHI: And Carl Sagan continued, "Since humans appeared on Earth, the shroud of night has yet to fall without touching a man or a woman in the same plane."

JOSH: Hmmm

HRISHI: And I thought, if Josh had just used that...

JOSH: That would've been better.

HRISHI: Ah...

JOSH: That was good. And, but, and the music itself I found very compelling...

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: ...and worked great.

HRISHI: Absolutely. I was thinking about, uh, the last line, you know, his music just left the solar system and, um, that is so majestic and epic, but it kind of hinges on the idea that, like Josh says, Voyager, in case it's ever encountered by extraterrestrials, hinges on that idea. If extraterrestrials don't exist, or never find it, all we really did was in a very expensive way say to NASA, here, you throw this away.

JOSH: [laughs] Practically speaking, you're not wrong.

HRISHI: [laughs] But no, of course, I really, I love the golden record. I think it's a, it's really an incredible idea, and uh, that gets me. For sure. I felt like I was being...I was like, ah, I'm a sucker for this stuff. But the fact that I felt the stretch, you know, from Josh, I was like, c'mon! I'm your target market here for this speech. So why isn't it totally working on me.

JOSH: So, it didn't quite work for you either?

HRISHI: I did feel like there was...like you said, just a little bit of a trim would've been great.

JOSH: Let me ask you this. Who do you think left the telescope for Josh, Alex or Donna?

HRISHI: [sigh]

JOSH: We may never know.

HRISHI: I was confused by it altogether because who has that kind of money?

JOSH: I...well, was it the same one? Maybe Alex was just, it's not working. I'll leave it on Josh's doorstep.

[laughter]

HRISHI: Okay. I'm gonna say it's Alex because it was...that was *her* personal telescope....

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: ...and she gave it to him. I don't think Donna was, one, convinced enough...

JOSH: I don't think she has that kinda dough.

HRISHI: ...or has the money to make that happen.

JOSH: I think that was also another moment. It's like a little bit too much.

HRISHI: Ah, okay.

JOSH: You liked it?

HRISHI: Uh, I mean, no. I don't know. I completely understand your objection. What about the moment in the car? I was about to call it "on the date," but it wasn't a date. I mean, and really, I think it was one of the, uh, kind of groatier moments where it seems really like Josh is treating it like a date and this other woman is...at work.

JOSH: Well, that's the, uh, I have to say that I felt a very similar dynamic between Josh and Alex that we've become used to between Josh and Donna, and I was thinking like, this guy just has no boundaries and he also just can't close the deal [laughing] with anybody.

[laughter]

JOSH: It's both weird, like, he's like, not aware of boundaries, or if it's, if you are on a date, dude, just be on a date or let her know [laughing] that's what you *think* it is really. He's got some issues around women.

HRISHI: But that reminded me of Margaret's conversation with us about how inappropriate it was for Leo to be hitting on Jordan. As charming as we might look at that on first blush, it's like she's at work, trying to do her job as a lawyer and he's sitting there trying to get her to go to lunch with him.

JOSH: Good point.

HRISHI: And she's trying to do her best, as a NASA administrator, to convince someone to help with their cause.

JOSH: I got another, I'm gonna pile on now.

HRISHI: Okay.

JOSH: And the shots of Mars and the Orion Nebula themselves also look like [laughter], they look like kitchen magnets.

[laughter]

HRISHI: Aw, I liked them.

JOSH: I had to look...I had to go back a second time and go, are they even twinkling like, okay, there is some twinkling. They look like a still [laughter] or a sticker. [chuckles] Didn't work for me.

HRISHI: Galileo...

JOSH: [to the “Bohemian Rhapsody” tune] Galileo!

HRISHI: [chuckles] It felt like the show was trying to deliberately just push us back toward hey, remember we already did an episode about NASA and space, with lines like this one...

[West Wing Episode 5.13 excerpt]

ALEX: Jupiter. The dots on either side are the four Galilean moons. You're seeing what Galileo saw 400 years ago.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: [singing again] Galileo!

HRISHI: And Charlie says to the president...the president says...

[West Wing Episode 5.13 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: You contradicted Aristotle, Charlie.

CHARLIE: He saw the rings on Saturn.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Yes he did.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I'm like, we literally talked about what Galileo saw.

JOSH: Yeah, that's funny. Well, I didn't remember, of course, as specifically as you did the actual references, but I often thought during this plotline, we already did this...*better!*

HRISHI: Yeah. It was an interesting decision to re-explore this part of the galaxy.

JOSH: I felt like maybe Lauren Hissrich was on vacation this week...

HRISHI: ...to remind them...

JOSH: ...yeah, hey guys! Remember “Galileo?”

HRISHI: Yeah. [chuckles] There was this funny relationship between this plot line and the nuclear plot line where I kept waiting and waiting, hoping, I guess, for these two stories to intersect.

JOSH: Yeah, as did I.

HRISHI: And I felt like, they *didn't* intersect. They were doing these things that, ah, I actually thought it was summed up well by the moment when Josh *is* telling the story about Blind Willie Johnson. As he's telling that story to Donna, the music kind of swells up, and, as he's saying it, it's intercut with the Israeli ambassador arriving in the White House. It's a nice shot, you know, it's shot from behind the back, I like that...

JOSH: Um hmmm

HRISHI: ...that move. But then the two don't congeal in any way. It felt like it was trying to employ that, like, Eisenstein cross-cut of like, oh we're saying this thing, we're talking about this thing, but you're seeing the images *here* and therefore you have to imbue these images with this other meaning. But then, the meaning didn't stick. It just kind of slid off because I couldn't see how Blind Willie Johnson's story actually applied to this meeting. You know, and then...

JOSH: I agree with you. I felt like I had to reverse engineer the meaning of the two plots and how they reflected on each other and decide for myself if it's about the, both the awesome destructive power of technology and the hopeful...

HRISHI: Hmmm

JOSH: ...look to the future of what technology *might* bring us. But it was never quite really dished up in a way that said the people creating this episode are thinking *this*...

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: ...what they're leading up to, it felt like it was up to you to sort of extraneously put something together.

HRISHI: It's funny because it did feel like there were breadcrumbs though. When the Israeli prime minister comes to the White House.

JOSH: Portrayed by the fabulous Armin Mueller-Stahl. Great actor.

HRISHI: Yes. Yeah. Okay so there's a moment when the president and the Israeli Prime Minister are having a conversation and they're talking about the Cold War and he says "mutual assured destruction" and the president says there's a reason its acronym was MAD. Separately, Alex, when she was talking to Josh in his office, she shows him a button. Right? That was supposed to be, like, a pro Mars Mission button...

JOSH: Right, MOB.

HRISHI: ...and it stood for Mars or Bust, but it said MOB. It's another three letter acronym that starts with M.

JOSH: [chuckles]

HRISHI: You know, these two things are adjacent...

JOSH: Hmmm

HRISHI: ...but they don't actually...

JOSH: Connect?

HRISHI: Yeah, they don't actually connect, I think. But it also felt like a strange coincidence that both these things were there.

JOSH: Hmmm, emblematic maybe of the problem with this episode.

HRISHI: Yeah, I mean there were also things like in the conversation about the cost of the Mars Mission. Alex says, oh, you know, it's the cost of one weapons system. And she and Josh,

neither one of them, are aware of the conversations that are happening about this nuclear detonation. But, I thought, you know, okay, this is a moment, this is where they're starting to pull the threads together. But ultimately, yeah, I didn't feel like they did pull together.

JOSH: Yeah. Well, maybe it was up to us. That's a good, ah...I don't know if that occurred to me as I watched, but that's a good point, just the question of where our money goes as a nation and what priorities that reflects.

HRISHI: Yeah. Okay, so this was my attempt to pull all the things together.

JOSH: I figured you would. That's why I didn't try to...

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: ...to while I was watching it.

HRISHI: I thought of it like this – how are nuclear weapons, politicians, and telescopes similar?

JOSH: I don't know Hrish. How *are* nuclear weapons, politicians, and telescopes similar?

HRISHI: They're all only effective if you know where to point them.

JOSH: BOOM! It's good. It's very good.

HRISHI: I think that works.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: I think that made sense.

JOSH: Yeah, it does...

HRISHI: That's, that's...

JOSH: I was hoping it would be a dirty joke, but that actually makes sense.

HRISHI: I love the...because I love the revelation that Bingo Bob does come to the rescue by talking about the merits of the thing that Will is arguing for him to argue against.

JOSH: [pseudo dramatically] Cast aside the policy brief he has been given, you mean.

HRISHI: Yeah, the Congressional, the idea of a Congressional junket.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: That oh, this is a waste and as a former congressman the vice president says

[West Wing Episode 5.13 excerpt]

RUSSELL: You know it's easy to characterize junkets as vacations at taxpayers' expense, but they serve a purpose. Contacts get made. Frank exchanges take place that would never happen in the glare of Washington.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And suddenly what was a haphazard memory that was not connected to anything and that didn't have any purpose, knowing this thing that Leo had told him, suddenly he could lock on to the target and say, oh, my gosh! This is actually something useful that I know and...

JOSH: There you go! He had to be pointed in the right direction.

HRISHI: Yeah and...and...same with Josh. You know, Alex, when we see Josh at the end of the episode for the final time, when he's, ah, looking through the telescope that has been mysteriously delivered to him, I thought, how does he even know where to look? Without Alex there? Like, how does he know how to find...I mean it's literally space. You know, like, how does he know...

JOSH: [chuckles]

HRISHI: ...what he's looking at?

JOSH: I guess is, I was hoping you'd see, and he would be looking at an apartment building.

[laughs]

JOSH: Like the girls' dorm, the women's dorm he had talked about earlier.

HRISHI: He's trying to look into Alex's apartment.

JOSH: [chuckles] Right. That would've been fantastic!

HRISHI: That's his version of asking Alex out on a second date.

JOSH: Fantastic! As Blind Willie Johnson sings [blues music plays] in the background.

HRISHI: And yeah, I thought, so I thought, how does he know where to point that thing? And then I was, like, yeah, maybe that is the greater theme for the classroom. Then I thought of Galileo when they're looking for, looking for the greater theme.

JOSH: By the way, telescopes, high tech telescopes...very difficult to use and set up. My dad bought a beautiful telescope and we kept it at my house in Malibu for 16 years and never set it up.

[laughter]

HRISHI: I would assume so, I mean, never having used one...

JOSH: ...they've from the great star gazers are the Malinas! We're very good at buying a telescope and putting it in the garage on a high shelf.

HRISHI: Look, telescope makers need to eat, too.

JOSH: That's absolutely right. It was American made if I'm not mistaken. Let's talk about the nuclear plot.

HRISHI: Yes, please.

JOSH: You said, early on, that you found it riveting. I thought it was.../less than riveting. I felt it *could* have been. I thought we needed to cut to some B2 bomber pilots talking to people in the Sit Room. Somehow I didn't feel the potential nuclear crisis in a vibrant compelling way.

HRISHI: Well, I guess there was no impending crisis, right, so much as, uh, I mean, because...

JOSH: No. The B2s were in the air and as soon as they could get a confirmation that it was Iran, something terrible would happen.

HRISHI: That's true. You know, actually thinking about it, that part of it, the sort of hard-edged, military strike part of it didn't even really [chuckles] register for me.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: I was thinking more about the softer side, the diplo...the diplomatic meetings with Ron and with Israel.

JOSH: But that stuff was more effective. I agree with you. I would like the throbbing pulse of the potential cataclysm to have been palpable as well. But, I, what did work in that plot for me were those meetings and the meeting with the Israeli Prime Minister. The writing was very good and it was interesting. And also the sort of puffed up hypocrisy of the United States is trying to dictate everything.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Trying to dictate nuclear policy.

[West Wing Episode 5.13 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Your argument boils down to you're asking that the world trust you.

ISRAELI PRIME MINISTER: As does America's.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Which of course is the case. I thought the writing was very good as well as the acting.

HRISHI: Yeah, and it's interesting to watch the episode a second time knowing how it ends. To then re-watch the meeting with Iran and realize they're wrong. They play it out the way the characters feel, which, you know is you assume that this person is lying or covering something up. And of course that's how they act and they say that's why they get the B2 bombers in the air and they're just waiting for confirmation. Then watching it a second time and to read that exchange the way it might have been read from the Iranian ambassador's point of view, where he's like, these are all facts. These are the things, you know, we have been complying with this. You know it's great it takes on a completely different tone when you realize, oh this...

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: ...is not about confronting the villain. We're the villains in this moment.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: There's a line that comes early in the episode...

[West Wing Episode 5.13 excerpt]

LEO: We find out who this was, then what?

PRESIDENT BARTLET: We'll have to do something.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: But then they *do* find out who it was and...

JOSH: ...what do they do? Um hm.

HRISHI: There was this one line that Josh had with Donna about going out with Alex.

[West Wing Episode 5.13 excerpt]

DONNA: Would you be going if she weren't attractive?

JOSH: We'll never know.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And [laughs] and then throughout the episode I thought, that answer could really be the response to so many questions this episode raises.

JOSH: We'll never know.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Like I said, who gave him the telescope?

HRISHI: Yeah. Exactly.

JOSH: We'll never know.

HRISHI: We'll never know. What is he actually *looking* at through the telescope?

JOSH & HRISHI: We'll never know.

HRISHI: But, you know, Charlie asks the president, of course this very poignant question...

[West Wing Episode 5.13 excerpt]

CHARLIE: Would you have made the same decision Truman made?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I felt like that was a bit of a cop-out, too. End of scene.

HRISHI: End of scene, well, and end of episode. We'll never know.

JOSH: Um hmm.

HRISHI: Or at least maybe we'll know in a future episode. I don't know yet.

JOSH: That was getting to a very, very interesting point. I liked Charlie kind of pushing him on that and I would like to know what President Bartlet's ultimate response would have been.

HRISHI: Yeah. I really would, too. I mean I that is...that's gotta be the hardest question a president has ever had to face. It was also interesting that, ah...

JOSH: Boxers or briefs? Also.

[chuckles]

JOSH: Or maybe that's number two.

HRISHI: It was interesting that the president had on his desk, a real book, the book "Man of the People: The Life of Harry S. Truman." It was a little bit of product placement. You know...

JOSH: Yes!

HRISHI: ...it, I like that there was a real world artifact there that he was consulting, in that moment. We'll put a link to that book on our site if anybody wants to pick that up.

JOSH: Maybe some listener out there will turn it into a musical.

[chuckles]

JOSH: Unlikely, but who knows.

HRISHI: Okay. Okay, let's take a quick break and when we come back we'll be joined by former Congressman John Tierney to talk about the fun topic of nuclear proliferation.

JOSH: Woo!

[Transition break]

HRISHI: That really would have been the time for you to say "Boom!"

[Ad break]

JOSH: Our guest today is John Tierney. He's the former nine-term congressman from Massachusetts, I believe representing Hrish's home town of Peabody.

HRISHI: It's true.

JOHN: That's right.

HRISHI: West Peabody. Represent.

JOSH: Mr. Tierney served on the House Intelligence Committee and worked ardently on nuclear non-proliferation when he was in Congress. He is now the executive director of Council for a Livable World, an organization that was founded by Leo Szilard, and whose board included

Hans Bethe, both of whom are name-checked in this episode. And I understand that your national advisory board includes our own Richard Schiff.

JOHN: That's correct!

JOSH: Welcome to the show.

JOHN: Well, thank you very much. We have, apparently a long history together.

JOSH: Yeah, it turns out. Can you tell us a little bit about the work of your organization?

JOHN: I'll be happy to do that. Look, the Council for a Livable World got started in 1962 after the Cuban Missile Crisis and, as you mentioned, it was started by the physicist, Leo Szilard. In about 1962, he figured out that just reasoning with people wasn't doing enough and he created the Council so that they could do a number of things. Support candidates for office, federal office that understood the risks and dangers and consequences of nuclear weapons and would work to get rid of them, at least lessen the risk of them in the interim and get rid of them eventually. And then help raise money for those candidates so they could get elected. And then work with them and their staffs, educating them about the issue. And, once elected of course, the Council continues that education process to staff members in Congress and to members of both the House and the Senate, and then brings a lot of pressure to bear through its significant membership, to make sure that the people remember that the ones supporting them when they went for office have an interest in this issue and want them to pay attention to it and want them to do the right thing. So, uh, you can imagine that, given today's environment, we're fairly busy.

HRISHI: You know, one of the things in this episode that comes up is, uh, a question between Charlie and the president and Charlie asks the president if he had been in Truman's position, what would he have done. And we don't get answer. You know, we see the president is still grappling with the question. You know because they talk about the potential deaths that were avoided. The scale of death would potentially have been larger if Truman hadn't dropped the bomb. And, I was wondering, do you have an official position from the organization about whether Truman was wrong to have done that.

JOHN: Actually, we don't have an official position looking back and it's a fiercely debated issue in the community for all the reasons that you state. That nobody seems to know exactly what the history was and what the trade-offs were really going to be on that basis. But, we have the position, obviously, that we don't think that nuclear weapons should be used, particularly not going forward. On that, we are very clear on that because we're aware of what the situation is today. In the United States, for instance, we can resolve almost all matters with conventional weapons and don't need to be threatening people with nuclear weaponry or using them. And the consequences are catastrophic. And the idea that there might be some sort of a limited nuclear war is just not reasonable. It's, uh, it's ridiculous and the risk of it just escalating and getting out of control and, as I said, being catastrophic, is just too huge. Unfortunately, it seems a lot of people don't really grasp the consequences of what happens when a nuclear explosion occurs. And they don't read about the book "Hiroshima," in schools anymore. And they don't talk about the types of injuries and damage that was done the types, difference between bombs today and the two bombs that were dropped in Japan.

HRISHI: What *is* the difference between the bombs today and those bombs?

JOHN: Well, just size and magnitude for one thing. We've a fusion bomb now as opposed to what was a fission bomb then. They do a tremendous amount of damage, significantly more

than what was done with that and that in Japan, obviously, was huge, on that. So just imagine that many, many, many times over and that's just with the United States arsenal. You add in the arsenals of the other countries that have the seven nuclear powers and you get to see what could really happen.

JOSH: And is it difficult for the United States to push for non-proliferation even as it modernizes its own nuclear arsenal to that extent?

JOHN: Yes, I think that it is. But it's hard to argue that other countries should not get a nuclear capacity or that other countries should start winding down with the United States unless we're being pretty deliberate about it. Unless we show some signs of, you know, really adhering to the non-proliferation treaty, which commits *all* of the nuclear states to sort of keep reducing the amount and eventually eliminating them. And, since 2010, with the new START Treaty, I think the rest of the world doesn't think there's enough being done. And, I think that they're right that there hasn't been enough being done to move us along in that direction. And we cannot use, which I think some people are doing, modernization process as something other than just making sure they're safe and secure. Some people are using it as an excuse to create new kinds of weapons, more powerful weapons, and a different assortment of weapons. And that's very de-stabilizing, and again, works counter to the idea of reducing weapons and eventually eliminating them.

JOSH: Um hm. Have you seen this actual episode of *The West Wing*?

JOHN: I have.

JOSH: Ah. So you know it begins with a nuclear detonation and, uh, the US government's attempt to try to determine who is the newest member of the nuclear club and there's some conjecture as to whether it might be Iran or North Korea, and it ultimately turns out that Israel was testing potential miniaturized nukes to be put on subs. And there's also some thought that it could have been a rogue group, like a terrorist group getting its hands on nuclear material. How likely is that scenario these days?

JOHN: I understand the license that the artists have in putting that show together, but it wasn't entirely realistic on that because essentially it was an atmospheric test which would not have been done at that point in time and there hasn't been an atmospheric test since China did one last in 1980.

JOSH: Hmm.

JOHN: So any test today would more likely to be underground. And on that if they were to happen at all, the only one who did any testing since that is North Korea. But there was a real life scenario, which I suspect your show was based on, where there was a detonation, or what was believed to be a detonation, in the South Atlantic, somewhere between South Africa and Antarctica. And a lot of people, experts, believe that the finger was pointed at, likely, Israeli situation, although the United States has never taken an official position on it. Many people think that it was fairly clear that's who it was. So I assume that's what instigated the show, was some knowledge of that.

HRISHI: And how do you think we're doing in the world in general on the issue. And I don't mean we, the United States, or anything like that. I mean in the world are we winning or losing the battle for non-proliferation?

JOHN: We're not doing enough. I mean, we were moving in the direction for years, for decades, since the 80s and 90s and on from there. We were moving in the right direction. We had a real movement internationally of people that were cognizant of the issue. They were passionate about it. And they forced the political structure in multiple countries to start getting serious about it. We kept moving in that direction right through 2010, whether there was a Republican or a Democrat in office here. But now we seem to be backing off from that a little bit. Some of the people that never thought we should have international treaties to begin with and we never satisfied enough nuclear weapons or whatever, like the John Boltons of the world. You know, they're now sticking their head up again. They're talking under the guise of this modernization program of doing more than keeping them safe and secure. They're talking about more powerful weapons and different types of weapons and that obviously leads other countries to be concerned and start thinking well maybe they should do the same thing. And so you see, in Russia, in China, in Pakistan, in India, and in our country this concept of modernization, which is leading to an increase in weapons and research and putting it to use...new kinds of weapons. That's very destabilizing. And we've had a number of different errors in detection systems in different countries where they thought there was an attack on them and they were getting ready to respond and just *luck* would have it that we haven't actually gotten into a full conflagration on a lot of this.

HRISHI: Hmm.

JOSH: I notice on the Council's website that you provide grades for candidates based on their voting records and their positions on these issues and that you endorse certain candidates, and looking at the slate of candidates you currently endorse, it's almost entirely Democrats, with an occasional Independent. Is this *that* partisan of an issue?

JOHN: No, but it's becoming one. That's the sad part of it. We used to endorse a lot of Republicans. Those that really understand the issue, and there are some, we talk to them regularly, are concerned about speaking out because of the treatment they'll get in their own conference, the Republican Conference, and with the, some of the people in their primaries on that. So, we have Republicans that we think are really knowledgeable about that issue, that understand it and agree with our position, but they would rather *not* be endorsed by us because in a primary, they feel they'll get shellacked and they get too much pressure from these outside sources on that who are, again, going very, very hawkish.

HRISHI: Do you think the United States can only be a truly effective advocate once we've gotten rid of our entire nuclear arsenal?

JOHN: No, no. I think we can be an effective advocate right now as we have been up through the Obama Administration. We are, we are people that can lead. We've got some work to make up given what's gone on on the international scene and I think the mistreatment of a lot of people in the international community by the current administration. But, we have the ability, as the United States, to take the lead on this, and if we go and take the lead and start acting intelligently on this, others will follow. China is probably the one major superpower that doesn't really have an interest in increasing its nuclear arsenal unless it fears that the United States and Russia are increasing theirs. If we took the leadership and started to get serious about our negotiations to try to reduce those numbers, and then persuade other countries like China and the other nuclear states to join us in moving in that direction. But as long as the United States continues to have this voice about wanting more nuclear weapons and more powerful ones and different types of ones, yeah, we don't have much voice or a leg to stand on as a nation because everybody else is going to figure that that's so de-stabilizing, what are they going to do to protect themselves?

JOSH: Makes sense.

HRISHI: The prime minister, the Israeli Prime Minister in this episode accuses President Bartlet...

[West Wing Episode 5.13 excerpt]

ISRAELI PRIME MINISTER: The United States ideal number for nuclear weapons states is one.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Do you think that is a fair characterization of a liberal Democratic president in the mid-2000s? Is that a fair representation of the politics then or is that really more of the hawkish, sort of Bolton, view of things?

JOHN: Yeah, I think the latter on that. I think, you know, in that period of time that we're talking about, there was an interest in negotiating a reduction and the eventual elimination across the board on that. It's gonna be a very, very difficult thing to do. Obviously, as long as there's an imbalance in conventional forces, as long as the United States has the size of conventional forces that it has, it's gonna be very difficult to get a Russia or people like that to give up what they think of as a deterrent against being overwhelmed by that type of a force. But in the meantime, while we're trying to get to that situation where we negotiate all of them, there's plenty of room to be negotiating down the numbers and types of weapons and putting in more safeguards against the use, not the least of a safeguard would be to take many them off of ready alert so that there was at least time for people to consider whether or not a threat was realistic or not and we wouldn't be in a situation where once somebody thought there was a threat you have to use 'em or lose 'em and put people in a predicament where they're making a decision on much too little time and too little information. We have a no first use policy that would assure the rest of the world that we were not gonna use them unless we were under threat of attack or imminent threat of attack or under attack, and that would be a more stabilizing factor on that. So there are things we can do in the interim and we oughta be doing and leading as a nation toward.

HRISHI: There's a reference to, you know, America's policy during the Cold War of Mutually Assured Destruction and I was wondering if there's a way to put that toothpaste back into the tube. It seems that's what you are advocating for, but even just with the existence of nuclear weapons currently, but then also, you know, developing nations who want to become members of this club in order to assert their own dominance. It feels like the idea of mutually assured destruction being part of our history doesn't seem quite accurate. That that's still the state of affairs, really.

JOHN: You know, what President Bartlet said in that episode, I believe, was they call it MAD for a reason.

HRISHI: Um hmm.

JOHN: Mutually Assured Destruction, everybody that that was saving the world, but in fact but we came close, in fact perilously close on a number of occasions, of that just flat out not working. And probably the example people will most recognize is the Cuban Missile Crisis. So that's a situation where Mutually Assured Destruction was not really effective and we came darn close to just starting nuclear war and having it escalate out of control, and it wasn't mutually

assured in that sense of the world in that once the trust goes out and someone decides to use the weapon you're off and running. And so the only answer really is the eventual elimination of all the arsenals and because of all the problems I stated earlier about how difficult that is, the only interim action is to move steadily in that direction. And to continue doing it to reduce them and keep reducing them and keep trying to make sure that there's as much transparency and as much verification in those reductions. As much knowledge and information about what the other side is doing with their weapons. Try to get everybody to march in the same direction all at the same time. And not have people wondering, in a destabilizing manner, who's going to do what or where are they?

JOSH: I'm curious. It seems unthinkable, but I understand there are examples of nations actually destroying their own nuclear capabilities. South Africa, I guess in the 80s and a few Soviet republics that had inherited weapons. What are the factors that lead to that kind of progress?

JOHN: Well, generally, it's a determination that the cost and expense of maintaining the systems outweighs what they think are the benefits. So, whether or not they thought they were actually at risk of being attacked by a nuclear state and the less that that risk was the more inclined they were to get rid of that expense and the danger of just having them. So they have all those different range of issues on that and you have Argentina and Brazil just made a mutual agreement that they would move in that direction because the only ones they were really concerned about were each other. And they finally came to their senses and decided it was just better to mutually agree to, uh, to not do it and they put their agreement in effect.

JOSH: And what risk do you think there is currently of a terrorist group getting their hands on nuclear material?

JOHN: Well, the nuclear materials risk is always a problem on that. You have to have the risk that they get their hands on the material. And then maybe the group is sophisticated enough to know what do with them.

JOSH: Um hmm.

JOHN: But that's certainly a higher risk of that happening than, oh, of somebody getting a weapon full blown and being able to do anything with it. Or even of a government intentionally starting a nuclear war other than by miscalculation. So, we should be concerned. One of our projects is the fissile material working group, which is a group that sort of taken on the Obama Summits that were two year cycles of meeting and internationally everybody trying to show what is it that they were doing to reduce the plutonium and uranium enrichment in their countries and lessen the exposure that somebody might get their hands on that material.

HRISHI: And what can people do to get engaged? I think our listeners, and *West Wing* fans in general, are people who want to be involved. So, what could they do if they wanted to contribute in some way?

JOHN: They could join the Council for a Livable World or one of the other organizations on that and educate themselves. Go on website. Go on the website of our sister organizations, which is the Research and Analysis Group, the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation and learn about the issue so that you know what you're talking about and we have it on the websites in a way that's very digestible and not overwhelming. They need to engage with their members of Congress, both the House level and the Senate level, and let them know that people in their district care about this issue and that they're watching about whether they're taking sensible

action or not. They can go to debates or forums in the political process and make sure that somebody asks the question about this or where does the candidate stand. They can visit their local newspapers, either alone or as a group, and say why don't you write more about this? Why are you not covering this on a more regular basis? Write letters to the editor. They can use all of the new digital tools that are out there to make that message gone and support groups.

JOSH: That's right. The message has gotten muted over time, but as you say, it's an issue that in many ways supersedes all others.

JOHN: That's right.

HRISHI: Mr. Tierney, thank you so much for joining us and talking to us about it. We'll put a link to the website Livable World.org on our website so people can find and join easily.

JOSH: Thank you so much. What a great interview.

JOHN: Thank you. Take care now.

HRISHI: And that's it for this episode.

JOSH: Thanks for joining us once again. We remain, as ever, part of Radiotopia, brought to you by PRX. Radiotopia has a fine selection of fine podcasts that you can learn more about at Radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: If you'd like to hear more from Congressman John Tierney, you can follow him on Twitter at @RepTierney.

JOSH: Thanks as always to Zach McNees and Margaret Miller for their help with the show.

HRISHI: And also a shout out to Nick Song who helped me research this episode.

JOSH: And thanks to no one who helped *me* research this episode.

HRISHI: Their work really paid off.

JOSH: [laughs] Yeah. I think it showed.

[laughs]

HRISHI: You can follow us on all of the things @WestWingWeekly @JoshMalina @HrishiHirway and then sometimes the names are something else on other places.

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: But you can find us.

JOSH: Find us. If you want us...we're not gonna handfeed you. You wanna follow us, you figure out where to find us.

[chuckles]

JOSH: It won't be worth it.

HRISHI: Okay.

JOSH: Okay.

HRISHI & JOSH: What's next?

HRISHI & JOSH: We'll never know.

[Outro Music]