

The West Wing Weekly
5.14: "An Khe"

[Intro Music]

HRISHI: You're listening to The West Wing Weekly. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway.

JOSH: And I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: And today we're talking about *An Khe*. It's episode 14 of the 5th season.

JOSH: It was written by John Wells, directed by Alex Graves, and it first aired on the 18th day of the 2nd month in the year 2004.

HRISHI: The NBC official synopsis and the TV Guide synopsis - both of them are wrong, I think. The TV Guide one begins - "A navy fighter collides with a North Korean jet, and the US crew is missing." The Warner Brothers official synopsis says, "When five crew members of an Airborne Thunderchief are shot down by North Korean jets near the hostile country, President Bartlet dispatches a Navy Seal team to retrieve them." But in both cases, that's not the case.

JOSH: Well, you know, it speaks to something that did pique my interest, which is why and how do the crew go down?

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Cuz the only mention that I'm aware of in the Sit Room, is that a MiG, a Korean MiG, was off their wing, as close as 10 feet.

HRISHI: Here's what General Alexander says:

[West Wing Episode 5.14 excerpt]

GENERAL ALEXANDER: An E2C Hawkeye was being harassed by two North Korean MiGs over the Sea of Japan. The MiGs have made two non-firing passes, one less than 10 feet off his wing.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And then there's no actual direct indication of what forced them either to eject or why they went down, and it seems clear that the people in the Sit Room are concerned about North Korea becoming aware of these downed fighters so clearly, they didn't shoot them down.

[crosstalk]

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Right.

JOSH: Or they'd know that there'd been military interaction. The whole thing is a little bit odd and perhaps, intentionally so.

HRISHI: Yeah, let me read what the rest of the official synopsis says. "President Bartlet dispatches a Navy Seal team to retrieve them, prompting Leo to recall his own harrowing experience when he was downed as a pilot over North Vietnam. Leo's good friend and fellow flyer saved Leo's life and now is in trouble for allegedly paying bribes to defense contractors to obtain military contracts. Meanwhile, C.J. accepts the challenge of dueling on live television with an opinionated, conservative talk show host, Taylor Reid."

JOSH: Who refuses to put a space between his first and last names [laughter] on his show's chiron.

HRISHI: "Josh fumes when he briefs the president about a contested tax cut for stay-at-home mothers and is undercut by brash, young intern Ryan, and the commander-in-chief balks at posing for his official portrait." They left out "again".

JOSH: Good point. Now back to the, I think, intentional obfuscation about what actually went down. I think it's a way to protect the integrity of the cold open. Now, I think, you know, we will later learn that what we're seeing is what happened over Vietnam in the air.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And I think the idea of the cold open is going straight from that to the Sit Room, we think we've seen what happened over Korea.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: So, it's giving us a scenario that can't be confirmed in the Sit Room, because they weren't shot down.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: So, I assume that's why it's all a bit confusing.

HRISHI: Yeah, they want to wait until the moment when you hear Leo's name to reveal that those scenes are flashbacks.

JOSH: Right, although, there is a little Easter egg, if you notice. And actually, I love the opening. I think it feels almost, not of the genetic code of *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: For sure.

JOSH: But I really like it, and I like how it leads out from a cramped, claustrophobic, chaotic situation that the pilots are in. Also, I think very well filmed and lit. The cinematography is great. I think you feel like you're in the cockpit and then goes to just a sort of a charity gala, and you get that feeling of the difference between being of the military itself and the people who make decisions about the military and that contrast. I liked the cold open very much. Alex Graves gives us a little Easter egg as he pans down briefly and lingers just a moment on the patch that's on the pilot's uniform.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: The 333rd fighter squadron. The lancers. It's like a little easter egg hunt, if you bother to look it up or if you know, I guess, your military history that that was a squadron in the Vietnam War. There's just a little hint, and also there's a little bit of a feel and a look that's suggests that this may be not contemporary.

HRISHI: Yeah

[West Wing Episode 5.14 excerpt]

CO-PILOT: We've been hit!

PILOT: Fire light's on. Can you see, two?

CO-PILOT: Clean off the wing. You've got two tanks near the fire.

PILOT: We've lost hydraulics.

[garbled yelling]

CO-PILOT: We've got to punch out.

PILOT: [garbled yelling]

CO-PILOT: We're not gonna make it.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: There was also a little bit of a head fake in the "Previously On" which is that it included a scene, the scene between Leo and President Bartlet at the bottom of the stairs.

[West Wing Episode 4.23 excerpt]

LEO: Me and Nancy and Fitz are standing right next to you when you get information. You don't need to remember it.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: It sort of suggests that that's going to play in the coming episode, and I kept waiting for the moment where MS became pertinent, germane to the episode and it never did. I felt like "Wow, they're even trying to fool us with the 'previously on' or not thinking that much about what they should include."

HRISHI: I also want to mention that John Spencer was nominated for an Emmy for this episode.

JOSH: Sure, why not? [laughter] I just mean he's very good.

HRISHI: Yeah, he could be nominated-

JOSH: Really for any episode. Yeah.

HRISHI: So, what did you think of the trickiness of intercutting present day with what turns out to be a flashback, but you don't realize it's a flashback?

JOSH: Right, a flashback to a similar situation.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: During the Vietnam War.

HRISHI: You know, and then flashes to the present tense with the two people who are in the flashback, Ken O'Neal and Leo. What did you think about it as a continuing device throughout the episode?

JOSH: Well, I guess the answer is that I like the concept of going back and giving us a little bit of Leo's backstory, but I felt these scenes themselves were a little wan. They didn't particularly elevate the current story. They weren't particularly revelatory. And one thing I did like was being able to see, in flashback, the payoff to something I bumped on initially, which is Leo giving this little speech and telling this little joke and feting his dear friend.

[West Wing Episode 5.14 excerpt]

LEO: The finest man that I have ever had the great privilege to call my friend. Your own Kenneth Sean O'Neal.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: At the moment, I thought, "Hang on a second-"

HRISHI: "What about the president?"

JOSH: You're right, he's got to be introducing President Bartlet this way, and that kind of stuck in my craw a little bit like, "Wow that's outrageous. [cross talk] C'mon!"

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah like, "Where's your sense of loyalty?"

JOSH: Yeah, right. And then to discover, and then to see, that this is the man who carried him bodily out of a life and death situation, I thought was great. I thought, "Okay, well, there is a bond, really, even beyond Leo-Bartlet." The tension of the moment, in a way, was missing for me in a way that it was present in the cold open.

HRISHI: Yeah, I thought that they pulled off a neat the trick when they finally reveal that it is Leo in the flashback.

[West Wing Episode 5.14 excerpt]

LEO: Please. You gotta go.

KEN: I'm not leave you, Leo. So forget it. Come on! [Leo grunts] Let's go.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: But then I felt like there was no need to return to them after that. Then it was sort of, okay, then we see them just, continuing on.

JOSH: Yeah. Good point. Diminishing returns.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Although, I found, in a way, throughout this episode there were kind of build ups, or builds up, to disappointing reveals.

HRISHI: Oh! You're talking about Ranger Ben?

JOSH: Certainly, chief among them was Ranger Ben, which, not only has been a multi-episode build up, but Alex also films the reveal. As we slowly creep into the room, he's talking to Carol; and then we kind of come around a corner, get a glimpse of him and... it's Brian Kerwin!

HRISHI: Yeah, and no offense to Brian Kerwin.

JOSH: Right, exactly. He's both a good actor and a fine-looking gentleman, but, like, it needed to actually be Robert Redford.

[laughter]

HRISHI: Or the Joker?

JOSH: Sure.

[laughter]

HRISHI: That's what I was expecting, at that point.

JOSH: That's brilliant.

[laughter]

HRISHI: Carol had been taken in, it turned out it was-

JOSH: Oh my God, that's hilarious. Yeah, you certainly were expecting something more revelatory than, "Oh, so that's Ben."

HRISHI: Yeah, it's a guy.

JOSH: Yeah, odd.

HRISHI: More odd even than a guy who carries around a photo of C.J. in her bikini.

[West Wing Episode 5.14 excerpt]

BEN: God, she was something in a bikini, huh?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: You know, look, that was a bit disappointing too. It's like this guy, this dashing guy. It's like Sir Lancelot finally arrives, and goes "This-

[laughter]

HRISHI: [cross talk] "Check out Guinevere!"

JOSH: [cross talk] "Guinevere! Look at her! Look at this corset shot! Whoa-who!" [Hrishi laughs] I was a little disappointed about the dashing Ben. I'm like, "That's it?"

[laughter]

HRISHI: Oh that's great. "I keep a photo of my love in a locket. It's her in a bikini."

[laughter]

JOSH: Yeah, I was like, “Womp womp” to quote someone famous. Yeah, a little disappointing. But I also thought it was almost a recurring theme in the episode. I thought, C.J. finally decides to go on Taylor Reid, and her, I guess, supposed thrashing of him.

[West Wing Episode 5.14 excerpt]

C.J.: I'm gonna reach down and rip off his puny little face.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I also found a little bit less than satisfying.

HRISHI: There was no knock-out punch or anything. It felt more like maybe it was a technical win by points?

JOSH: Yes, well said. One, first of all, his show is just the worst of the worst. He's not even really there to interact. He's, like, hardly letting her get a word in. It's almost so cheap like, why would she go on that show?

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It's like accepting an invitation from Alex Jones or something. There's no way to even respond substantively to what this guy is saying. And then when she does, yes, she's very articulate and has a good little run, but it isn't the knock-out that we've come to expect.

HRISHI: Yeah, Taylor Reid, I guess, is based on Bill O'Reilly. I can't really actually comment on how accurate it was because I never watch those shows.

JOSH: I do, on occasion. I'm neither a hard-crow listener, I like to watch Lawrence, and I like Rachel Maddow. And I like to see, also, occasionally, what's happening on the other side in small doses.

HRISHI: And how did this feel to you?

JOSH: It felt like an exaggeration pushed beyond credibility. Almost just because he, in the early segments, isn't really even letting her speak.

[West Wing Episode 5.14 excerpt]

C.J.: You're not giving me a chance to answer. If you just want to bloviate, why don't I leave a cardboard cutout of myself, and you can talk all you want.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: It's kind of just an overwrought version of what you get on Fox News. I mean there is usually a little more air given to the guest. I can't imagine why anybody would go on a show, I guess I think that sometimes on Hannity as well, but the Taylor Reid show is a super intensified version of, I guess, what you see on Fox.

HRISHI: It does make me wonder about pundits who go onto shows. Pundits who come from the administration or, you know, who are serving either for a political party or for an administration who then go on shows like that where the odds are absolutely stacked against them in terms of the chance of them being able to make their point or convince anybody- I don't know, I guess I always think that the idea of those shows is that someone is gonna convince somebody else of some point of view, but that never happens.

JOSH: No, indeed not. There's a funny bit – I've been watching *The Good Place* – and there's a funny joke about somebody on the internet having changed his mind because of an interaction, [Hrishi laughs] cause it's the only time it ever happens.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: It sort of applies to this arena as well.

HRISHI: But it makes me wonder, why people do go on those shows. I know there are audiences there, but it just feels like volunteering to be a punching bag.

JOSH: Well, look, a lot of them are just, that's their bread and butter. They're the "I'm the more right-leaning person who goes on CNN a lot and gets paid for it." I understand what you're saying, if it's actually, an administration representative.

HRISHI: Yeah, that's what I mean.

JOSH: Then it is more of a head-scratcher.

HRISHI: Yeah, is it just sort of, you try and deploy everyone you can across all media to try and get your message across?

JOSH: Yeah, I suppose so. There's, I guess, clearly an upside just to being represented and just to getting your message out anywhere.

HRISHI: Yeah, maybe you reach the tiny fraction of that population who isn't the choir being preached to.

JOSH: Right. You can find the small sliver of your choir, that you can get to even in enemy territory.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I'll throw out two more reveals that were on the disappointing side to me. One was what happens in the Oval with Ryan and Josh.

HRISHI: Oh yeah.

JOSH: Not that it's a huge build up, but you sort of get the feeling Ryan's in there for the first time, and Josh says "I'm gonna take credit for your work" and so I think there's a little bit of an expectation built up that something's gonna happen, and in the end it was just a little bit of a "eh"

[West Wing Episode 5.14 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: What's the tax benefit for the typical family?

JOSH: About a hundred dollars a year.

RYAN: Closer to three hundred.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: First of all, Ryan's idea of like "I think we can do both" didn't seem like an incredible revelation or a master intellectual stroke of what he came up with. He just kind of "Maybe there's a compromise to be had here, hmm".

HRISHI: Well the thing that struck me the most about that scene was not anything that Ryan did, but the idea that Josh would go in the Oval Office to brief the president and not be fully prepared. That seemed so out of character that it actually pulled me out of the episode. I was like, this would *never* happen.

JOSH: [crosstalk] I agree.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] We know how seriously he takes his job. We know how seriously he takes briefing the president. The idea that he would go into the oval office to brief the president and not have the numbers down cold seemed crazy to me.

JOSH: Great point. I also bumped on that as well. Josh walking into the Oval as prepared as I am to get on mic with you to discuss an episode [Hrishi laughs] of *The West Wing*. I don't buy it.

[West Wing Episode 5.13 excerpt]

JOSH: I prepare even for meetings that I don't want to go to.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah, that part felt unfair to that character and only as a means to have this moment for Ryan. I thought a moment that should have felt maybe interesting or exciting or dramatic. It just was undercut by my disbelief.

JOSH: Yeah, well, I guess that's what I'm really getting at. I feel like there were some mini flares being deployed that lead me think that there's something very significant that's gonna happen in the Oval, and I do agree that it was sort of undercutting Josh's character and what we've come to expect of him in a way that if you're going to at least do that it should have paid off more. So it's like "ahh, for this you give us an unprepared Josh that is difficult to buy."

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And then he's extremely petty, I mean, walking out of the room. What he should have said is something along the line of - "Thanks for saving my ass." I didn't think Ryan completely showed him up like, "You're an idiot! I have the answers!" you know, but "I was a little unprepared, thanks for having my back" instead he's just the pettiest of bosses, ever.

[West Wing Episode 5.14 excerpt]

JOSH: Xerox this. Front to back. Double-sided. And-

RYAN: Collated?

JOSH: Go wild!

RYAN: Right.

[end excerpt]

[laughter]

HRISHI: Exactly.

JOSH: Like, what an ass. Not a great showing for Josh.

HRISHI: No, it really isn't. I'm starting to feel like maybe everyone is a bit more of a prick in season 5.

JOSH: I think that is true. And there is some value in that. I think, in a sense, we're getting more human iterations of God-Heroes that we've been given. And so I think there's some value in that people with flaws showing and people's less admirable sides coming to the fore. But sometimes it's maybe it's a little bit too much of a step in the other direction.

HRISHI: I shouldn't say everyone. It's not everyone. It's really Josh and Toby.

JOSH: We've seen an edgier Leo as well I think in season five.

HRISHI: But you know who is definitely not more of a prick this season is Carol who is just - continues to be delightful.

JOSH: She remains a bubbly delight.

HRISHI: Yeah and I think Donna is free from that as well. And this episode, I felt so bad for her too. She rightly, I think, objects to the fact - she says "Hey, why does Ryan get to go brief the president? I'm sitting here, you know, arranging your calls" and Josh doesn't think anything of it, but I think, that yeah, that's the kind of thing that would definitely be understandable, that personal affront of being passed over for a chance to be in the Oval Office with the president.

JOSH: Especially as, in recent times, we've seen her be truly capable. The way she handled the pardons, and she's been given more responsibility and come through with shining colors every time.

HRISHI: Yeah, but most of those moments have occurred in conference rooms not in the Oval Office.

JOSH: Indeed. While we're going through the characters, Will now is essentially Ryan, except that Ryan, in this one, has a plot. [laughter] Will is the new Ryan. And I'm having an interesting experience watching these episodes, and now to be honest I'm not sure I'm re-watching. I think I might be watching episodes for the first time. [crosstalk]

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Yeah.

JOSH: At least some of them. And I'm feeling an aggravation on my own behalf that I really didn't feel at the time of the shooting of these episodes.

HRISHI: Really? [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] And I'm - yes, I'm really having to- I'm going through some introspection, and I think what I have in place is a very good self-protection system. So, I think, I certainly noticed while we were filming season five that my role in the show had diminished, and certainly my importance, the importance of the character all together was becoming less important to the show, but at the time one, it's just the way I approach this kind of work is - it is what it is. It's not

my job to lobby for storylines or for more work, and I had young kids. I think they were six and two at the time of the shooting so more time at home while getting paid the same amount of money was fine with me, and also I think there's a defense mechanism which is nobody wants to be miserable. I don't want to spend time worrying about my storyline or this or that. So I just focused on the positive aspects of having a job all together and having more time with my family. But now as that I re-watch, it is a bummer to me, if I may be so- I'm just a little bit aggravated and sad that this character that Aaron had created for me is so reduced to a handful of lines and just kind of wandering around. I can almost feel the effort to include me in this episode. There's really no reason for Will to be there at all.

HRISHI: Yeah, have you ever talked to Dulé about this? Because Charlie, you know, suffered from being underused a lot as well, I mean, throughout the five seasons, Aaron told us they often found that the Charlie storylines would be written but then they would end up getting cut from the episode for time or he wouldn't be- there just wouldn't be something there for his character that would be so interesting. Have you ever talked about that?

JOSH: No, I don't think I have. It would be interesting next time we have him on. Although, I'm sure we'll have him on for an episode where he figures prominently. [crosstalk]

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Right.

JOSH: We'll have to put the question to him. And maybe I think it's just I love Dulé and I love Charlie, and I feel like there's so much richness to his character, and I feel like Will and I had a little bit less time before my role started to be diminished. Even when I see Charlie, you at least know why he's there. I mean, he's doing important things. He walks into the president's bedroom and says, "The General's out there." There's a reason for him to be there. He is integral to this White House and to this staff, and there's so much kind of rich relationship work that's been done between the press particularly and Charlie that I still see it and feel it even when he's on screen briefly.

HRISHI: Yeah, we talked about this a little bit before, but along these lines, how crazy is it that the same level of involvement is also given to Lily Tomlin?

JOSH: Oh, I agree. I think that over and over and I know we have touched on it.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: That she would show up for a couple moments here and there of secretarial work.

HRISHI: Exactly she has like handful of lines and that's it. Although, she does have some pretty good ones.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: My favorite moment, I think from the entire episode is when Toby is pacing and trying to get into the Oval Office to get in to meet with the president, and he's asking Debbie, he's haranguing her, you know, about how long it's gonna take and then she just says-

[West Wing Episode 5.14 excerpt]

DEBBIE: You have some food stuck in your beard.

[end excerpt]

[laughter]

JOSH: Yes, and then it's fun to watch Richard for the next 30 seconds, kind of, his reaction and his tending to his beard. It's great. It's hilarious.

HRISHI: Yeah, he's a little bit out of focus in the background but then you finally see him he starts to brush away at the-

JOSH: That's right. He doesn't do it immediately. All right. All right.

HRISHI: It's a better rejoinder than, "Actually it's President Bartlet." You know, to say, "Actually-"

JOSH: I thought you were gonna "President Something in my beard."

[laughter]

HRISHI: That would have been good if C.J. used that on Taylor Reid.

JOSH: I wrote down "Will is reduced to scut work" which is my new favorite phrase, that I don't think I was aware of before. "Scut work" I like it.

HRISHI: And definitely non-President scut work, not even Vice Presidential scut work.

JOSH: No, exactly. I watched it, and when I showed up on screen, I thought "What does that guy do again?"

HRISHI: And really in the episode the role is- "Hey, he's right," "Hey, have you seen this thing?" "Oh this guy's already looking at it and I agree with what he said."

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Okay let's turn to the main plot of the episode which we haven't really discussed yet, which is the man who saved Leo's life in Vietnam, Ken O'Neal is now involved in this defense

contract that a senator is objecting to and holding up. It's a senator who's played by the great Philip Baker Hall.

JOSH: Oh! Oh! What a wonderful actor. He's up there on my list of favorite character actors. Have you seen *Hard Eight*?

HRISHI: I have. I love *Hard Eight*.

JOSH: Paul Thomas Anderson's first feature film. I highly recommend it, and a wonderful, truly wonderful performance by Philip Baker Hall.

HRISHI: He's a legend.

JOSH: By the way, Jeffrey DeMunn who play Kenny O'Neal, also no slouch, and was particularly memorable to me as Dale in *The Walking Dead*. Good actor.

HRISHI: So, Philip Baker Hall plays Matt Hunt in this episode, a senator from Arizona, and if that makes you think of John McCain, I think there's a very good reason because this entire plotline is inspired, it seems like, by an incident in 2003 in which John McCain was trying to block a proposal by the Airforce to lease a fleet of Boeing 767 tankers. The substance of that event are really similar to what's going on here. There's a competing bid by Airbus, in both the show and in real life, and the Airforce ignored this other proposal, and in this episode Ken O'Neal is the CEO of Mueller-Wright.

JOSH: There are all these- I mean, obviously, also the idea of paralleling John McCain, as he was laid to rest yesterday. There's always these odd things that overlap.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And seeing Mueller-Wright, I kept wanting to say, "No, it's Muller."

[laughter]

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Muller!

HRISHI: On that note, let's take a quick break.

[Ad break]

HRISHI: I think that the heart of this story is really about loyalty and the lengths to which we're willing to go out of loyalty, which is not an uncommon theme for *The West Wing*, but here Leo's

loyalty for Ken is so strong that he is ready to go to bat for him without even questioning the idea that maybe he had engaged in wrongdoing. People try and stop Leo at several points.

[West Wing Episode 5.14 excerpt]

JOSH: You worked for Mueller-Wright. If they're involved in procurement irregularities, any attempt on your part to impede a senate-

LEO: I'm not going to [fade out]

[end excerpt]

[West Wing Episode 5.14 excerpt]

MATT: How many years did you work for Mueller-Wright? Was it 10? 12?

LEO: Don't try to embarrass me [fade out]

[end excerpt]

[West Wing Episode 5.14 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Have you asked Kenny if there's any truth-

LEO: I've known Ken O'Neal for 35 years. I worked beside him, served beside him. He hasn't done anything wrong.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: He just, is adamant that there's no way this person who he admires so much and respects could have possibly done something immoral.

JOSH: Yeah, no, in that sense, it actually- as I watched the second time, it rang bells for me almost with the #metoo movement and how charges constantly come up and we have sort of a macro reaction to believing charges. Not that this is similar situation but believing victims and then almost every time there's somebody who knows the person being accused who cannot just on the face of it accept the possibility of wrongdoing. See now these things when we have personal connections we do have personal loyalties and bonds and relationships that sometimes do not allow us to see those that we love and are so close to fully. Leo owes his life to this person. He's got that military bond of which I can only imagine is one of the tightest, closest things having even been in a situation like that together and then truly to know that this person saved his life. It prevents him from viewing the man as he is today fully.

HRISHI: At the heart of the controversy is this document, an AOA, which I don't believe is ever explained in the episode but AOA stands for Analysis of Alternatives.

JOSH: Due diligence that the price is right.

HRISHI: Right. You can use those other bids to negotiate with even the person who you have ultimately decide you're gonna go with to try and lower the price. And it turns out that Ken Mueller has bribed a person in the Defense Department and given him a job at his company, and not only that, he gave him an advance on the salary. So, it's really just a bribe.

JOSH: Yes, and not a subtle one at that. I'm amazed, often, at the Duncan Hunters of the world and these people who get caught having done just egregiously wrong things, having not even covered them well. So, I think it's fully credible, this storyline, the corruption in politics and sometimes the blatant nature of it should no longer shock, but it often does to me. This whole Kenny O'Neal plot felt like, you know, "How else was this gonna wind up?" but that happens again and again.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: There was a lot of a McCain-vibe to this episode. John McCain was shot down over Hanoi, so even though that's not- Hunt is not directly involved, obviously, in that storyline.

HRISHI: And he serves on Arms Services which eventually John McCain was the chairman of the Armed Services Committee, and I read in his obituary that he considered that position second only to being commander in chief.

JOSH: Interesting, and as much as I like Philip Baker Hall as our, sort of, John McCain stand-in I wonder what the value of the second scene between him and Josh was because to me it robbed us, once again, of a satisfying reveal. I really think that the episode would have been elevated had that scene been excised and had we found out in the Leo-Kenny scene- had we only found during that scene that Kenny was guilty.

HRISHI: Hmm, you wanted to wait until that final-

JOSH: Well, what is the value of our knowing, going into that scene, what Leo doesn't know? Why not experience it as Leo experiences it? Why don't we walk in-

HRISHI: Thinking that Leo's still right?

JOSH: Thinking that Leo is right because we trust Leo and we trust Leo's judgement and we've learned, or we've been told that Kenny O'Neal is this paragon of virtue and this stand-up kind of guy who couldn't possibly have done what he's being accused of, and I would rather have learned it from Kenny. It would have been, I think, just a more difficult, painful, compelling scene rather than our walking in and just waiting to see the scales fall from Leo's eyes.

HRISHI: That's interesting. Any time that the audience already knows what the conclusion is gonna be, it puts this additional pressure on the storytelling itself. And I think you felt that this episode cracked under that pressure.

JOSH: Yeah, I think so. I think that the pressure was released in a way that didn't dramatically have value for me. And now that you mentioned, I think almost splitting the difference might have been the way to go so that we have that scene between- the second scene between Hunt and Lyman, but rather than explicitly being told the situation, we could have gotten an adumbration of what was to come. A sort of sense that Hunt has something to tell Josh, he shows up unannounced, Josh wasn't even expecting him, and he's apologetic and it maybe ought better to have ended on, "There's something I need to tell you", or something like that, that gives us just a little spark a little *frisson* of something to come but not the whole enchilada.

HRISHI: By the way, we don't know what's going to happen to Ken O'Neal but in 2003, this Boeing incident, it ended up with the Boeing CEO resigning, which I think probably going to happen here. I think Ken O'Neal even knows that the curtains are coming for him.

JOSH: Seems it.

HRISHI: Well, to mix my metaphors. [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] I've been doing the same. [laughter] The whole enchilada.

HRISHI: And then the person at the Pentagon ended up going to jail.

JOSH: Oh.

HRISHI: Yeah, so bad things are coming down the line for Ken O'Neal and even though we don't see it, Leo knows it and that leads to the final scene with the president. Which is really, I mean, let's give the man the Emmy for that, him just taking in the idea that this person that he loves has fallen from grace.

[West Wing Episode 5.14 excerpt]

LEO: We had a responsibility to live our lives with the integrity and the honesty to honor their sacrifice.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, it's a remarkable performance as always from John Spencer, and there almost was, I have to go back and watch, but I felt like there was even physically, a similarity in Leo's countenance that bookended the episode. Early on in that cold open, when Leo is introducing

Kenny, his face crinkles with laughter and delight. He has such joy to be introducing his friend, this man he loves. Almost his features disappear in just full-on Leo crinkle face.

HRISHI: Yeah, smiley crinkle face.

JOSH: Smiley crinkle face and then we get despondent crinkle face towards the end, I think is the technical term. [laughter] [crosstalk]

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Yeah.

JOSH: There's almost something even brilliant to that that Leo in the depths of despair almost echoes the celebratory delight that we saw him experience earlier in the episode.

HRISHI: Yeah, yeah, I'm looking on the television academy website right here, and it says that John Spencer was nominated for [Hrishi laughs] best despondent crinkly face [both laugh] and best smiley crinkly face in a single episode.

JOSH: Wow. That is impressive. [laughter]

HRISHI: I was thinking about- almost immediately after watching this episode, the first time I was watching something else in which a character is supposed to be crying, and it was so bad, I mean you know the person tried their best to do a crinkly face, but certainly no water was coming out of their- it just was not believable at all, I was looking at it, I was like, "What is this?" and, I think, Lindsey said to me, "They're not all John Spencer."

JOSH: Yeah, indeed. He is sorely missed, the man himself and what an actor he was.

HRISHI: Is that not the worst thing, most consistently done on TV, is having characters crying and the actors just can't pull it off?

JOSH: Sure, especially when there is [expletive] they can blow in your eyes that makes you cry. I mean literally I just gotta say to the makeup people, "Can you blow some talent into my eyes?" [laughter]

HRISHI: I was thinking about that. This guy should have asked for that.

JOSH: Yeah, man up. Stick your finger in your eye at least. [laughter]

HRISHI: One other thing that I had trouble with during this episode, it's a minor thing, but Philip Baker Hall's character is Matt Hunt. The amendment that Ryan is briefing the president about comes from someone named Wendt, and I, a few times, got confused. Just the Hunt and Wendt names were similar enough that I got a little bit confused when they were going back and forth, especially before we first met Philip Baker Hall and we didn't have a face for either of these

names. I was thinking, "Wait, this is the same... which guy is the tax break for housewives person and which one is the-" I just got confused a few times.

JOSH: See, I just kept thinking George Wendt and Mike Hunt.

HRISHI: Oh, Josh! [laughter]

JOSH: Well, I did.

HRISHI: Well, thank you for the space, at least.

JOSH: Right? I did it like "Feb-ruary." Also here's one thing, a little Trump-ay-yi-yi moment, I noticed early in the episode in the Sit Room when the powers that be are looking to the Commander in Chief, President Bartlet, to okay the mission to give the final "Let's do this." He simply nods. And first I thought, I wonder whether that even is, can you really do that or would somebody say [crosstalk]

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Right.

JOSH: Just to be entirely sure, you're saying, we should start, right? [laughter]

HRISHI: Do not sign this contract with a crayon.

JOSH: Right, exactly. But then it actually made me think of the recent statement by George Papadopoulos' lawyers.

HRISHI: From Webster? [laughter]

JOSH: Uh, no, but I like the reference. Right, so George Papadopoulos, a former Trump campaign aide of either great or minor importance depending on who's describing him. According to his lawyers now, Trump indicated approval of the concept of setting up a meeting with Putin by nodding. Here's the quote, "Mr. Trump nodded with approval and deferred to Mr. Sessions." That's then-senator from Alabama, Jeff Sessions, now-AG, "who appeared to like the idea and stated that the campaign should look into it." So apparently nods- I mean when I first heard that statement from lawyers, I was like that's not gonna amount to much, someone claiming he nodded, but in *The West Wing*, we get the resident deploying troops with a nod.

HRISHI: Yeah, you know where a nod is not enough, is when you're seated in the exit row, and they ask if you understand the instructions, and you'll comply with the placards, whatever. You have to say yes, verbally.

JOSH: Very good. I think that may even have been bubbling in my subconscious when I watched the moment in the Sit Room. And I thought, they're not gonna make him say yes? I think part of me was thinking, I had to do it in the exit row. [laughter]

HRISHI: Right?

JOSH: Very good point. That's fantastic. As is often the case in *The West Wing*, sometimes the smallest moments give me the most in an episode rather than some big explicit *denouement* to the entire episode. It's just a little thing that's almost quickly brushed by, and that was the fact that there was a loss of life. A Navy Seal died in the extraction, and I was moved by, just generally obviously, the loss of life but almost, I liked the way Alex and John Wells dealt with the moment which is they didn't make a meal out of it. It was the cost of the operation, and they do, you know, we can see in their faces that it's a loss and [sung] Ron Canada and President Bartlet they have a moment but then they sort of move on with the rest of what happened.

[West Wing Episode 5.14 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: General, can you get me a number for Captain Zaretsky's family?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: The Navy Seal who dies, he dies of hypoxia from the jump. It is not from enemy fire or anything like that, it's just a really [expletive] thing that happened.

JOSH: Yeah, they did a HALO jump, high altitude, low opening jump and apparently that can lead to hypoxia and that made me think of the former Thai Navy Seal, a guy named Saman Gunan who died.

HRISHI: Rescuing the boys?

JOSH: Right, rescuing the boys or even just laying the groundwork trying to, ironically and tragically, trying to provide oxygen for the eventual rescue. He died from, also similar to hypoxia, a lack of oxygen, and you know what we now generally think of as just this enormous success, against all odds, miracle, you have to remember a man gave his life in the effort, and it's easy to sort of forget that aspect or gloss over it.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: What did you think of Crosby, Stills, and Nash?

HRISHI: I thought, it was too bad that they came to the White House, and we didn't get to see them. I feel like that's a big thing to happen off camera.

JOSH: I felt the same thing too. You're gonna name check it and then use their work. I'm like, well, where are they?

HRISHI: Oh, you just missed them.

JOSH: Yeah, I think it's another missed reveal, is what you're saying. They should have just cut to Brian Kerwin singing "America." [both laugh]

HRISHI: The camera turns around the frame of the door slowly [laughter] to reveal...

JOSH: There's three Brian Kerwins rather than Crosby, Stills, and Nash. Again, no offense to Brian Kerwin, terrific actor, major stage career.

HRISHI: Sorry, it's Brians Kerwin.

JOSH: Yes, good point.

HRISHI: The Presidential "portlet." Wow, the Presidential "port-rai" [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] Portlet.

HRISHI: -subplot.

JOSH: They're painting my "portlet!"

HRISHI: [laughs] The portlet of President Partlet is just [both laugh] running throughout the series, and I don't know what is going to happen with it, why have we talked about it so much?

JOSH: I feel like we're being set up for another disappointing reveal. Or maybe he will pose nude.

HRISHI: [both laugh] Exactly, it will be nude. That is a great moment.

[West Wing Episode 5.14 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: When am I supposed to find time to sit for some cut-rate Ruebens while he angles me just so to catch the late afternoon light?

ABBEY: You do know it's not a nude, right?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Now I'm envisioning him in that Nastassja Kinski python shot, but President Bartlet instead. If somebody please would put that together, I'd like to post it on our site.

HRISHI: Oh wow [laughs], that's a big ask.

JOSH: That is a big ask. I did read that Crosby, Stills, and Nash performed that version of "America" on *The Tonight Show* when *The Tonight Show* returned for the first time after 9/11

HRISHI: Oh wow.

[The Tonight Show excerpt]

CROSBY, STILLS, and NASH: Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from [fade out]

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I like that Carol has spent so much time fielding calls from Ben for C.J. that she now has a relationship with him of her own.

JOSH: And I like that she finally said, "If you're not gonna go for it, can I have him?"

HRISHI: [laughs] Exactly.

JOSH: That was a great line.

HRISHI: C.J. says, "Oh, he and Katie split up?" And Carol's like, "Katie's living in Portland with an Orthodontist." Carol's on a first name basis with [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] Yeah, she's got the full load in.

HRISHI: C.J.'s ex-boyfriend's ex-wife. [Josh laughs] One of the things that didn't work for me, I don't like it when a show tells me that a thing is supposed to be funny and then they tell me the thing that was supposed to be funny because it's-

JOSH: Wait, what was that instance?

HRISHI: When Toby and Josh are in C.J.'s office telling her about Taylor Reid and trying to encourage her to go on the show.

JOSH: Oh!

HRISHI: He says-

[West Wing Episode 5.14 excerpt]

JOSH: Taylor Reid was talking about your spin on the decline in manufacturing jobs, and he said [laughs]

TOBY: *"The tall lady is back to telling tall tales."*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I completely agree, I'm like, "What a knee slapper, don't let her know that he said this because it's hilarious and cutting." I was like, "That's really dumb." [both laugh] Yeah, I'm with you. I also felt that we should have gotten a decent set up to the mulligan joke in the cold open.

[West Wing Episode 5.14 excerpt]

LEO: *So, so, he says, "That's my mulligan," and I say, "But you've already taken your mulligan." "Yeah," Kenny says, "but we're playing Texas rules." [laughter]*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah, that also felt like we're supposed to laugh at that and really it must have been hilarious because the happy crinkly face is so extreme. I mean, I don't think we've ever seen Leo this happy ever before in his life.

JOSH: No, no indeed not.

HRISHI: I thought that the loyalty part, this idea of sort of blind loyalty that Leo exhibits in this episode, and really throughout the time that we've known him, I think a little bit of that is carried by Josh too. You know, Josh is another person who absolutely will be loyal to the people who mean a lot to him and I think that colors his reaction to Ryan Pierce's undercutting of him. If there were a more dignified version of his objection, it might have actually felt closer to what Leo is experiencing, you know, which is, "Look you're supposed to have my back." There's also a little bit of Josh being guilty of what Leo's guilty of in his effort to stop Leo. Everyone is so gentle with Leo about Ken O'Neal, and it makes sense given his history with the man and everything, but at a certain point, what Ryan does is right. They're in that meeting with the president rather than waiting 'til afterwards to say, "Hey, Josh, you got that wrong. Maybe you should go back in there," in the critical moment he says, "Actually here's what that information is," [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] Yeah, he steps up.

HRISHI: And no one really does that for Leo. They try, but there are several moments where Josh kind of just shuts up out of deference.

JOSH: Yeah, in his defense, he makes a call that Leo doesn't take as he approaches Kenny O'Neal. So, Josh had [crosstalk]

HRISHI: [crosstalk] That's true.

JOSH: Made one effort, we are led to assume that Josh was going to say, "Hey, hey, hey, you gotta know this."

HRISHI: Yeah, that's true, but in the end it's actually Ken O'Neal himself who tells Leo.

[West Wing Episode 5.14 excerpt]

KEN: You can't testify.

LEO: If it comes to that, I can handle Hunt.

KEN: You can't testify.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It's really Leo's unknowing offer to sacrifice himself that prompts Ken O'Neal to reveal his own complicity.

JOSH: Yeah, I also thought during that scene, especially walking in with the knowledge that Leo didn't have that we, as the viewers, did have, that were Kenny to reveal the truth as he indeed does, that he might do it in a more oblique fashion so as to give Leo plausible deniability. I'm kind of surprised that he just says it.

[West Wing Episode 5.14 excerpt]

KEN: We didn't do the AOA. I gave a procurement officer at the DOD a job, and I got to a guy on the Defense Policy Board.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I thought there was a way to write around it maybe.

HRISHI: I think the reason why he does that is some level of sacrifice, like he is going to now sort of knowingly tarnish his reputation with his dear friend. He's going to say, "Hey, look. Okay, these are the facts of my transgression," because at that point suddenly Leo has said, "Hey, I'm willing to do this. I'm going to go up there in front of the Armed Services Committee," and suddenly, Ken has this reaction. He says, "No, you can't do it. You can't testify."

JOSH: So that even in adversity, or even as he admits having transgressed that he acts with some integrity.

HRISHI: Yeah, I think so.

JOSH: See, I just kept thinking, now, when Leo's subpoenaed he's gonna have to, he knows.
[laughter] He knows the truth.

HRISHI: I think Matt Hunt also says to Josh, "I don't want to subpoena him." I think they all want to save Leo [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] Right, they're trying to protect Leo.

HRISHI: -from this. Yeah, but I do think that there is something noble about Ken O'Neal's reaction to this offer from Leo, and that's what prompted him to be like, "No, I did it, and you can't put yourself out there like that for me." But ultimately, it's Leo really who calls him out for how hollow the whole thing is.

[West Wing Episode 5.14 excerpt]

LEO: This was about money?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: After everything they've been through, Ken was saying, "Oh I had all this pressure from stockholders and responsibility to the employees," but really it is about making sure that Mueller-Wright gets awarded the contract so that they have some level of profitability that they didn't have, or whatever, so he can keep his job as the CEO. And so it's about money, and Leo asks him, "How much money did you make?"

JOSH: Yes, he makes him say it.

[West Wing Episode 5.14 excerpt]

LEO: How much, Kenny?

KENNY: Mm... just over a million.

LEO: Nah, how much with bonuses?

KENNY: \$11 million.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And it is just, I think, maybe even worse than the fact of the wrongdoing for Leo. The root of it being about money is what really crushes him. That there is no noble intent underneath all of it, you know, like, "Oh maybe he had some inside info-" I don't know but maybe there was some possible layer behind all of this.

JOSH: Uh it could make him understand

HRISHI: Yeah that could somehow [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] A little bit better.

HRISHI: Yeah exactly, the man who steals bread to feed his family. There's nothing like that here. It's millionaires.

JOSH: He's no *Jean Valjean*.

HRISHI: No, Ken O'Neal would be in *Les Millionables*. [laughter] [Josh makes beeping noise]

HRISHI: And I think that's really what crushes him, this idea that they had this responsibility to live their lives with integrity. This is also the really poignant thing about the Seal who died from hypoxia, which further ties in this present-day rescue mission with the mission from Vietnam. The crew members in North Korea, you know, ought to feel the same kind of responsibility out of respect for the memory of this Navy Seal who died trying to save them.

JOSH: Good connection.

HRISHI: So to smirch that, smirch? Besmirch?

JOSH: Besmirch.

HRISHI: To-

JOSH: Can you smirch something?

HRISHI: Papa Smirch?

JOSH: Ron Klain

HRISHI: Exactly.

JOSH: Smirch: to make something dirty or spoil it. The window was smirched by heat and smoke. Oh, I'm gonna start using that.

HRISHI: So, can I use it again? All right, so to smirch-

JOSH: Ooh, smirchandise, [laughter, HrishI claps] we should start selling just a filthy t-shirt.

HRISHI: Oh, man. It feels like there's no way it could possibly be his friend, who had that oath. That's really what crushes him, and then the president [HrishI laughs] – you know the thing that

you always want to hear from your friend when you're going through something painful is for them to speak to you in Latin.

[West Wing Episode 5.14 excerpt]

LEO: We had a responsibility to live our lives with integrity and honesty to honor their sacrifice.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Corruptio optimi pessima.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah [both laugh] "Oh for the love of God, would you can the Latin and just talk to me like a person."

HRISHI: It doesn't feel like the right time to be quoting Latin.

JOSH: It would have been great if Leo had responded with, "Give me a [expletive] break" in Latin.

HRISHI: I mean, I appreciate the sentiment, but it feels less poignant to reach for an epigram than to just say something, I don't know, heartfelt back.

JOSH: That's interesting. Well maybe that's a weakness in Bartlet's social game.

HRISHI: It's no "I'm proud of you, Charlie."

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: What if he had said, "I'm proud of you, Charlie" in Latin? [laughter]

JOSH: In Latin. And Leo would be like, "I don't speak Latin, but I know what 'Charlie' means. Who are you talking to? What the hell?"

HRISHI: Okay, that wraps it up for this episode. Thanks so much for listening.

JOSH: *The West Wing Weekly* remains, as always, a proud member of Radiotopia, a collection of fine podcasts about which you can find out more information at radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: Thanks to Margaret Miller and Zach McNees for their help with this episode. Also thanks to Nick Song who helped us with research.

JOSH: Right on.

HRISHI: You can follow the West Wing Weekly on Twitter @westwingweekly. We're on Instagram @thewestwingweekly. We're on Facebook, and you can talk to us, tell us your thoughts about this episode. Tell us what we got wrong or tell us what you liked.

JOSH: Sure. Do the second thing.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And if you'd like to support the show and our long, slow crawl over the finish line, you can donate money on our website or you can buy smirchandise at westwingweekly.com/smirch
[both laugh]

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

JOSH & HRISHI: What's next?

[Outro Music]