

The West Wing Weekly
6.01: "NSF Thurmont"

[Intro Music]

HRISHI: Welcome to Season 6 of The West Wing Weekly. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway.

JOSH: And my name is Joshua Ma-li-na.

[Hrishi laughs]

HRISHI: Today, we're talking about the season premiere of season six. It's called "NSF Thurmont."

JOSH: Yeah, you know what I call this episode?

HRISHI: What?

JOSH: "Mother-[expletive deleted] [expletive deleted] [expletive deleted]-talking NSF
Thurmont."

[both laugh]

JOSH: Yeah, that's what I did with my time off. I came up with that.

HRISHI: Ok. Tell us about the episode, Josh.

JOSH: Ok, sure. It was written by John Wells. It was directed by Alex Graves, and it first aired on October 20th, 2004.

HRISHI: Let me read you a synopsis: "In the aftermath of the Gaza strip attack that seriously wounded Donna and killed Admiral Fitzwallace and two American congressmen, Bartlet faces strong opposition to his peace plans. Defying the wishes of the majority of Congress, including some of the White House's democratic allies, the American people, and the Vice President, Bartlet persists in the hope that inviting Palestinian and Israeli leaders to participate in the peace talks will forestall the necessity of a U.S. military retaliation. Even Leo feels that the President should order an attack to make a decisive statement on terrorism. Bartlet's only hope is that a risky secret negotiation will deliver the leader responsible for the bombings into U.S. custody. Meanwhile, Josh hovers worriedly by Donna's bed in a German military hospital. As doctors try to stabilize Donna's deteriorating condition, no one knows whether or not she will suffer brain damage if she survives.

JOSH: Nor how we'll tell. [Hrishi laughs] Just kidding.

HRISHI: You can tell I didn't write that because it didn't say "President Bartlet."

JOSH: Mmm.

HRISHI: Well Josh, we're back in Season 6.

JOSH: [cross talk] Yeah.

HRISHI: And this episode was shot on location in Maryland. Do you remember going out there to film this?

JOSH: Strangely enough, I'll not disappoint you. I *do* remember this trip for a variety of reasons, many of which sadly, I think I've already alluded to, so we'll have to see if I have any fresh material, but, one: I believe this is the trip during which I took John Spencer's Provigil without knowing what it was, much to his delight.

HRISHI: Yep, when you walked in and there was a pill in his hand, and you said, "Ooh drugs" and took it out of his hand, put in your mouth and swallowed it without knowing what it was.

JOSH: Never seen him laugh harder, and I've never stayed up later. [Hrishi laughs] Still, worth it. Also, this was our first time shooting out of town with Mary McCormack, and she was pregnant at the time, and it was cicada season in D.C., so I just remember her being on a bench at one point, and I knew, because she had been talking about it, that she thoroughly abhorred bugs and spiders and was not excited about cicada season, and so I just took a little little twig and I came up behind her and I lightly touched her ear, and she cried.

[Hrishi laughs]

JOSH: And it was one of those things where, one: I didn't know her *that* well, so you know... Whereas I might have delighted making somebody cry that I knew better, I felt really bad, especially because she was also pregnant.

HRISHI: Now that you do know her better...

JOSH: Yeah...

HRISHI: Do you retroactively not feel so bad?

JOSH: Yeah, that's a very good point. Yeah I feel totally fine about it now. I'm weaving in, I may even be retconning. I might have felt fine about it then too. I was trying to weave it in to make me look better.

HRISHI: Sprinkling in some likeability for that Josh Malina character.

JOSH: Additionally, I will say I know this story I have told before-the scene where we all get on Marine One is the infamous scene where we arrived to shoot and on the side of the helicopter, it said "*Untied* States of America."

HRISHI: Oh! That's this one!

JOSH: Yeah, and there's a nice big shot of it looking the way it ought to in this episode.

HRISHI: One note: there are some who would say that the words appeared in this episode the way they 1900 to.

JOSH: And I think I'm the one who said "Hey art department-that can't be right...I'm no expert" and I remember it being a significant problem, a big delay, and having to either print up or locate the correct decal and fix it. It was no small affair, and I think put us behind for the day. I think we shot for nine days out of town, so it was a lot of fun. It's like going to camp with your friends, sit was great. I really loved shooting out of town, and I taught Dulé Hill how to play poker during our downtime.

HRISHI: For money?

JOSH: Yes, well I tried to explain to him that you can't-and I think this really is true--you can't really learn how to play poker...

HRISHI: So mean...

JOSH: ... efficiently unless you're risking something. In other words when you play for fun and sometimes people play online now for free and, you know, you have a million units to play, if it doesn't cost anything, you haven't really put yourself to the test in terms of the types of decisions you need to make in a game that is played for money. So I played I think head-to-head, and I beat him for about \$350--which he could well afford--but I went to sleep... he was fine about it, and, you know, he would actually turn, ultimately, into a decent poker player. I went to sleep--this must not have been the night of the Provigil because I went to sleep--and at 2:00 or 2:30 in the morning, I had a phone call in my hotel room. I pick it up, and all I hear is "Don't make me pay."

HRISHI: [laughing] Oh, you have told that story!

JOSH: Ok, so this is that story, with Dulé just saying over and over "Don't make me pay." It took me a while to even figure out what was going on because I had been in a deep sleep and I said 'oh, you're paying; we play for money" but he was so insistent. He never even really quite acknowledged the midnight you know the middle of the morning phone call. But I started to think maybe I don't know Dulé that well and he's going to kill me over this money.

HRISHI: It's not like the entire episode was shot on location. Really the first three quarters of this episode is filmed on set. We're still in the White House for the majority of the episode. This episode and the next episode really kind of serve as a two-parter.

JOSH: I think you can argue that the last episode served as a two-parter.

HRISHI: Well the episode before this and the episode before that really also were two-parter.

JOSH: So maybe we're looking at a four-parter separated by a couple of months off.

HRISHI: Mmm-hmm. We might even call this just like a continuing series.

JOSH: [Laughs] And, you know, in some ways, the show is really like that.

HRISHI: It is. Well let's go to the beginning of this episode. Even before the beginning, the 'Previously On' music here is noticeably more dramatic. It was not our usual 'Previously on *The West Wing* theme' that we've all come to know and love and be so familiar with that sometimes it sinks into the background.

JOSH: I don't think I even noticed, oh can I kind of just jump off that for a quick second first and give you a huge hat tip for the mash-up *Parks and Rec/West Wing* weekly theme that you created? It's getting lauded all over the internet, and I just want to add my kudos. That was very, very well done.

[mash-up plays in background]

HRISHI: Thank you very much, kudos to Zach for talking me into actually doing it. It was something I'd wanted to do and then we got close to it, and I was just like 'I'm not going to do it because nobody's really going to care,' and then Zach was like 'this would be a great thing to do' and I said [exasperated whisper] "Ok fine, I'll do it."

JOSH: Aren't you delighted-do you feel the love? Wasn't it worth it?

HRISHI: It was worth it. I'm glad the he encouraged me to do it.

JOSH: Huzzah. So what's different about the previously on?

[West Wing Episode 6.01 excerpt]

C.J.: Previously on the West Wing.

JOSH: You're goin' on a CODEL to the Middle East with Fitzwallace and Andy. No presidential hand-holding. You're gonna see what's going on and brief me and Toby about it.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It is not our normal tense but somewhat sedate 'Previously On' music that happens which is a mix of snare drums and pianos.

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt, with usual music]

C.J.: Previously on the West Wing.

JOSH: You're goin' on a CODEL to the Middle East with Fitzwallace and Andy. No presidential handholding. You're gonna see what's going on and brief me and Toby about it.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And like I said, in some ways, it's become this kind of wallpaper for those moments as you get caught back up. But in this episode--and this happened, I think, in the season 5 premiere as well--it seems like Snuffy Walden wrote something new just for this, where the energy and the drama is kicked up. Like in the season 5 premiere, if you remember, the music was more hectic and then suddenly, it cuts out, and John Goodman says:

[West Wing Episode 5.01 excerpt]

WALKEN: You're relieved, Mr. President.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: There's no moment where things cut out, you know, normally, so this one had already felt like "Ok, season 6, things are different even still from season 5."

JOSH: The "Previously On" footage itself made me feel like I was watching a different show, even though I just watched the previous season, seeing it all together and the way it was cut together felt like...

HRISHI: [interrupting] More action-y?

JOSH: ...Yeah, right.

HRISHI: Well, we start in and we see Navy officers with the casket for Admiral Fitzwallace and our first scene is the president, the First Lady, Leo, and Kate in the car heading to the church, and I thought 'This is a new dynamic. This is a new set of counselors.' I mean, Kate--she's a new character--but there she is in the opening credits, so that's a big deal.

JOSH: Of course, and she's got the president's ear.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Exactly.

JOSH: Ever since she went home with him, and lived with him for six months, they've become very close.

HRISHI: People are going to have to be reminded what you're talking about.

JOSH: No. No, they're not.

HRISHI: That's a callback to a silly thing you said before.

JOSH: Off of my idea, that whole thing where she wouldn't...he was like "Come with me, walk with me, get in the car, here's my house, come in, live with me." Somebody sent me a funny YouTube video that basically plays off of that.

HRISHI: Oh, that's what it is.

JOSH: It's like a Mike Birbiglia, Terry Gross video that is incredibly funny and sort of has that never ending sense to it. It's a great iteration of the idea I was trying to get at. We'll link to it.

HRISHI: Speaking of never ending.

JOSH: Me?

HRISHI: Is this bit over? [laughs]

JOSH: Sorry. Are you referring to *The West Wing Weekly* altogether? [Hrishi laughs] Or just that last bit I went through?

HRISHI: Just the last bit.

JOSH: Ok, fair enough.

HRISHI: So Kate clearly has found her way into the president's favor and Mary McCormack has found her way into the inner circle of the credits.

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: And Abbey's there too, which I thought that...I liked that this builds on what we already established in the previous season. Abbey is now she's changed fundamentally her role within the administration, which is to say, she actively has one. So as they're discussing international matter, she's going to weigh in.

JOSH: That's right. My guess that's their way of keeping her off the street, vaccinating junkies.

HRISHI: Can't have that I guess.

JOSH: No.

HRISHI: By the way, Kate says:

[West Wing Episode 6.01 excerpt]

KATE: ...invited himself to Camp David. What's he going to do next? Raid the icebox at the Council on Foreign Relations?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I just wanted to give a shout out to the Council of Foreign Relations, from whose ice box I believe I have eaten. I've been there.

JOSH: Really? Is it a good spread?

HRISHI: I was there for a wedding, so it probably wasn't their native foods, but it was very lovely. The cold open ends quite deftly. It sets up the president's attitude for the rest of the episode, and everyone else that he goes up against as I'd mentioned in the synopsis. It feels like he is fighting a lonely battle, ironically, for peace. But he says at the end of this section:

[West Wing Episode 6.01 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: And blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yes, I looked that up, and it's Matthew 5:7 and which then made me...no, am I wrong?

HRISHI: I believe it's Matthew 5:9.

JOSH: Well, he may look taller from where you are.

[both laugh]

HRISHI: Actually speaking of the chapter and verse of these lines...

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: I was surprised--though it made for good TV here--that the president took some liberties with the Gospel, which I hear Christians don't like to do; that's why it's called "The Gospel."

JOSH: [Laughs] Wait, what liberties?

HRISHI: Well, here's how Matthew 6:10 goes. We don't hear that first line: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" which I think makes sense to leave that part out, as that seems to really be putting an argument on the side of people who want to start a war. They leave that out, fine. Then in 7, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy," and then 8 is skipped: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." We don't hear that line. 9 is "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God." And then 10 is: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven." So things get shuffled; they're put in different order. Things get skipped...

JOSH: [interrupting] Number 17, you really won't believe.

HRISHI: I'm just saying, it makes for great ending to the cold open, but I can imagine some Biblical scholars might note some...

JOSH: [interrupting] Liberties were taken...

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: Fair enough...

HRISHI: Might lodge some complaints...and then we go to our main titles, and the main titles look sharp. Mary McCormack as noted.

JOSH: Are they longer than they used to be?

HRISHI: I don't think so because the song is still the same.

JOSH: How do they do all that? The song remains the same. So, who's losing time? I gotta take out a stopwatch and see whether I got ripped off.

HRISHI: Yeah that's a good question. I don't know.

JOSH: Right?

HRISHI: Yeah, they're just adding more and more people in there.

JOSH: Yeah, it'd be funny if the music ended and the last three people were just in silence. [Hrishi laughs] "Hey, this sucks." "Well, you joined late."

HRISHI: This episode is called "NSF Thurmont" and I just wanted to point out that that is just another name for Camp David.

JOSH: Right, it's the real name. I guess Camp David is the sobriquet.

HRISHI: And NSF stands for "Naval Support Facility" Thurmont.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: It's commonly known as Camp David.

JOSH: Ok fair enough.

HRISHI: It's been around since FDR. It was Eisenhower who named it Camp David after his grandson David Eisenhower.

JOSH: Cool.

HRISHI: It used to be called "Shangri-La."

JOSH: Also cool.

HRISHI: The thing about this episode that I wanted to mention upfront--now it's too late to do that, but I'll mention it now--John Wells won the Humanitas Prize for this episode. The Humanitas Prize honors film and television writers whose work inspires compassion, hope, and understanding in the human family.

JOSH: That's fantastic. I was nominated for a Homunculus Prize for this episode. [Hrishi laughs] But I lost to Willie Garson.

HRISHI: Wow.

JOSH: Yeah, I'm punchy here in season 6.

HRISHI: Mmm hmm. Ok.

JOSH: It's been a long podcast. It's been a lot of years.

HRISHI: After the titles, we come back and we're in the sit room. George W. Bush ay-yi-yi.

[West Wing Episode 6.01 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Do we have any evidence linking Iran to Nasan?

FBI DIRECTOR GEORGE ARNOLD: If we take this opportunity to strike Iranian terrorists camps, believe me, Sir, we'll find a way to link the attacks on our people back to them later.

BARTLET: Are you suggesting we use the attack on our Congressional delegation as a pretext to attack another country we don't know to be responsible?

FBI DIRECTOR GEORGE ARNOLD: Sir, I'm not suggesting that, but it's clear that if we don't...

BARTLET: [interrupting] Then what the hell are you suggesting, George?

LEO: [cross talks] Mr. President...

FBI DIRECTOR GEORGE ARNOLD: There's ample intelligence to indicate...

BARTLET: I'm not using Admiral Fitzwallace's death and the death of our congressmen as a pretext to attack another country that we don't happen to like.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I'm not going to send Colin Powell out to convince the American people that there are weapons of mass destruction. Yeah, very good point. I just wrote down--I should have thought of Bush--I just wrote down *Wag the Dog* like that is a super *Wag the Dog*-y pitch from the FBI director.

HRISHI: Mmh-mm, yeah.

JOSH: And just nakedly so.

HRISHI: Yes, yeah.

JOSH: Don't worry, we'll retcon it.

HRISHI: There are times when the ripping from headlines gets a little too on-the-nose for me. This was one where I was like, "Well, gee! Tell me what you really think!" Hmm, not of course that I disagree.

JOSH: So you found it too on the nose, even as it didn't even occur to me as I watched it. You make a good point. Now you've ruined it for me.

HRISHI: I had a question, how will these characters in the situation room come to a consensus on bombing Iran if they can't even come to a consensus on how to *pronounce* Iran?

JOSH: I didn't notice that either.

[West Wing Episode 6.01 excerpt]

GENERAL ALEXANDER: Syria and Iran are the primary supporters of the martyrs.

KATE: We start bombing Syria and Iran.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Do we have any evidence linking Iran to Nasan?

FBI DIRECTOR GEORGE ARNOLD: If we take this opportunity to strike Iranian terrorist camps, believe me...

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Well "Iran" at Camp David for one of the scenes in this episode.

HRISHI: That's true-you really did. You ran really... 5 miles, according to what Will says.

JOSH: [in creepy voice] It's a lie! [normal voice] I ran five takes, about 50 yards each.

HRISHI: Well, I have questions about that scene, but we'll get to it. I love the scene between Colin Ayres and Josh in the hospital in Germany.

[West Wing Episode 6.01 excerpt]

JOSH: Where are you from?

COLIN: Belfast.

JOSH: Yeah, you guys are really the model of how to work things out over there.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Josh gives us a nice sarcastic, snarky take on finding out Colin is from Northern Ireland, and Colin says

[West Wing Episode 6.01 excerpt]

COLIN: Yeah, we are actually.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I know, back in your face.

HRISHI: It's just great.

JOSH: There's a subsequent scene where Colin is trying to get at the nature of the relationship between Josh and Donna.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Clearly, he senses that there is something romantic there, perhaps not consummated, but there's something between them, and he starts to tell a story about when he was younger and the story gets interrupted and we never hear the end of it.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: I loved that.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I just like that that it was started, kind of piqued my curiosity and it was just a real moment that we went on. There was never any payoff to that, there was never ever any return to that, it was just kind of good writing.

HRISHI: Yeah, we don't find out what the end of the story is, but we did get the most important sentence from him out of that story, you know, he says

[West Wing Episode 6.01 excerpt]

COLIN: There was this girl when I was 17, she was mad about me. Worshipped me, really. And I liked her, but I was off to university in Dublin and she was going to stay in Belfast to work in her dad's shop. She wrote to me every single day, and she called weekends, and she was always there. I took her for granted, you know?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: The most important sentence I think is "And I took her for granted, you know?" I love that Colin who's there as a paramour for Donna.

JOSH: You think he's resigning at that point. Yeah, and he's like "Go for it, dude."

HRISHI: [cross talk] Really. He's like "Come on, dude; I should have never even been here," I think is what he's trying to say to Josh.

JOSH: Yes, Well maybe it's all over when the doctor comes out.

[West Wing Episode 6.01 excerpt]

COLONEL LEAHY: She asked if she could see you for a moment before we put her under.

COLIN: Me?

COLONEL LEAHY: Uh, no, Mr. Lyman.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Well, we do know it is all over--I mean now we're jumping way ahead--but after Donna wakes up from her surgery, Josh lets her know that Colin has taken Donna's mom for some schnitzel, and we know now that Colin never returns from that schnitzel.

JOSH: That's some bad schnitzel he got ahold of.

HRISHI: I guess so. That's what I was thinking. Mandy-ville.

JOSH: I made schnitzel last night.

HRISHI: Really?

JOSH: Just to show how evergreen this show is.

HRISHI: It's always relevant.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: I was thinking that there must be lots of schnitzel in Mandyville.

JOSH: Somebody ought to write a scene that takes place in Mandyville.

HRISHI: Maybe we can get John Robin Baitz to write it, and then we'll never share it.

JOSH: Well, in the great spirit of Mandyville.

HRISHI: Exactly. Josh somehow has missed the entire sense of--not just nuance--but really, just the basic facts of Northern Ireland and what has happened there when he makes that comment.

JOSH: Yeah, that was a dense thing to have said.

HRISHI: [cross talks] But, again, I like it because I think Colin just throws him off of his game, and he's not at his best.

JOSH: Well he's much, much better looking than Josh.

HRISHI: But there are other moments in this episode from other characters where they really have no excuse for some of the garbage that they are spouting.

JOSH: Like perhaps Will?

HRISHI: Oh my gosh, yeah. Will turns out to be a straight up racist.

JOSH: Yes. I wasn't surprised by it because I do remember...I want to make sure I articulate it correctly. I don't object to saying anything as a character....

HRISHI: Yeah, and even the things you seem willing to say as a person are really astonishing...

JOSH: That's true, but I do care what I say as a person more than what I say as a character. There's nothing wrong with playing a racist character. There are racists. But I do remember there are a couple doozies in this episode.

[West Wing Episode 6.01 excerpt]

KATE: So now all Palestinians are terrorists?

WILL: If the keffiyeh fits.

LEO: That's enough.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Oh my gosh.

JOSHUA: Which is just first of all not clever, and racist, and a resounding 'yes.' So there it is. Will thinks all Palestinians are terrorists.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: What is he doing there? How do they let him stay in the room?

HRISHI: Exactly.

JOSH: How do they continue to interact with this guy?

HRISHI: Really, how does he get to still have a position in the administration? In *this* administration? I mean, in the current administration, he'd be right at home.

JOSH: Yeah. Writing his own ticket.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I remember at the time I hated that line; I didn't object to saying it. I didn't say to anyone like "Oh, I don't think Will should say this." It was just like "Oh ok, that's who Will is, huh? People don't like me because I work for Bingo Bob? Give me a break!"

HRISHI: I might have said "His dad was Supreme Allied Commander of the NATO Forces, and wouldn't you think that with that upbringing, and that history, and that connection to multilateral conflict, that he would have developed some sense of--I don't know--just I would never think that he write off an entire people as terrorists. I mean, it just seems intrinsically, un-Will."

JOSH: I agree; now I watch as a fan and critic, and it doesn't really work for me. We've ramped up to it a little bit because there's some zealotry we've seen on his side. There's some blindness in terms of his ability to see anything other than the 100% Israeli narrative, so I kind of see it. But I did bump on it watching it. I remember at the time filming it. I'm like, "Ok, I guess I'm this guy."

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: But watching it as a viewer now, the level of disappointment and sort of difficulty reconciling what we've come to know as Will, and I also know what's coming after. He kind of goes back to being, I think, the kind of guy you wouldn't imagine would ever say something like this. And I'd even go an extra layer, which is, were he this closet racist, I don't think he'd say it out loud.

HRISHI: Right, he'd know how to read the room.

JOSH: Even if you accept that that's really this guy, I'm like, "Well, he's hidden it this long," and he'd have a level enough head not to say that in that room in those circumstances, even if he felt it. So on a lot of levels, it's pretty disappointing. And also, the earlier one where Will peeks his head into the room:

[West Wing Episode 6.01 excerpt]

WILL: The president knows, right? You guys are telling him?

C.J.: Knows what?

WILL: That there is no viable alternative? He's going to have to bomb Palestinians.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And it's not, "He's going to have to pick a military target."

HRISHI: He says, "There's no viable alternative."

JOSH: Right. To bombing Palestinians. Even just the way he chooses to phrase it; he sounds like he's just saying "civilians."

HRISHI: Right. It's like 'some people.'

JOSH: "It is what it is!" And a few scenes later you realize, well, he considers them *all* terrorists, so what he's really saying in the first scene is, "He's going to have to bomb some terrorists."

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: Not a pretty picture of Will Bailey.

HRISHI: Yeah. That's--I think--the part that lets me down. I'm absolutely open to the idea that there are characters who are racists that might be on this show. It seems strange that they might have a position in the administration, but it feels really crazy to someone who has embraced the kind of complex and pluralistic viewpoint as the person who says to the president

[West Wing Episode 4.14 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Why is a Kundanese life worth less to me than an American life?

WILL: I don't know, sir, but it is.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Woo, I didn't even think of that specific moment. That's really hard to reconcile with this.

HRISHI: Yeah, he's speaking truth to power there and he's talking about--it's just something that's within his grasp--and I don't understand where this comes from.

JOSH: And the circumstance isn't--there isn't something else going on where you go, "I'm sure he'd apologize later; he was going through something." They were sort of just discussing what to do and how to proceed. Yes, it's a crisis, but it's not like Josh's moment.

HRISHI: Exactly.

JOSH: Where his dear friend, and maybe the love of his life, is in mortal danger. And so maybe we cut him some slack or we understand why he's speaking the way he is with the extremity and lack of compassion. Will's just there, one of the guys, shooting the [expletive deleted] about how they should proceed.

HRISHI: Yeah, this is his policy advice.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Not good.

HRISHI: A more minor example of this comes from Toby "Rest on our Laurels" Zeigler when he goes in and asks Leo:

[West Wing Episode 6.01 excerpt]

TOBY: What is the president doing, Leo? A summit? He's already got a Nobel Prize! What's he need a second one for? Bookends?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I mean, he's already been president one term? What's he need a second term for? What? What?

JOSH: Yeah this is Toby Zeigler arguing against second things?

HRISHI: Why would you ever think that the fact that he's--he's like "What is he trying to do man? Is he trying to solve peace...he's trying to create peace in the Middle East?" Come on! He just like maybe he should aim lower. I didn't know where that came from. From a person who's always been at the president's heels trying to have him engage with his better angels. This also seems like some bull- [expletive deleted].

JOSH: I believed it from Toby.

HRISHI: You did?

JOSH: I'm disappointed in Will.

HRISHI: I feel like Toby would be "Yeah, let's think about the legacy. This is going to be an enormous thing, and yes, maybe it won't happen, but why not try?"

JOSH: That's what I took it as. I took it as Toby's keeping his eye on where things are and where they're going to go politically given that he has zero belief that any progress can be made in terms of peace talks.

HRISHI: Hmm. [sighing] yeah.

JOSH: I mean, not at his best but I sort of buy it more than I bought the Will moment.

HRISHI: There's a moment where the Speaker and the President meet, and the Speaker gives a well-articulated argument for the reasons why the President shouldn't pursue the peace talks.

[West Wing Episode 6.01 excerpt]

HAFFLEY: Members of Congress were killed, Mr. President. Instead of seeking justice, you're typing up name tags and inviting them to play dodgeball at Camp David.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Haffley accuses him of appeasement. In this scene, there's a funny thing that happened, I thought, which is that the president walks in, Haffley gives him this dressing down. The president says "I didn't come here to play games," and basically walks out of the meeting or walks off frame, and then there's a shot of all of the Republicans on the other side of the table from the side and the president walks to a side door to exit the room, I guess, and then he says. "I'm trying to find a way to make peace." And as one, all of them like swing their heads to look at him. And that's just a funny awkward moment, where you're like what were you looking at this whole time? Like you can only look at the president once he's spoken; otherwise, your eyeline has to be trained on the place where he last was when he made a sound. [both laugh]

JOSH: Maybe it's a comment on Republican legislators and their having to do everything as one.

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

[Ad break]

JOSH: Now here's a question-I literally didn't understand this line. Doesn't the president refer to them all as "right-wing turkey basters"?

HRISHI: He doesn't refer to *them* as right-wing turkey basters [laughs].

JOSH: I didn't understand the turkey baster reference.

HRISHI: So, Haffley says:

[West Wing Episode 6.01 excerpt]

HAFFLEY: Many people believe you sent Congressmen into harm's way.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Are these the same right-wing turkey basters who said I faked MS to get the sympathy vote in the last election?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: You know that he had intentionally sent this CODEL with some sense of recklessness, right? That they're going to get hurt. So I think the president is asking if those people--the people who were saying that he sent Congressmen into harm's way--are those the right-wing turkey basters who said that he faked MS. Maybe by deleting one letter and altering it a little bit, it's the president's way of avoiding calling them 'turkey bastards.'

JOSH: Ah, that makes more sense.

HRISHI: I think my favorite moment from this episode is one between Donna and Josh. After the doctor says she wants to see Josh, he goes in; she's being prepped for surgery and she can't speak--she's got a tube in her mouth--so she can only write notes, and he's asking her how she is, and she's making jokes. She says "Nice hat." And Josh is trying to make light of it, but she writes the word "scared," and it's just killer. And that moment, we are in totally new territory between the two of them in terms of their relationship.

JOSH: Vulnerability and intimacy.

HRISHI: Josh was shot and had to go into surgery and all that, but she didn't see him right before he went into surgery. It was afterwards. This is just a new scene.

JOSH: Some very fine pre- and post-op acting from Janel Moloney.

HRISHI: Yeah, I thought so too, and I thought Brad was great in his struggle to try and keep his composure but also letting his own fear belie that a little bit. I thought it was a really nice scene.

JOSH: I agree.

HRISHI: Another part that I really liked is the way that things change between Leo and Kate, which we talked about earlier way back in season 5 when we were talking about how Leo had said to Kate, you know, he tells her basically to back off. Well, he changes his tune in this episode, I think. You know, Kate tries to actually apologize; she tries to apologize to the president for giving him counsel that might have led to this mess, and the president says:

[West Wing Episode 6.01 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I get lots of counsel, Ms. Harper. What I choose to do with it is my responsibility.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And then she tries to apologize to Leo, too. And Leo kind of echoes the president but I think takes on a different meaning. He says to her:

[West Wing Episode 6.01 excerpt]

LEO: The president heard what he wanted to hear and went where he wanted to go. He's over 21. Don't flatter yourself, Commander, you're not changing the course of history.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Mean.

HRISHI: I actually think that Leo is talking more about himself here than he is about Kate, and I think it's a nice step indicating where this storyline is going because when Leo is talking to Kate originally in the sit room and saying, "Hey, what are you doing?"

JOSH: Yeah, "You're out of line."

HRISHI: Yeah, it's coming from Leo in the mode of opinion that the president is impressionable, and he can be swayed by Kate's advice. And I actually think that there's a little bit of optimism in that as dark as it is for him to be, like, back off, because it means that Leo believes that the president listens to his advisors.

JOSH: Yeah, he's trying to protect his process.

HRISHI: Yeah, and Leo doesn't want an advisor who's going to be in the room disagreeing with him. But I think that is actually darker; Leo's more resigned to the idea that the president actually makes up his own mind. It wasn't Kate's fault that the president went this way; he's letting her off the hook, but by extension that means it isn't Leo's fault if he can't talk the president into what he thinks is the correct course of action. Like I think Leo is letting himself off the hook.

JOSH: Right. That said, I think this moment is before their quaking, snarling interchange in the Oval.

HRISHI: Right, no, I think that this is evidence that this is simmering for Leo. He's blaming the president really single-handedly. It's not like he's saying "Hey, look, we all gave him the best advice; you influenced him this way; I influenced him this way." Because if he were to really believe that, he would be acknowledging the idea that he gave the president what he thought was really great advice, and the president went with someone else's advice over his. You know what I mean? And instead, it's easier for him to say, "Well, the president just is going to do what he's going to do, and you can't take any blame for it. Also, you can't take any credit for it," and by transitive property, neither can Leo.

JOSH: Hmm, I guess so, but he still gives it a shot after this moment. I mean I love this -it's such a cliché to refer to a performance as "brave," but John is so ugly in that scene.

HRISHI: When they really...

JOSH: When they just go at it.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: ...mano-à-mano in the Oval, and he's really like snarling and almost spitting, and there's something, I think, actually brave about the performance. He just doesn't care how he's coming across or how the character's coming across or how he looks. It's just like it is all out there, and there's almost a shock on his face. That's why I'm maybe pushing back against what your interpretation of what he said to Kate because I think there's almost seems to me like a little shock there when he can't just bring Bartlet around to his perspective on this at that moment.

HRISHI: Well I think maybe he's feeling hopeless and that's when we get to

[cross talk]

JOSH: Desperate.

HRISHI: Yeah, desperate, and I think that desperation is laced into this last exchange:

[West Wing Episode 6.01 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: They're deliberately provoking us, Leo. They know that we have to retaliate. They've studied us; they want us to overreact.

LEO: This isn't overreacting. It's the appropriate, balanced...

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Tell me how this ends, Leo! You want me to start something that may have serious repercussions on American foreign policy for decades, but you don't know how it ends.

LEO: We don't always know how it ends!

[clock ticks]

LEO: The Lincoln will be in position in a few hours, and then you are going to have to give the go-ahead for the bombings.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And the first time I was watching that, I was like. Wait, he's making it seem like that's just-

JOSH: "You're going to do what I'm telling you."

HRISHI: Yeah, and then the president says:

[West Wing Episode 6.01 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Or what?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And really gave voice to something that I hadn't quite--I was still processing it--and yeah, he's calling Leo on this being a threat, and what is it that Leo's actually threatening? And you know it's like there's all kinds of things that he's potentially threatening, but one of them is is, "You and I will be over."

JOSH: We're done. Yeah, I got that sense, too. I mean in one sense, maybe just politically, you're going to have to do it, like you're not realizing that you're going to be in a situation where it's the only choice, but I also got the sense, too that there's another layer there like, "I'm done with you 'Mr. Man;' I'm will walk away." And the president basically says 'okay.'

HRISHI: Because of this scene, I had to go back to season 1 episode 19, "Let Bartlet Be Bartlet." I don't if you remember this, but when we were covering that episode, way back in the salad days of 2016. There was a quote from an article that I had read where Martin Sheen talked about this scene:

[West Wing Episode 1.19 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: We've heard it all before, Leo: you drive me to the political safe ground. It's not true.

LEO: I know it's not true.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Good.

LEO: You drive me there.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: What the hell did you say?

LEO: And you know it, too.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Leo?

LEO: We're stuck in neutral because that's where you tell me to stay.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: You're wrong.

LEO: No, I'm not, sir.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: You want to do this now?

LEO: Sir?

PRESIDENT BARTLET: You came to my house.

LEO: Mr. President.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: You came to my house, Leo, and said "Jed, let's run for president." And I said "Why?" And you said "So that you can open your mouth and say what you think!"

LEO: Sir?

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Where did that part go?

LEO: You tell me, Mr. President.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: We discussed this scene and how Martin Sheen said that the way that they had first started performing this scene, they'd turned the temperature up.

JOSH: Very quickly.

HRISHI: Yeah, he described it as they were overplaying this scene, and the director, Laura Innes, came in and said, "Take all of that away and just talk," and that's what they ended up using in the episode, this much more subdued version of it where they never get to the point where they're screaming at each other. So seeing that ugly take that you're talking about--Leo really losing his temper and screaming at the top of his lungs--I thought it was an indication of how far things have gotten between these two characters. That in another time when they--this is I think as close to an existential divide between the two of them since "Let Bartlet Be Bartlet"--but there, they resolved it, and they never got to the spit-flying rage.

JOSH: Well, one of the interesting things--I can't decide whether it's a strength or a weakness of the episode--is that the same beat is being played out over and over again. Already from the previous episode; we're having the same essential argument made in only slightly different iterations over and over again, and at a certain point, it's like watching two people beat their heads against the wall.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: In one sense, I think it feels a little repetitive during this episode, but it also...we're used to somebody giving. We're used to somebody making that argument that's just somehow more salient and substantive and swaying the other person, and there's a little give. And these guys have just been going at it now, for a long time.

HRISHI: Yeah, maybe it is an apt dramatization of people talking about Israel-Palestine. You know, it does sometimes feel like people are just talking themselves in circles, and it's intractable.

JOSH: Right, and in a way, it's great that John avoided any kind of sense of there being an easy answer and sort of chose to dramatize things sort of as they are.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Sort of very, very little progress being made and two sides reiterating, again and again, intractable positions.

HRISHI: Yeah, I mean that being said, there is some movement that happens in this episode, and I really like it. I love how hard won it is and kind of how miniscule and how painfully it has to be extracted, which is this game of diplomatic chess that Kate and the president are trying to play between Israel and Chairman Farad and the U.S. constituency. Farad has accepted the invitation to Camp David. He pulled a 'them' on them, but they also have to feel like Americans don't want to feel bullied into it. They still want him there, but they just don't like the way they've done it.

JOSH: Yeah, and they don't want the political calculus to be an act of terror brought them to the table.

HRISHI: Right, and I think they want to show some goodwill among all of the players to everyone, to the world at large and to the people who are going to be actually directly

negotiating. So they figure out this way that they think that they can make this work, which is they don't blame Farad; they really are pinning this on Nasan. They want the PLO to be the ones who bring them Nasan, and if they do that, that can be a gesture to the American people like "look, this is the guy who is actually responsible, and see, this move, this is like the move of an ally. They're helping us bring this person to justice, which we said we would do. But Farad has to deal with his own internal constituency, and he says he can't do that...anyway, I loved that the solution finally that they come up with is that Farad is going to get him, but he's not going to take credit, and they're going to deliver him to the FBI so that the US can say, "Hey, we got this guy," but then they can kind of privately tell Israel, "Yes, they actually did help U.S. do this," so Israel will come to the summit with them. It's multi-layered.

JOSH: It's complex, and it makes a lot of sense.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It's a good plan.

HRISHI: And it doesn't come out of nowhere. It's a slow jam...

JOSH: [interrupting] Indeed...

HRISHI: That they end up playing, and I really like it.

JOSH: I like the way it plays out over those phone calls. The phone calls are well done.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: [cross talk] the leaders.

HRISHI: Ok, so then it's game on. The peace talks are gonna happen. This part I found really weird. It feels like, as I said, "NSF Thurmont," and "The Birnam Wood" are two halves of a two-part story, but the middle point is not actually in the middle of the two episodes. Like then they go to Camp David, and suddenly it feels like a new episode is starting.

JOSH: [interrupting] It feels like the beginning of the next episode. I agree completely,

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right

JOSH: [cross talk] I thought the same thing as I watched.

HRISHI: [interrupting] It's so strange.

JOSH: In fact, in my memory, I thought that was "The Birnam Wood." I didn't think this is how this episode ended.

HRISHI: Yeah, I was wondering if maybe it was because there was so much material at Camp David that they just had to squeeze some of it into the end of this first episode.

JOSH: Yeah, that seems possible.

HRISHI: The change of location is dramatic. It's just like, oh now, we're in a whole new...there's a whole new set piece, and a whole new thing on location, which normally you'd get at the beginning of an episode, really at the beginning of a season, but I guess the point is that we're going to end this episode with everyone there- all the players at Camp David, but it did feel strange. Especially with this thing they're getting on the helicopter, and then we see...the way we're introduced to Camp David is by Will running through the woods, and there's something about the direction of it and the scripting of that moment that feels like the beginning of an episode.

JOSH: Yeah, I agree.

HRISHI: The part that I was kind of surprised about is that with all the security-you know the president is coming and with all the security there at Camp David, how was Will allowed to bring those guns?

[Josh laughs]

JOSH: Yeah, somebody tweeted a picture to me today, and I remember that I wanted to feature my arms. I think I rolled up my sleeves during rehearsal, and Alex was like 'Don't do that.'

[both laugh]

HRISHI: "Don't do that."

JOSH: And very unlike me, I just did it anyway. [both laugh] Maybe he didn't realize or maybe we had already done a take before he realized and at that point, it's like "Ah, [expletive deleted] it, fine."

HRISHI: That's great.

JOSH: I remember that. I remember, ironically, having to have fake sweat put under my arms because the sweating--now that I'm old, nothing in my body works--but sweating used to be the bane of my existence as an actor. I'm a very sweaty guy, and you don't want to be the guy that was always sweating under his arms, so to have somebody actually spraying it onto my arms was a delightful change.

HRISHI: Hmm, was it hot? Did you really need the artificial sweat?

JOSH: It was hot, but they wanted "you've been running for five miles" sweat.

HRISHI: Right. And how much running did you actually do?

JOSH: You know a few takes worth of not that much. Much to my delight. I'm no five-miler.

HRISHI: How about that Carnegie Mellon shirt?

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: Someone just said "Put this on?" And you said, "Ok."?

JOSH: Well, yeah, that's my entire approach to acting. "Do this, do that; wear this; say this; be racist." Okay! "When do I get paid?" No. It's like in "Scandal," I am often wearing a Dartmouth t-shirt: Shonda Rhimes' alma mater. I can't remember who went to Carnegie Mellon. It was always fun any time you work on *The West Wing* and not be in a suit. I definitely enjoyed the running scenes.

HRISHI: Shorts, too! I mean that was brave. Speaking of brave.

JOSH: Right! To look like that? To go in front of a camera?

HRISHI: I'm just kidding. It was exciting; it was nice to see some skin on *The West Wing*. So Leo is not invited to Camp David.

JOSH: No.

HRISHI: And there have been plenty of times when Leo has had to miss something monumental.

JOSH: You'd think maybe Will wouldn't have been on the list.

HRISHI: That was one thing where I'm like-sometimes with some of these scenes, where I'm like "You all know he works for the Vice President?"

JOSH: AND he hates Palestinians. Maybe you ought to keep him out of the room?

HRISHI: How does he get to be there? As one of the gang? Alright, he gets to go to Camp David? Alright. Vice President isn't there, but the Vice President's guy is there?

JOSH: Well, maybe he's off-camera.

HRISHI: Maybe.

JOSH: Maybe they're in a bunk together somewhere.

HRISHI: But yeah, so Leo is specifically asked not to come, which really the consequences of Leo's unspoken threat really are already echoing.

JOSH: Leo has a line...

[West Wing Episode 6.01 excerpt]

LEO: He doesn't like chaos.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That put me in mind to once again recommend the Netflix show *Fauda*.

HRISHI: Mm, yes.

JOSH: I think I'm pronouncing it correctly, which is the Arabic word for 'chaos,' and which is this Israeli made TV series about these undercover I think it's "the mista'arvim" I think is the name of the unit that Arabic-speaking Israelis that go undercover in the Palestinian territories and operate undercover, and it is a very, very good series. You can decide for yourself whether it's balanced or not. In the end, it is an Israeli-made TV show, so I think you can fairly argue that it shows an Israeli perspective, but I think it certainly at least attempts to give a balanced view or some balance or some more than a single narrative, and you certainly get a sense of some of the less savory and brutal aspects of the occupation in the TV series. It's also just a good television series.

HRISHI: Yeah, I would not recommend that people watch it if they're looking for something relaxing to watch.

JOSH: It's true.

HRISHI: It's so nerve-wracking.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: The whole time; it's an incredibly tense show.

JOSH: "It's very 'Yudi'-fying" is what my parents would say.

HRISHI: Unifying?

JOSH: "Yudi"-fying. I once asked my dad the story because I thought I was going to use it on another episode. Oh here we go, so this is my dad; I asked my dad the origin of 'Yudi-fying.' "We were telling our friend Yudi Rosen about your role in *In the Line of Fire*--old Clint Eastwood movie--and urging him to see the movie, he asked if it was suspenseful, and when we said 'yes' he told us that he couldn't go to see it; he said that he cannot take any movie or TV show that's too suspenseful. It affects his pulse and whatnot, and since then we've referred to that condition as being "yudi-fied."

HRISHI: Oh. I mean I have a similar thing with horror movies. I like a good action-suspense movie, and that's about as far as I can take it.

JOSH: Mm-hmm.

HRISHI: That gets me right up to the red line; horror movies are past the red line, and I cannot watch them. The only way I can ever watch a horror movie is if I first go online, read, and this is in complete contradistinction from how I approach every other viewing experience. I try to go in knowing nothing at all; I try not to watch any trailers, read any reviews...I want to go into a movie theater and have the first scene of the film be the first time I'm ever seeing these images. But with horror movies, it's the opposite. I google, *It Follows*: spoilers, synopsis, everything-tell me everything that happens.

JOSH: That's a good movie.

HRISHI: Yeah, and I enjoyed it after I found out it exactly what it was that I was going to watch. Then I could watch it with a level of relative calm, so that I was only completely anxious instead of unbearably terrified.

JOSH: [Laughs] Jumping out of your skin. Yeah, that's funny, Avi, my son used to do that. We would watch something on Netflix, and I would see him take the cursor and put it down on that bar at the bottom and kind of just see. I was like "Don't fast forward;" he said, "No, no, I'm not going to fast forward. I'm just watching the movie." Basically he's going "frame, frame, frame, frame, frame" just to kind of see as each scene is evolving. 'Ok, now I can watch it.' He just needed to know; same thing.

HRISHI: There was a line in this that Nick brought to my attention where the president says,

[West Wing Episode 6.01 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: 'Party clowns, piñatas, build a mosque out of Jell-o if I thought...'

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Leave it to Nick. To find something super esoteric. Yes.

HRISHI: He said, "Concerning the mosque of jello, it's a matter of debate whether gelatin is permissible to eat by practicing Muslims." Because gelatin is made from horses.

JOSH: Mm-hmm.

HRISHI: Right?

JOSH: I don't know; I know it's made from various animals and, of course, Nick is referring to the laws of Halal. Gelatin is a questionable substance in terms of kashrut and the laws of being Kosher as well.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: I know that the conservative movement some years back decided that gelatin- Because there's something called K-Jel, and there's also a vegan gelatin version to have the same effect.

HRISHI: Yeah, and there's Halal gelatin available, too.

JOSH: I'm not surprised, and there's also kosher gelatin, which I think is maybe made from fish or something, but also the conservative movement decided that gelatin--maybe from anything--is so far removed ultimately when it becomes part of another food, so far removed from what it was that it was considered Kosher. I just remember being very excited because this is when my family began eating Mentos.

HRISHI: Mentos have gelatin?

JOSH: Well, they certainly did at the time.

HRISHI: Yeah, Mentos-not vegan. Who knew? I guess you knew!

JOSH: Well let me see if that's true. "Are Mentos vegetarian? Unfortunately Mentos, three-layer, Strawberry Squeeze, and Juice Burst gum are all unsuitable for vegetarians." Alright well there's a raging...so there's gelatin.

HRISHI: Anyway, he was opening up a whole other non-Halal can of worms...

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: By suggesting a mosque made of gelatin.

JOSH: By the way, anyone who is Kosher or who observes Halal would not eat a can of worms.

HRISHI: On that note, I think it might be time to wrap it up.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: Thanks for listening to another episode of *The West Wing Weekly*. Thanks for breaking through into Season 6 with us.

HRISHI: You know, I meant to call you "Yakov" in this episode.

JOSH: You "Mento" call me?

HRISHI: I "Mentos" have called you "Yakov" this whole time, and I forgot to. If you are looking for some last-minute holiday presents, check out thewestwingweekly.com/merch.

JOSH: Or if you're shopping super early for next year, go to the same place.

HRISHI: That's right, only 390 days until Christmas 2019.

JOSH: [cross talk] Shopping days left, that's right.

HRISHI: Thanks so much to Zach McNeese, Margaret Miller, and Nick Song.

JOSH: All of whom you got to know a little bit better in last week's mini-sode. Thanks to PRX and Radiotopia for allowing us to be a part of their fancy collection of the world's best podcasts. You can sample the others at radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

HRISHI & JOSH: What's next?

[Outro Music]