

The West Wing Weekly
6.10: "Faith Based Initiative"
Guest: Bradley Whitford

[Intro Music]

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

JOSH: And I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: Today we're talking about "Faith Based Initiative". It's from season 6. It's episode 10.

JOSH: It was written by Bradley Whitford -

BRADLEY: [cross talk] What?

JOSH: [cross talk] – and it was directed by Christopher Misiano, and it first aired on January 5th, 2005.

HRISHI: And we have a special guest joining us today, the writer of this episode, Mr Bradley Whitford.

JOSH: Oh, I was hoping it was Christopher Misiano.

BRADLEY: Me too.

HRISHI: Here's the synopsis of the episode from Warner Brothers. Brad, let me know what you think of this official synopsis.

BRADLEY: I will.

HRISHI: [Reads] "*The press circulates an untrue rumour about C.J. A controversial amendment banning gay marriage is added to the budget. Josh convinces Santos to vie for the office of President. Bartlet tries to handle his latest recurrence of Multiple Sclerosis and Donna works for Vice President Robert Russell in his New Hampshire presidential campaign headquarters.*"

BRADLEY: Right.

JOSH: That's about right. No mention of Will.

BRADLEY: No. No. So that's really just the important stuff that happens.

JOSH: Right.

BRADLEY: Yeah. The only thing I would add to that synopsis is "Will sits at a desk".

HRISHI: Just for comparison, here's what the NBC synopsis says. [Reads] "*The internet press is running with a story that questions C.J.'s sexual orientation. C.J. refuses to put out a statement which only makes the media press harder. The effects of MS are becoming more pronounced on President Bartlet. Meanwhile Santos declares that he will run for president, but only if Josh will run his campaign.*"

BRADLEY: Yeah. That's a little better. Do you find that Warner Brothers does better than NBC?

HRISHI: Oftentimes they're the same, and oftentimes they're both bad.

BRADLEY: I'm interested in your interest in synopses. Is this just a remnant of how you worked in

college?

HRISHI: I think it's an interesting thing to hear how the people who were in charge of getting people to watch this show -

BRADLEY: [cross talk] Yeah.

HRISHI: [cross talk] – try and do that in a few short sentences, and yeah, sometimes it feels like they're really just doing the driest thing to convey some information. Sometimes it feels like they've done a good job that's gonna actually describe a situation that's gonna appeal to fans and say 'Hey I'm interested in watching that', or, you know, possibly even drawing in new viewers, but it's crazy to me that the people who got paid to do this -

BRADLEY: [cross talk] Right.

HRISHI: [cross talk] – came up with some of the stuff.

BRADLEY: Yes. It's not the most alive prose.

HRISHI: But it's a good way for us to start our episodes and let people in on, you know, 'remember this episode?', in case they're listening to this without watching and then we'll get into the finer aspects.

BRADLEY: Yeah.

JOSH: Let's start at the beginning. How did you come to write an episode of *The West Wing*?

BRADLEY: Interesting story - one of the greatest things, honestly, that ever happened to me creatively. I was supposed to - you get to a certain point where, when you've been on these one-hour dramas that were twenty-two episodes a year, eventually you would get to the point where you would be given the opportunity, if you were interested, to direct. So I was excited about directing and I had an idea and I made an appointment with John Wells, just to say I had an idea, and it feels like a pretty dated insight, that you can really mess with people when you start internet rumors. But it was sort of a new thing that I felt the Right was doing with this new tool of the internet which is, create a rumor and the rumor will take on a life of its own, whether or not it's true. And I was explaining the ideas I had for this. I wanted to work on it with Eli Attie and John said, 'well why don't you write an outline?' And I said 'what do you mean?' And he said 'just tell the story in one page'. And so I did that, and I came in the next day and he said 'just tell it in three pages'. And then it got up to five pages, and then he said 'if you can give me seventy pages in a week I'll put it on TV, and I think you should write it, but I won't let you direct it, because I won't let somebody write and direct. What would you rather do?' And I said 'this is terrifying to me', and he said 'well, you know, if you fail I'll back you up but - ', he said, 'I think you should try it. I think you could do it.'

HRISHI: When he said 'I'll back you up', did he mean, like, he'll help fix any problems that might come up?

BRADLEY: Basically, you know, if I flamed out – you know I was working that week too, we were shooting -

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

BRADLEY: [cross talk] – and it was actually a really wonderful way to write for the first time, because writing is absolutely terrifying and painful. And to just be sort of given this challenge, and it's John saying 'I have confidence that you can do this'. But I expressed the fear. I said 'I have no idea if I can do this at all'.

JOSH: Had you written scripts previously, of any kind?

BRADLEY: None that I put a period on at the end of it. So it is absolutely what I could feel myself wanting to do. I think as an actor, eventually, if you're lucky to work a lot, you eventually get bored in a certain way, because you're a pawn in a story, and if you have the opportunity you wanna take kind of more responsibility for it. But it was a scary thing. I could not stop, from the moment – I had to write it as quickly as I could and it was, you know, it was shooting all day and, like, doing all-nighters. It was a crazy week and the first draft I was not happy with. It was this kind of sprawling series of monologues. And then I realized pretty quickly that your fears about writing are, you know: 'Can I write at all? Am I gonna be able to create interesting dialogue?' That, I found, was not the problem. What's fascinating about any kind of filmed writing, but especially television writing is it's all about architecture, it's all about math. You gotta set this up here, you gotta create a couple of stories that are gonna, kinda swirl around each other and it becomes kind of a construction problem, and that was interesting. And the distance between the first draft and the second draft was a huge difference. And it's terrible when you've written a first draft and you know it sucks. You know it's not where it needs to be. But then I got notes from – the way John likes to do it and the way I wrote the second episode, the one in the seventh year – the way John likes to write is you pitch story and he kind of approves in the room the basic beats of the story, then you go and write an outline, then you get notes, then you write another outline, you get notes, then you do a first draft, then you get notes, then you do a second draft and then you get notes. And that's a really good process. But this was just out the window. This was just write as fast as you can. And I realized pretty quickly, like, John runs that writer's room - Lawrence O'Donnell said 'he runs it like a great editor at *The New Yorker*. I mean he is absolutely brilliant, in control of the room. He's like a good director in that he's trying to figure what you're trying to do, as opposed to imposing what he thinks you should do. And so it ended up being a very scary but, you know, lucky situation and I was secure. I was getting advice, a lot of advice from Eli, from Debora Cahn, and then I had John, who knows more about one-hour television writing than anybody on the planet. But it was terrifying.

HRISHI: So what other writing had you done, in any form, before that?

BRADLEY: What had I done? I don't wanna say this in front of Josh -

JOSH: [cross talk] Uh oh.

BRADLEY: [cross talk] – But I've written poetry nobody sees.

JOSH: Respect.

BRADLEY: Yeah. I have a lot of writers in my family. I wrote a graduation speech that University of Wisconsin, you know, so I had expressed myself on paper, but I had not done any play writing, and I had just sort of messed around with screenwriting. I ended up having a real advantage. I was basted, obviously, in this world and it was very weird – I watched it last night, I think for the first time since I saw it when it came out.

JOSH: Really?

BRADLEY: I think a lot of the ideas I got, that are in the show, are because of my saturated sort of relationships with these actors. The basic idea for this came when Allison knocked on my trailer door, and Allison was single at the time, and had just broken up with a guy, and in *The National Enquirer* there was a mention of a rumor that she was gay. And she just kind of burst into tears and said 'you know it's really hard to meet a guy and this doesn't help'. And there was a bunch of political disinformation going around, so this idea – it was interesting watching it because now, like, this is, you know, rampant. This is a political strategy. I knew I wanted to write about the gay marriage issue because it was upsetting to me, and this was at a time - I mean, I don't know if all the listeners can appreciate that gay marriage was never gonna happen. It was what Bush used, you know he put gay marriage on the ballot in Ohio to drum up base voting. It was seen as a place that you absolutely couldn't go. It's an amazing thing with gay marriage.

JOSH: That's one of the rare things, I thought, as I watched this episode, where you can point to an episode of *The West Wing* and say 'wow progress has occurred'. Usually it's infinitesimal or non-existent, and it's refreshing to watch an episode that really now feels of another time. It's amazing the progress that's been made.

HRISHI: There's actually this really incredible moment where Russell is talking about why he won't touch the issue.

[West Wing Episode 6.10 excerpt]

RUSSELL: We're not there yet. Five thousand years of socialisation didn't go out the window with the first Village People album. You do this wrong and there'll be a backlash that sets us back fifty years. You do it right we'll be there in ten.

TOBY: And in the meantime?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: The Supreme Court decision that came down was in 2015. It was ten years later, so you actually nailed it.

BRADLEY: Yeah. See, I was a visionary. That was always the A storyline. I wanted Allison, in her relatively new role as Chief of Staff, to get messed with on the internet – to have them try and sort of flick her gyroscope and throw her off. I forget, honestly, what the other storyline was, but John – they call it 'pipe', which is, in John's era, it's sort of the ongoing story that you have to put into the plot of your episode, and so it was weird because when I finally agreed to do it he said 'oh by the way you gotta write basically you leaving the White House'.

HRISHI: Right.

BRADLEY: So that was interesting. I didn't know that was gonna happen.

JOSH: That was a bold thing, I thought. First of all I think it's a great script. I remember being disappointed initially when I read it, how good it was. And re-watching it, it's a great – I think it's a terrific script and an excellent episode and I was struck by how much you have to do in it. It must be difficult – I always think it's hard, it must be hard to direct and then to have yourself be in the episode. Is it hard to write for yourself, or is that just a joy?

BRADLEY: I had said to John 'can I just basically not, you know, kind of, be in this? You know, like maybe be in a morning scene?' And he said 'No. We really have to deal with this. I mean we have to get Jimmy to announce'. I'll tell you a funny thing. When he announces -

HRISHI: [cross talk] This is the very end of the episode.

BRADLEY: [cross talk] Yeah. Basically I'm staying up all night and pretty ragged and I get to the end and I realize I really have to, you know, it really does have to be a kick-off speech and I had no idea what to do and just as a marker I wrote a version of that speech which was something I'd heard a lot. One of my best friends, John Chestak, his son is autistic and these families who are dealing with these very, very difficult situations, they would constantly say that they hated it when doctors used the phrase 'false hope'. 'I don't want to give you false hope.' And this one woman in particular – it was really moving, said that, it's a version of what I stole which is, you know 'there's no such thing as false hope. Hope is as necessary to the species as oxygen, and hope cannot be false by definition. Facts can be false but hope is just hope.' And I was very obsessed with this idea.

[West Wing Episode 6.10 excerpt]

SANTOS: We live in cynical times. I know that. But hope is not up for debate. There is such a thing as false science. There is such a thing as false promises. I am sure that I'll have my share of false starts in this campaign. But there is no such thing as false hope. There is only hope.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I thought it was very clever of you. I shook my head thinking 'that wily bastard', in that scene at the end there are moments where we're just getting Brad's reaction shots to how good his own writing is [Brad and Josh laugh]. You're listening to Santos and just like kind of impressed by what he has to say.

BRADLEY: Wow. What a turn of phrase. So I write this speech and I look at it after a couple of hours of sleep and I'm like 'this is the cheesiest – this is like being pro-gravity, like I'm announcing this guy's presidency and he's saying 'I really believe in hope'.' And I remember showing to Eli, who was great to have around because he's written a number of these speeches and he said 'no, no, actually hope's a great idea. They're all super simple'. I mean it is really interesting how we ended up, a couple of years ahead of time, with a candidate very much like Barack Obama, kind of a progressive dream, who came out of nowhere. And when his announcement was 'Hope' it was really funny, because I had just thought 'this is the stupidest idea'.

[Excerpt from Barack Obama's presidential announcement speech]

OBAMA: In the face of despair you believe there can be hope. It was here in Springfield that I was reminded of the essential decency of the American people. Where I came to believe that through this decency we can build a more hopeful America. And that is why, in the shadow of the old state capitol, where common hopes and common dreams still live, I stand before you today to announce my candidacy for President of the United States of America.

[end excerpt]

BRADLEY: Can I just say one thing that was really helpful in this and that I think is interesting? I think it's interesting creatively. Some of the best sort of creative experiences – and I would say that Aaron and Tommy are an example of this – is a kind of collision of collaborators and, on this, the response from Alex Graves and Chris Misiano, who at that point are parental figures to us, and Alex is wonderfully positive, and he reads it and he's like 'oh my God I can't believe you wrote this. I love this episode. I'm so jealous that I, you know, I can't direct it. Oh my god'. And Chris Misiano walks up, who is directing it and goes 'I don't get it'. Like 'I don't understand why we care'. And you really need those two voices in your head of 'oh my God this is wonderful' and 'this might not work'.

JOSH: Do you remember specifically what Christopher was questioning or pushing back on?

BRADLEY: The horrible thing with Chris was – and I love Chris, I mean I really love him – but he was like 'Naah', you know. And I would ask just that, like 'what specifically?' and he'd be like 'Nah I just – I don't think it – you know?' I think it's good to have that sort of fear of 'does this work at all?' And then once we started to get it up, and again it was really quick - the weirdest thing about this was I had not written anything scripted or professionally ever and ten days later, after I find out I'm doing it, I got Allison Janney, like doing a monologue. It was pretty freaky.

JOSH: It's incredible. I mean of all the shows or projects to cut your teeth on, this seems like a very daunting one. It's impressive.

BRADLEY: Thank you, but you know I was also in a cult for, you know, all of these years and I was pretty basted in that world. Like, I have strong ideas and I got to do it more in the next episode, where I got to humiliate you -

JOSH: [cross talk] Oh we'll get to that.

BRADLEY: [cross talk] – We'll get to that. But I think I understood – I had an advantage because I understood what Aaron had sort of set up, and I knew that the best episodes included a personal struggle that was amplified by the issues that we were dealing with. I would not have known how to write that if I hadn't lived in that world, you know.

JOSH: What about the final sequence? That speech that we've been talking about that Santos gives is intercut with images of President Bartlet struggling to stand and move and walk with his crutches. Did you envision that whole sequence, when you were writing it?

BRADLEY: Yeah. That was soon after my sister-in-law was diagnosed with MS and I had been thinking about - she's my age, she's fine, you know, she's good, now, but she was dealing with this real sort of challenge of surviving on hope and finding her strength through hope. I'm also obsessed – balance is a very interesting metaphor that I'm kind of interested in.

[West Wing Episode 6.10 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I just can't find my balance. It went away. I try thinking it back but it's difficult because it's not a static thing. Once it's gone it's hard to imagine having it back again. It's disheartening to realise that thinking just isn't gonna get it done. You've just got to trust that you'll happen on to it again.

[end excerpt]

BRADLEY: So I knew I wanted him to talk about balance. I knew I wanted him to push against what his body was doing to him, and I just wanted to tie that with hope.

HRISHI: That bit of dialogue from President Bartlet really hit me personally too just because that's the thing that's affecting my mom. She has problems with balance. She has a Parkinson's type disease that affects her motor functions and the thing that it really affects is balance, like she can't walk, and so to hear it put this way and put eloquently like this was great and hard.

BRADLEY: Yeah, it's sad. I mean I had – it had been five years since my father had died and I, like I knew I wanted to have that thing of him needing help with his pants.

HRISHI: Right.

BRADLEY: I wanted to sort of focus on somebody who the audience, you know, is very invested in their, sort of strength and survival and just to see them go totally vulnerable.

JOSH: I like the line:

[West Wing Episode 6.10 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: So this is why they make you take vows.

ABBEY: Yup. This is why.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Like, the matter-of-factness -

JOSH: [cross talk] Great moment.

HRISHI: So when it came time to do some of the 'pipe' stuff, in addition to your own character's leaving The White House, all this stuff, did you have to consult with the writer's room a lot? I mean, like you said you're on set while you're trying to write, stuff like that. I imagine that must have been

so hard to try and figure out what the overall plot beats were that you had to hit while interspersing these bigger ideas.

JOSH: And correct me if I'm wrong but you'd been laying pipe for years when you came to write this script.

BRADLEY: Yeah, laying pipe is no problem for me.

[laughter]

JOSH: I just wanted to make that clear.

BRADLEY: Yeah, you know, actually you're in a weird state because you're like, oh it was the ultimate 'be careful what you wish for', because it was just like, 'oh this is sort of semi-public, even if you fail', there was a lot of pressure, so I think I looked at the 'pipe' as 'oh good, well that's two pages', you know. You just want to beat out very clearly -

JOSH: [cross talk] And you'd been beating out for years at this point.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Oh god. [laughter]

BRADLEY: So you wanna beat it out -

HRISHI: [cross talk] Ok.

BRADLEY: [cross talk] – straight and then lay the pipe.

JOSH: [cross talk] Right.

HRISHI: [cross talk] I retract the question. Forget it.

JOSH: Too late.

BRADLEY: And then you just -

HRISHI: [cross talk] Let's start -

BRADLEY: [cross talk] – bring the audience to a climax and it's really easy.

HRISHI: Alright, well let's start at the beginning of the episode. The teaser starts in the Santos household, and Matt and Helen are talking about the meeting that had just happened.

JOSH: Teri Polo, by the way. Have we discussed that Teri Polo is now in the show?

HRISHI: No we haven't actually.

BRADLEY: I love Teri in this. I love them in this teaser.

HRISHI: Yeah. One of my favorite things that she does in it is when she swirls around the melted ice cream in the bowl.

[West Wing Episode 6.10 excerpt]

HELEN: Oh my God this is good. You want some?

MATT: What is it?

HELEN: It's ice cream, melted. It's good like this.

(Sound of a spoon scraping the bottom of the bowl.)

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: That is so real and relatable.

JOSH: I like that too. There's a – any time I eat, you know, like sorbet or ice cream there's a point at which my wife hears that sound and goes 'it's done, Josh. There isn't any more'. Click click click click click. 'Stop it.' That's a great scene of them at home in bed with their kids, the whole thing is very believable and -

BRADLEY: The strategy there is you just want to emphatically set up their normalness and, you know, kind of humanity, because you're - shove them out in public and on a pedestal.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: We also though get a sense of the stakes involved because he's not being, when they finally discuss it, when he finally tells his wife what Josh had in mind, he's not fully honest about the fact that he's considering it. He just kind of laughs it off. He wants to obviously, kind of see where he stands and how she might react but withholds from her.

BRADLEY: Yeah and they both play it really well because it's one of those sort of, she knows what he's doing.

[West Wing Episode 6.10 excerpt]

MATT: Told him no.

HELEN: Told him no.

MATT: I told him no.

HELEN: And what did he say?

MATT: He said that I was right, that it was a stupid idea and that I made the right decision.

HELEN: Man of conviction right there.

[end excerpt]

BRADLEY: I wanted to show that they had, like a little emotional short-hand, so she doesn't, you know, it's not a scene where she's gonna like blow and say, you know, 'you can't do it'. They're both sort of feeling each other out in a complicated way.

JOSH: Yeah, a little bit of a dance.

BRADLEY: Yeah.

HRISHI: I love this moment in contrast with the thing that we were just talking about, with the president and the First Lady and, you know, the closeness and the sort of intimacy of their relationship, even though they have now elevated to this larger than life position and they're in the White House and – you still need to rely on that kind of well of love and trust with your partner. I love that you're sort of establishing those points between these two people who are still new to us.

BRADLEY: Yeah, no, that was the attempt. One thing that I just don't want to forget – I originally

had a scene where I go into the Oval and tell him that I'm leaving and it was just kinda yuck, it was just kinda flat and I wrote that scene a bunch of times and it couldn't kinda get there and it reminded me, and then Chris suggested that we leave it to the audience's imagination, which I thought was a really smart move. In my experience there are a lot of times where the audience will fill in much more brilliantly and much more painfully what initially, when you're setting out, you think you've really, you know, it's the meat of what you have to show. But that was just an interesting moment of, you know, the hottest emotional thing in the episode, you just don't see.

JOSH: Yeah, I thought the same thing as I watched it. It was done with a real economy of dialogue and visual, which was perfect. Exactly as you say – it allows us to sort of – we know the characters so well that that suffices.

BRADLEY: Right. And that's the amazing thing about these television shows and that's why television is so much better than [expletive deleted] movies is - you know, when Tony Soprano walks in in year six, you know, and is having a fight with his wife and he's lost weight and he's gained weight and he's had this affair - like you've lived with these people. And there's a lot of that in this episode that is dependent on the audience's saturation in this world, to know how difficult and tricky it's gonna get for it to break up. And all of this, by the way, I think was managed pretty brilliantly by John Wells, who, if anybody is gonna know how to deal with an invested audience that's witnessing the destruction of their world, he knew how to do it.

JOSH: Yeah. An unrelated moment, but that I also noted for its economy that I liked was when Toby and C.J. are discussing, I think they're discussing, Josh and the possibility that he's gonna go work for Santos.

[West Wing Episode 6.10 excerpt]

TOBY: Josh is thinking of leaving.

C.J.: What?

TOBY: To help Matt Santos run for President.

C.J.: The congressman from Texas?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: There's just a great little reminder to us of Santos', sort of relative political obscurity at this point. I liked that. I thought that was great. In one line a great reminder.

BRADLEY: Right.

HRISHI: This idea of investment and history in the characters I think really comes together in this next scene where we're in C.J.'s office and there's the, sort of the morning briefing and everybody's gathered together. I also really liked the moment where Will is talking about the Vice President going to speak to the NAACP in Memphis and Will gets to say to him:

[West Wing Episode 6.10 excerpt]

WILL: You're like the whitest guy on the planet.

[end excerpt]

[laughter]

HRISHI: You know, prefiguring your character in *Get Out*.

[Excerpt from the film *Get Out*]

DEAN ARMITAGE (Bradley Whitford): *By the way, I would have voted for Obama for a third term if I could. The best president in my lifetime, hands down.*

[end excerpt]

BRADLEY: Yes

JOSH: Ha.

BRADLEY: Yes.

JOSH: Very prescient.

BRADLEY: And you know that we were doing a panel for *Get Out* and, you know, somebody asked Jordan why they cast me. You know what he said? He said 'I thought it'd be funny to watch Josh Lyman take the top of someone's head off'.

JOSH: [Laughs] Spoiler alert. I love that scene and I love that moment too and one of the things I also like is that I feel it a little bit goes to a place you don't expect *The West Wing* to go to, just with Josh's line about 'I can help with those guys', and Charlie getting slightly offended by it.

[West Wing Episode 6.10 excerpt]

CHARLIE: *Those guys?*

JOSH: *Is it weird? Did it just get weird in here?*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I like that cause it is an atypical *West Wing* moment but it really lands. It's very real.

HRISHI: It's great, right. You haven't heard this yet but we interviewed Ben Murray who played Curtis.

BRADLEY: Oh wow.

HRISHI: Yeah. And after speaking to him - he was hilarious – and now every scene with Curtis in it I love automatically.

BRADLEY: Oh I realized too that out of desperation I was just writing my response to these people, like I loved him, I just wanted to, like, point it out a little.

JOSH: I love Abbey's line.

[West Wing Episode 6.10 excerpt]

ABBEY: *I'd like to watch him eat a pie.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I love that line for some reason. And she says it so sweetly. She means it. She really would. He'd be satisfying to cook for, to give him and watch him eat something.

HRISHI: I love the way that it doesn't stay limited to sort of comic relief or something like that. Later on when they're discussing the actual treatment plan for the president you've got Charlie in the

room and you have Curtis in there and Curtis is asking, you know, substantive questions and even though this guy's a new part of the team, you know, you can feel how quickly he's become integral.

BRADLEY: Yeah.

HRISHI: I do have one bone to pick with you about language in this episode, Brad. My hackles were raised when Josh and Toby kept referring to Josh's temp, Marla, as 'girl'.

BRADLEY: Yeah, I noticed that too.

[West Wing Episode 6.10 Excerpt]

TOBY: He in there?

MARLA: Yeah. Don't go in.

TOBY: He alone?

MARLA: How do you mean?

TOBY: Not with others.

MARLA: That is correct.

TOBY: You know what, he'll be fine.

MARLA: Step away from the door.

(Sound of door opening.)

JOSH: Hey, one second. You alright? (To Marla) How's this?

MARLA: I'll tell you after I read it.

JOSH: (To Toby) Come on in. She likes it closed.

(Sound of door closing.)

TOBY: Interesting girl.

JOSH: Yeah.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And then Josh has a few complaints about how controlling she is and then she comes in and she kicks Toby out. She's like 'you're done. Leave.' And Toby says:

[West Wing Episode 6.10 excerpt]

TOBY: I don't know what you're talking about. I think this girl's fantastic.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I think Toby's the one who says 'girl' both times.

BRADLEY: Yes. You're right, he does. You know in writing her I wanted to just play up Josh being intimidated and just sort of highlight how difficult it is for him not to have Donna there. I thought she

was hilarious.

HRISHI: She was great. And that actress is Cleo King, playing Marla.

BRADLEY: She was great and that's - what I learned is it's, especially Richard in this episode is like, I know Richard so well and that it was really an advantage. I realized how when you have nothing to write and you have actors who you can write for it makes it a lot easier.

HRISHI: Yeah, I was just wondering when that line was written if that was something that you all talked about at any point, because calling her 'girl' is both a little bit sexist and a little bit racist.

BRADLEY: Yeah, I know. There was absolutely no discussion of it.

HRISHI: Interesting.

BRADLEY: Yeah, absolutely no discussion, no. Yeah, I mean, look can you imagine if he was a young African-American man and -

HRISHI: He called him 'boy'.

BRADLEY: Yeah.

HRISHI: That's what I'm saying.

BRADLEY: Yeah.

HRISHI: It's surprising from Toby. Toby's an interesting case, because on the one hand he is, sort of the most progressive voice in *The West Wing* often, but he is also kind of like this old crusty curmudgeonly guy too.

BRADLEY: Yeah. I sort of bumped on it. The truth is we were totally unconscious about it.

HRISHI: I'm just curious. Were there any African-Americans on the writing staff?

BRADLEY: No. I don't think there were.

HRISHI: I feel like if there were that's the kind of thing that somebody would be like 'hey you know what, that might be weird'. But, anyway -

BRADLEY: Yeah.

HRISHI: Makes sense.

BRADLEY: Yeah, I think there would and I think now that line might be said but it would be checked.

HRISHI: Yeah, exactly.

BRADLEY: Watching it for the first time in how many years - a decade, more than a decade - when the episode started I thought 'oh boy, I'm talking about gay marriage, is this gonna look archaic and, you know, naïve and dismissive?' It scared me when it started -

HRISH: [cross talk] Yeah.

BRADLEY: [cross talk] - cause I forgot where it went. But no, there was not that kind of awareness. I mean, do you -

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah.

BRADLEY: So Josh, we weren't thinking about that?

JOSH: I was. I remember you weren't.

HRISHI: [Laughs] On that note, let's take a quick break to thank some sponsors, and then we'll come back for more with Bradley Whitford.

[Ad break]

JOSH: Let me pivot to another language thing, just to save Brad. The character of Wilkinson is described twice in the episode as being a federalist. Early on someone says he's more of a federalist than an ideologue, and then in Toby's conversation with Wilkinson – Wilkinson is the one who wants to add the Sanctity of Marriage Act to the budget bill – Toby says:

[West Wing Episode 6.10 excerpt]

TOBY: Senator, you're one of this country's great federalists. You believe in state and local control of education.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Wouldn't that be anti-federalist? In other words, he's saying to him 'I do. State and local law enforcement, yeah. But I'm not sure you think there should be federal government at all'.

HRISHI: Right.

BRADLEY: Yes. Although what's interesting is that the people who describe themselves as federalists are often espousing the opposite. Like if you look at the Federalist Society, they tend to be advocating for a very limited federal government. Unless I'm insane but -

JOSH: You're definitely insane, but that may have no connection to what we're discussing.

HRISHI: Here's what it says on the Federalist Society's website. [Reads] *'It's founded on the principles that the State exists to preserve freedom. That the separation of governmental powers is central to our constitution and that it is emphatically the province and duty of the judiciary to say what the law is, not what it should be.'*

BRADLEY: Yes, so they're constantly advocating actually against the growth of the federal government and they're total hypocrites about it because when it comes to social issues, you know, they tend to want to sort of impose. I was trying to get at the hypocrisy of these people who claim that they're about the original intent and then are actually using it as a way to sort of trojan horse their sort of oppressive/repressive ideas. But basically Josh was wrong.

JOSH: Well no, the original – it depends I guess in terms of how you're saying it – the original federalists, they were the pro-constitution, pro-powerful central government clique; the anti-federalists were more about the Articles of Confederation and pro-Bill of Rights, which the federalists opposed, but I think you've clarified that you mean it in more of a more modern day conservative anti-big government way.

BRADLEY: They're an insult to real federalists.

HRISHI: You know what's a website that still exists, that still works?

[West Wing Episode 6.10 excerpt]

WILL: *TheFederalGovernmentareabunchofdinks.com.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Wow. You actually – so does that mean Warner Brothers bought the domain because it got a mention in the show?

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah. They had to.

JOSH: [cross talk] Where does it send you? To Warner Brothers?

HRISHI: [cross talk] It sends you to Warner Brothers. It sends you to, you know, a 'page not found' on the Warner Brothers website.

JOSH: That's funny.

BRADLEY: Wow.

HRISHI: I think it would be fun as a writer to just make up websites that then you would then force the studio to have to buy.

JOSH: So does that mean they're still paying for it, year after year after year?

HRISHI: I mean they're just paying for the domain, yes. They're not paying for an actual full on website but yeah, they're just paying for a domain.

JOSH: I wonder if there's any chance of buying them out and selling *West Wing Weekly* merchandise on those sites, just for the errant person who wanders there and tries them.

HRISHI: Coming soon. I love the C.J./Annabeth dynamic.

BRADLEY: Yeah I knew – well that was one thing where I'm like, it's like when I get to humiliate Josh in the next episode. One thing I knew -

JOSH: [cross talk] Oh we'll get there.

BRADLEY: [cross talk] – is that I just wanted to do a walking shot with these radically different women.

JOSH: Pretty fantastic visual and a great line of dialogue.

[West Wing Episode 6.10 excerpt]

C.J.: What are you, like 4'10"?

ANNABETH: Me? I'm 4'11".

C.J.: I can't believe we're the same species.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Glorious.

BRADLEY: Yeah, that was fun. We couldn't get the shot exactly the way I wanted, which was just on her head, like just her head and she's in her own thoughts and then reveal it perfectly, you know, right at the moment. And she scares her.

JOSH: Did you attempt to do that? Was there actually an attempt to frame it that way?

BRADLEY: Yeah, I mean in order to make it work we just had to go back a little too far. We couldn't get it, because it's hard to get Kristin in the same frame as Allison.

HRISHI: So on the Wilkinson side of things, for a second, I think for me the nastiest turn in the whole episode is the reveal that it's actually Hoynes behind all of this.

BRADLEY: Yeah.

HRISHI: Was that your idea? Was that, you know, a plot point that had to be injected or did you have this idea that Hoynes would have been, sort of behind this kind of dirty scheme?

BRADLEY: I honestly don't remember. I think it was with Eli that we realised it might be a good move to kind of throw it in that it was Hoynes.

HRISHI: Yeah. It's great to remember that he's a powerful adversary, you know. We saw him last trying to get Josh to come back to him and there's some element of kind of discounting whether or not he'll be a serious candidate, because of the sex scandal that's behind him. But then something like this happens and you're like 'oh no, you can't write him off.'

BRADLEY: [cross talk] Right.

HRISHI: [cross talk] This guy is politically wily, and he also has some slippery morals that you have to include in your calculus of what he's capable of.

BRADLEY: Yeah. Now that I think about it I do think that there was a directive to keep him involved in some way. I'm veering a little bit, but the gay marriage stuff is really interesting to me in politics. You look at gays in the military. Bill Clinton gets elected and signs an executive order the day he's inaugurated, about gays in the military, and there's a huge, huge backlash. And it's very interesting to me that, like Barack Obama, I feel pretty confident, knew what he wanted to do about gays in the military, but he did not sign an executive order. He knew that that directive had to come from the Joint Chiefs, on their own time, in order for it to be real. It's just interesting to me those moments where politicians – is it out of cowardice that Barack Obama's not advocating from the beginning what he really believes in, or is there a pragmatic reason to not advocate for it.

JOSH: Well, that points to another aspect of the episode that I really liked, which is this subplot about the attempt to have Vice President Russell address the issue. That'll make everything easier for them, if he comes out against and he decides not to. But you give him a more substantive argument than we might have expected from him, basically saying 'I'm on board, but this isn't the right time to make the point', and you can argue that he's wrong, but there is substance and thought to his position, and I like that you gave him something with a little meat on it, rather than just a deflection that 'I can't do this cause politically it's going to be bad for me'.

BRADLEY: Right.

HRISHI: I love the whole tension in this episode between substance and symbolism. There is this debate about whether you add the amendment out of symbolism, whether the president might oppose it publicly and what the symbolic value of it is, because there's a sense that, like even if the amendment goes through, it's going to get overturned. So if that's the case then what is the value of coming out for or against it? You don't hit us over the head with it, but the power of the symbolism of doing that is real.

BRADLEY: I always thought every episode of *The West Wing* is about some version of how dirty do your feet have to get, without disappearing in the mud, in order to get an inch of what you really want done? That seems to me to be the sort of quandary that the show got right, that politicians face. And part of the reason that issues of gender and sexuality just totally short us out – that was

the other thing I was thinking then. I guess this is a weird thing to say, but I don't think you can function in the political world without thinking not just in terms of morality and honesty, but you have to think in terms of strategy.

JOSH: Yeah, it's a multi-dimensional game.

BRADLEY: Yeah.

HRISHI: I think what I was trying to say, and I didn't do a very good job saying it, is that symbolism isn't only an empty gesture.

BRADLEY: Yes. There is power in the president, at that moment, coming out and saying if you attach this we have no budget. I will not allow it.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

BRADLEY: [cross talk] We are all human beings and I will not allow it.

HRISHI: Let me ask you a very specific process question about one moment. The President, when he is struggling, he does this very Bartlet-esque thing and he quotes this poem.

[West Wing Episode 6.10 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: How body from spirit does slowly unwind, until we are pure spirit at the end.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: From Theodore Roethke. Where did that come from?

BRADLEY: I don't remember where I got it.

HRISHI: Do you remember, I guess, the impulse of, like having the president quote some other piece of text?

BRADLEY: Yeah. Both Martin and Bartlet are often quoting poetry and at the drop of a hat. I think I started looking through my old college - the Norton poetry collection, but I knew that I wanted him to be quoting something to give him nourishment, basically.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

JOSH: [cross talk] You didn't wanna use any Brad Whitford poetry?

BRADLEY: No.

HRISHI: [laughter] Yeah. That's great. It's a really smart understanding of the character.

BRADLEY: The other thing I was trying to do with him was keep him - I wanted him to be, like how is Bartlet gonna deal with this? And he's kinda weirdly chipper, you know -

HRISH: Yeah

BRADLEY: - through the whole episode, and when my dad was vulnerable he would be almost sort of pyrotechnically jovial, in a way that kind of, you know, broke my heart, you know, because he's trying to make it ok for everyone and just, you know, kind of keeping it light. I didn't want him to disappear into darkness. But then I wanted to undercut that by showing the fight he's up against, you know, and really trying to find his balance.

HRISHI: You told us a little bit about Alex Graves and Chris Misiano's reactions to it and, you know, the support you got from John Wells and Eli Attie. What about the rest of the cast?

BRADLEY: They were awful. No, they were incredible, very supportive.

HRISHI: Did you tell Aaron Sorkin that you were writing an episode?

BRADLEY: He found out and he actually, amazingly, came to the read-through with Tommy. Remember?

JOSH: That's awesome.

BRADLEY: Yeah, yeah. No, he was incredibly, incredibly supportive, as was Tommy. It had to be surreal cause I think it was weird for him to come back to a read-through.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Not a huge fan of later years *West Wing*, Aaron.

BRADLEY: Yeah, that's what I've heard but he was totally supportive.

JOSH: That was kind.

BRADLEY: I mean it's such a weird emotional thing to watch that show now because you just realize, you know, the farther you get away from it, the more you realize what a miracle it was to have the opportunity to work with all of those people and to do a show that was about something.

JOSH: That's true but at the same time I will say that we were a group of people that appreciated it when we had it, also.

BRADLEY: Yes.

JOSH: I don't look back and think 'oh my I had no idea I was in a special situation there'. It really was – I, we enjoyed the process.

BRADLEY: Yeah. It was fun.

JOSH: I have a question before we get done with the episode. A sub-plot that you handled very well, I think, is C.J.'s journey through this episode. I like the scene she has with Leo and her sharing the emotional, personal side of this whole Internet rumour, and then the deflation of that moment, where he just responds like that was a complete overshare.

[West Wing Episode 6.10 excerpt]

C.J.: Until I became successful and suddenly started to scare them. Scare them with the very independence they required me to have, so that now I'm looking at some bad numbers. Really rough stuff, if you know what I'm talking about. But what was I supposed to do? Turn down an opportunity to serve the President of the United States, who I believe in and adore? You just wanna share it all with someone, you know?

(long silence)

LEO: So, if you wanna send down any more call sheets?

C.J.: [cross talk] Sure. No, that'd be a great idea.

[end excerpt]

[laughter]

JOSH: It's very funny. It's very Leo. And as I was watching it I didn't remember how the scene ended and I was so delighted that, like, you stayed true to the way these two characters would handle this moment. And then the build up to her decision not to share, not to make a statement and not to share the statement that she has prepared to read when she walks into the press room, is great and powerful.

BRADLEY: Yeah, yeah, yeah. The first thing I wrote when I left John's office and realized 'oh my god, like, I have a week to write an episode', the first thing I wrote, which is a stupid way to go about writing, was, I wrote that monologue for Allison. Almost just to sort of think about - and not necessarily to use it - but just that it was an exploration of a woman getting older, becoming independent and then having their independence and their strength and their power become an obstacle to meeting someone. So at one point I think I went to John and I said 'I don't know where it should be' and I think John suggested that it be with Leo, and I thought this is just like, it's too corny, it's too revealing to just plop it in. So then I tried to find a way to undercut it, cause she's just absolutely spewing, you know, exactly how she feels.

HRISHI: It's great.

BRADLEY: And it's beyond Leo's cosmic eggshell to talk about.

JOSH: Exactly.

HRISHI: The other scene with Leo is fantastic. Josh tells Leo, he says 'so, I think I found my guy', and, you know, he invites Leo to come with him, and I love it, and Leo's just like, has this, I don't know, has this resignation to it.

[West Wing Episode 6.10 excerpt]

LEO: I already found my guy.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: There's this really beautiful separation between these two.

BRADLEY: Yeah, it's like generational, like kind of, hand off.

HRISH: Yeah, exactly.

BRADLEY: And I think what Josh is feeling there is, it's almost like 'I think I'm in love'.

HRISH: Yeah.

BRADLEY: Like 'is this what it feels like?'

HRISH: Right.

BRADLEY: You know, and I'm kind of checking with somebody who's been in love before, and he's basically going 'yeah, yeah, yeah that's it'. You could tell that, you know, we're winding down here. It's really fun to play with Richard's - part of what makes him such an incredibly interesting actor is he's got this crust, you know this kind of dyspeptic armour, and underneath it he's just a pussycat. It's as if he's pissed but he's really heartbroken.

HRISH: Yeah.

BRADLEY: It was basically the scene with him.

[West Wing Episode 6.10 excerpt]

TOBY: *So Santos, huh?*

JOSH: *What are you gonna do when this is done?*

TOBY: *Whatever I can to stave off the chaos, mayhem and self-interest that lies just beneath our civil disguise.*

[end excerpt]

BRADLEY: I wrote it as, like, basically just kind of joyous explication of Richard's world view, of his darkness. I just remember him saying something like 'is this how you think I think?' [laughter] Like he was a little put off. And I was like, 'yeah'.

JOSH: Before we finish I just want to make sure we don't go without mentioning that despite their not sharing a moment of screen time together, it's a not insignificant episode for Josh and Donna. They're really going their own ways.

BRADLEY: Yeah. I got upset watching her, like walk into another office.

JOSH: Yeah. You can feel it in the episode.

HRISHI: It's pretty great. Donna is not in the episode very much but those few moments are really significant -

BRADLEY: [cross talk] Yeah.

HRISHI: [cross talk] - going in and having this recognition from Will.

BRADLEY: I remember being upset - I really wanted to write just like a really physically moving, snappy Josh/Donna scene but -

JOSH: It felt right though. This is how these things happen though. They just kind of happen. People go their way.

HRISHI: I loved this line from Will.

[West Wing Episode 6.10 excerpt]

WILL: *Well, we can use you, no question. And not as anybody's assistant.*

[end excerpt]

BRADLEY: Yeah, yeah. I gave you a really good line.

JOSH: Thanks. You knew I could sit and say a line. You really used me well.

HRISHI: The thing about Leo and Josh in that scene that we were just talking about – it is generational and I think you really nailed it in terms of making it feel like they were talking about someone they were in love with. To me Leo, when he says 'I already found my guy,' there's a sadness in his face and his voice when he says it that makes it almost sound to me like a widower, talking about dating again.

BRADLEY: [cross talk] Yeah.

HRISHI: [cross talk] And saying, you know, 'I'm not gonna get back into this game. This person is the love of my life.'

BRADLEY: Yeah. 'I had the love of my life. You go.' It goes to a really interesting current political thing that just bugs the [expletive deleted] out of me. This episode and the show is espousing something I don't believe in, which I think is a real problem with Democrats, which is we need to be in love, they need to come out of nowhere, and Barack Obama comes along and we fall in love, and he's gonna give us absolutely everything we want and we're in love and we're endowing him with all of our infinite hopes and then he doesn't get single payer and everybody on the Left says, you know, 'he is a Republican'. Like, Democrats are so about their personal relationship, like 'date me, seduce me, make me love you, show me you're perfect' and then they turn on him and the reason we're in this situation that we're in, in this country right now, is that the Right votes based on the consequences of elections and we vote to express our love. Trump holds up a list of Supreme Court nominees and people go 'oh, I don't like him but - '

HRISHI: Right. 'This ogre's passing my legislative agenda so, oh well.'

BRADLEY: Right. It's something for Democrats to think about. Anyway. [Expletive deleted].

JOSH: On that note -

HRISHI: Was there a character that you discovered you enjoy writing for the most?

JOSH: This is before you would figure out how to weaponize my own performance against me. So, I withdraw my name from consideration.

BRADLEY: I didn't have the wherewithal to attack you my first time out. It's interesting because my next episode is a big Allison episode -

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

BRADLEY: [cross talk] – as well. I think I instinctively, you know, she's such an amazing actor. But I realized I just got, like, a glimmer – it's interesting cause Aaron is, not all writers are like this, he is actually in love with actors. And very in love with his own actors. And I got a little whiff of it cause when you're like writing for Richard or even you, Josh -

JOSH: Thanks Brad.

BRADLEY: There's a kind of a joy because you know them and you know that only Richard could take this position.

JOSH: How soon after this episode was it decided that you would write another?

BRADLEY: John told me right away. He was very nice about it. He said 'I know that was crazy but I really want you to do one under the normal process'. And that's -

JOSH: [cross talk] Very cool.

BRADLEY: [cross talk] – at that moment, when he finished that sentence, I knew that you were going down on national television.

JOSH: And I did.

HRISHI: There's this other meta story here that I was reading into, while watching the scene with Donna and thinking about how things had to change fundamentally, you know when Will says

'we're not gonna use you as anybody's assistant' and then, kind of the opportunity that presented herself only after this seismic change, and I was thinking about this creative opportunity that you had and all the things that you got to do with it. You got to do it here and then you get to do it again in another episode. All the stuff that wouldn't have occurred if Aaron hadn't left. I mean like, truthfully you would not have gotten to write these lines if Aaron Sorkin were still writing the show.

BRADLEY: Yeah, that's true. I mean this was honestly, truly one of the greatest creative gifts anybody's given me. I would have taken Aaron staying and missed it but, yeah, it was an incredible opportunity. And the amazing thing about Aaron is that, and I say this all the time, nobody will ever do that again. Nobody will write a complicated adult drama, twenty-two episodes for four years. The show after him is a testament to his idea. We're all living in that idea. We're all living in those characters, we're all living in the, kind of format that he set up. But yeah it was a mindboggling opportunity and John Wells is really good at this. He will, you know, a guy who was a PA on *ER*, you know, ends up being the producer for the last five years. John, you know, writes, directs, produces, and John will say, you know, 'we all, out of insecurity really, limit what we're doing' and what he was saying to me was really kind of profound was, 'no, this is a story. You're a storyteller and let's not create this artificial line that you're just an interpreter and not a storyteller. Give it a shot'. It was an incredible gift.

JOSH: Does it work the other way? Do you think he would hire me as a PA? I mean, just in case things get really bad. Like six months from now.

BRADLEY: Yeah. He will get you going down the ladder too.

JOSH: Yeah alright.

HRISHI: Brad, thanks so much for joining us. This was awesome.

BRADLEY: My pleasure.

HRISHI: And that does it for this episode. Thanks so much for listening. Thanks so much to our guest, Bradley Whitford, for joining us.

JOSH: Many thanks to Margaret Miller, Zach McNeese and Nick Song for their work on this episode.

HRISHI: You can find *The West Wing Weekly* online at thewestwingweekly.com. You can follow us on Twitter, Facebook or Instagram, we're @westwingweekly. You can find Bradley Whitford on Twitter @whitfordbradley. Let him know what you think of this episode.

JOSH: By unfollowing him.

HRISHI: *The West Wing Weekly* is a proud member of *Radiotopia*, from PRX, a collection of creative, independent podcasts. And you can learn about all of the shows at radiotopia.fm.

JOSH: Ok.

HRISHI: Ok.

BRADLEY: What's next?

[Outro Music]