

The West Wing Weekly
6.19: "Ninety Miles Away"

[Intro Music]

JOSH: Hey gang, you're listening to *The West Wing Weekly*. This is Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: And this is Hrishikesh Hirway and today we're talking about "Ninety Miles Away". It's episode 19 from Season 6.

JOSH: It was written by John Sacret Young. It was directed by Rod Holcomb and it first aired on March 16, 2005.

HRISHI: Here's a synopsis from NBC: "When speculations fly surrounding the nexus between communist Cuba and the Democratic United States, President Bartlet is propelled into a dubious conundrum: whether to continue secret talks with Cuba's ailing dictator and lift an antiquated embargo or to yield to bipartisan political fall out and reaffirm 40 year old sanctions. Meanwhile, Leo and Kate learn that they have more in common than politics when a distant memory of corrupted elections and barroom antics reveal a more intimate connection."

JOSH: Mmmhmm. Sexy.

HRISHI: Other *West Wing* viewers might remember this as: The worst episode of the *West Wing*.

[laughter]

JOSH: Wow, we're just going to start there. It's not a great one. People get upset you know, by the way, this is gonna, people are disappointed when we don't like an episode. I mean, obviously I'm sure there are some people who agree with us when we're not crazy about an episode, but I can feel the blow back when people like an episode and we don't like it. And I encourage them to just not like that particular episode of our podcast.

[laughter]

JOSH: Shut up about it.

HRISHI: Well, I think there might be a lot of folks who agree with us that this is not the best episode of *The West Wing*. In fact, again going back to our IMDB guide of rankings, except for the episode "Access", which is the documentary special episode...

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: "Ninety Miles Away", this episode, ranks as the least popular *West Wing* episode of the entire series.

JOSH: Oh indeed it does, okay, how bout that.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I'm going to predict that, none the less, those few people who do like it will find their way to the message boards and Twitter.

HRISHI: And that's what those things are for.

JOSH: That's exactly true.

HRISHI: For me, I can't look at this and talk about this with you the way that we talk about episodes of the West Wing that I love. It is like a completely different show and I think it merits a completely different kind of discussion. I can't help but think about this episode in a "it's so bad we have to laugh at it" kind of way

JOSH: I think you're right. I think maybe the approach is why don't we take a five minutes break and each find the worst wig we have at our house and put those on and then just discuss it like a normal episode.

[laughter]

JOSH: You were right in saying that this is a distinctive episode and not-in-necessarily good ways. I saw it as almost an attempt to make a, like another *Bourne* movie. I consider this the *Bourne Legacy*.

HRISHI: By the end of the episode were still only kind of in Act 1, where the intrigue has been laid, but we haven't gotten any kind of answers or any sense of how these things are going to actually meet up and tie together, let alone how they're gonna resolve

JOSH: Right, it's, again, a lot of or some potentially interesting stuff going on that doesn't really pay off or pays off ludicrously in a scene set in 1995. We'll get to that eventually.

HRISHI: No, let's talk about that because I think this a part of the reason why I'm so frustrated with this episode. The timeline is all wrong. In 1995, that is not when Leo went to Sierra Tucson. We know for a fact from the show. He says in "He Shall from Time to Time"...

[West Wing Episode 1:12 excerpt]

LEO: In June of 1993, I voluntarily admitted myself to the Sierra Tucson Rehabilitation facility to treat...

[end excerpt]

JOSH: [Gasp]

HRISHI: In June of 1993. We also know that he was Secretary of Labor at the time because he was Secretary of Labor in a previous Democratic administration. So in 1995, we're two years off from that timeline. Also, just in the timeline of the show, it was a Republican president at the time. Leo wasn't Secretary of Labor then. We know the date when Leo had relapsed. It was October 30, 1998, the day of the final debate before then-Governor Bartlet won the presidency. These are things that are just in the show.

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

GIBSON: I'd like to take you back to 30 October in St Louis Missouri. Jed Bartlet is the Democratic nominee for President and is about to participate in the third and final debate.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I pondered it, I wondered whether it would all fit together, but apparently it doesn't at all.

HRISHI: It doesn't at all and you know time is a little bit sketchy on the show as it gets later into the series. I can't remember if we've talked about this or not. But you know, at some point we've lost some time. I think that they made the decision to sort of jump ahead.

JOSH: Right, we lost a year.

HRISHI: After Zoey's kidnapping. That part is really annoying because it's so easy to fix. Just make everything set in 1993.

JOSH: Yeah, that's odd. I mean there's no explanation. You can understand why they might lose a year, in terms of what they want to accomplish on this show, but why not reconcile this discrepancy.

HRISHI: Yeah, but that's not even...

JOSH: That's the least of it.

HRISHI: That really is the least of it. In terms of not, you know, this is an example of *The West Wing* makers not knowing their own history of their own show, which is granted a fictional history. Let me just jump right into the middle.

JOSH: Go for it.

HRISHI: Let me bore right into the middle like a termite boring into the middle of your walls.

[laughter]

HRISHI: And go to this just ridiculous moment where Charlie is talking to these two entomologists who've come to talk about the termites in the walls. One of them says:

[West Wing Episode 6.19 excerpt]

ORBITZ: Insects can spread disease, but they're also crucial to studying how diseases are spread.

WYSNIEWSKY: But now the newest discovery and perhaps most important is that they can play a crucial part in learning about our own history.

ORBITZ: Like this great White House. Think Abigail Adams and the War of 1812. The burning of this building.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And all I thought was, maybe those insects can teach you that during the War of 1812, Abigail Adams wasn't in the White House. The First Lady was Dolly Madison.

JOSH: Yeah, what was that?

HRISHI: I don't know. Like who was out to lunch the entire time this episode was being made?

JOSH: It is a little bit like a lot of people were on vacation and whoever was left behind just cobbled together an episode of the show. I wrote down BBOC incursion, which is my new response to anything that seems like it was a subplot for a Big Block of Cheese episode that was cut.

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: Well we'll use this somewhere else.

HRISHI: Yeah. It's a little chunk of cheese.

JOSH: Also, literally no payoff to the termite thing.

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: The payoff is...

[West Wing Episode 6.19 excerpt]

C.J.: Just, excuse me, kill the damn bugs.

[end excerpt]

[laughter]

HRISHI: It's baffling to me. All right, let's try and have some order in this episode and let's begin at the beginning.

JOSH: The beegen.

HRISHI: Yeah. For the beginning of the episode, I need something, one second.

JOSH: Don't tell me you have a wig.

HRISHI Oh, I have something better Josh

[Guitar playing]

[laughter]

HRISHI: [singing] This is how you know, we are in Cuba.

JOSH: Cooba

HRISHI: Cooba, sorry, sorry. Oh my God.

JOSH: Oh dear.

HRISHI: It's basically the equivalent of, if we were about to set a scene in China and they opened with a gong.

JOSH: You're not wrong.

HRISHI: But Leo was speaking Spanish to someone named Jorge.

[West Wing Episode 6.19 excerpt]

LEO: Jorge, por favor. Ah. Canceladas? Por ahora, no? Y esto esta conectado con el rumor?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: The Spanish is not translated for whatever reason, but here's what he says.

JOSH: He slips in a bad word.

HRISHI: He does, he says "Jorge please, ah, cancelled? Not yet? And this is connected to a rumor? [expletive deleted] Jorge"

[laughter]

HRISHI: "I don't know. I don't know. I don't want to lose this opportunity, we'll come up with something, ok? Thanks Jorge, see you later"

JOSH: Wait, isn't there mierdo at some point?

HRISHI: Oh yeah, que mierdo, is in there, which I think would transliterate as "what [expletive deleted]"

JOSH: Right? I was like, "they slipped one by the NBC censors."

HRISHI: But what I like about that is Google Translate translates "que mierdo" as "what the [expletive deleted]."

JOSH: [Laughs] That's funny.

HRISHI So then the president comes into Leo's office. It's 5:13 in the morning. He sits down and he picks up *A Farewell to Arms*, which Leo has open on a side table and he reads this quote from the book:

[West Wing Episode 6.19 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: *The world breaks everyone and afterwards many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Which is how I sort of feel about this episode.

JOSH: Mmmm

HRISHI: And then he and Leo start practicing for their upcoming podcast, *The Hemingway Weekly*.

[laughter]

HRISHI: Leo says:

[West Wing Episode 6.19 excerpt]

LEO: Hemingway was a monster. He hated his mother, treated four wives miserably, trashed his friends, grew paranoid, had breakdowns and like his father, killed himself.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Not the most compassionate take on Hemingway from Leo. Are you a Hemingway fan?

HRISHI: Here's my story about Hemingway.

JOSH: Please.

HRISHI: When I was in high school, I thought I could get ahead by multi-tasking by listening to the audiobook of *A Farewell to Arms*, instead of reading it, so that I could also do my calculus homework at the same time

JOSH: Holy and giggle at Latin?

HRISHI: But it was hard for me to pay attention to both, you know, so I was working on my math and trying to catch what was going on in the audiobook so I kept gradually turning the volume up thinking that if I could hear it a little better I could retain it a little better. And I remember when there was a moment when my roommate walked in to find me with my books just on the floor and the stereo at that point was just blasting the audiobook.

[laughter]

JOSH: [Laughs] That's very funny. I've an *A Farewell to Arms* anecdote as well, or thought. I'm trying to think, it might be the only Hemingway book that I've read. This is a novel set in the Italian campaign, WWI, and it includes that book, I think what is probably a very, very famous image, but it's one of the most resonate images of anything I've ever read, probably because of a good teacher. At one point, the protagonist of the book, Frederic Henry, I think recounts a story about having put a log on a fire. There's a profusion of ants in this log, and they run out because of the fire and at first they run towards the flame, then they run to the cold other extreme of the log and some of them burn, even the ones that make it to the other end fall one by one into the fire and are charred. And I think in the micro-sense, this is Frederic Henry having just heard that his baby has been stillborn and then in the macro-sense it's this, these ants on the log are supposed to be I think emblematic or symbolic of soldiers and the insanity of war.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: And you know rushing to the front and rushing away and dying none-the-less and that image has always, and I think it is a celebrated image, but since whatever age, 8th grade, I don't know when you read or listen as you study math, to *A Farewell to Arms*, but that image...anytime I hear the name Hemingway, I think of that image and it's also one of these sort of recurring images I have in my mind when I'm pondering war. Like it is an incredibly powerful, I guess hat tip to my teacher, whoever he or she was, for sharing thoughts on that paragraph of that book.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And you know, Hemingway and termites in this episode really had me going.

HRISHI: I was wondering if there was somehow, by the end, gonna be some connection made between the termites story and Cuba. That there was something about diplomacy, understanding, you know, I was reaching for the idea that these entomologists were saying, "No, let's try and find a way to coexist with the termites."

JOSH: I was hoping against hope that we would somehow get a connection to the ants on a log image.

HRISHI: Yeah. We were ninety miles away from any kind of connection.

JOSH: [Laughs] Indeed. The other thing that *A Farewell to Arms* always make me think of, and I think it's from *Mad Magazine*, I think it was an article called "Double Features We'd Like to See."

HRISHI: Mhm.

JOSH: So one of the double features was *Jaws* and *A Farewell to Arms*.

HRISHI: Oh geez.

JOSH: Which, since I was a kid, I've always thought was the perfect joke.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I just, I worship at the altar of that joke.

[laughter]

HRISHI: The last time I read Hemingway was in 2007. I was reading *The Sun Also Rises* when I was waiting for Lindsey on our very first date. We had never met before, but we had agreed to meet at this cafe in Alphabet City in New York and I was sitting outside and I had gotten there early and I was waiting and I had my book and kind of, you know, trying to read it but I was also excited and little distracted by my excitement. But I was trying to read and keep myself occupied as the time drew closer to when she was supposed to show up. And as I was reading, I got interrupted by a hand on my thigh and I looked up and there was a homeless man in front of my giving my leg a little squeeze and he said to me with a smile, "You've got skinny legs."

[Josh laughs]

HRISHI: And I started to respond and then I turned and saw Lindsey walking up.

[laughter]

JOSH: That was a really romantic story, up to a point.

[laughter]

HRISHI: Yeah. So then I started to stand up and you know had to, I was like “yeah, it’s true, I do.” And he said “I do too” and we talked a little bit about our skinny legs while kind of interrupting my date with Lindsey before it could even begin. And so then I had to say bye to him before I turned and said hello to her for the first time.

JOSH: Wow. I thought his opening salvo might be “I’ll stop doing this if you give me a dollar.”

[laughter]

JOSH: It sounds like it would have been a very effective sales pitch.

HRISHI: I think he was just being affectionate.

JOSH: I guess so. It’s actually a lovely story. It’s romantic on a couple levels. I was gonna ask you, if you were going to be entirely candid, how much thought did you give to what book you wanted to be discovered reading on your first date?

HRISHI: This was just the one, I’d just come off of tour with my band and it was the book that I had in my bag.

JOSH: Oookay.

[laughter]

HRISHI: I mean if you were to ask Lindsey, I doubt that she would remember that that was what I was reading, if she ever noticed even then.

JOSH: I would always bring *Infinite Jest*, just so my date would think “My God, he’s strong.”

HRISHI: [Laughs] It’s a very big book, for anybody who hasn’t seen it.

JOSH: Thank you. Thanks for that. That’s it for another episode [cross talk]

HRISHI: [cross talk] Ok so...

[laughter]

HRISHI: So Leo lays the story out for us. He wants to make sure that the seeds of diplomacy, that the Bartlet White House has planted, in secret with Cuba, that those seeds are able to bear fruit before the president’s term ends in less than a year and/or before Castro passes away.

JOSH: Right because we've seen that on his white board, under the heading Latin America, there is nothing.

HRISHI: It's true. this is as far as they got when Kate said:

[West Wing Episode 6:12 excerpt]

KATE: New approach to Latin America.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: But the days are counting down and so Leo goes to Cuba. He visits, I think Vigía, which was Hemingway's house. Charlie asks:

[West Wing Episode 6:19 excerpt]

CHARLIE: The one in Idaho or the one with the six toed cats in Key West.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Good question, Charles Young. I forgot to ask.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: The, what are they called, with the multiple toes?

HRISH: The six? yeah.

JOSH: Polydactyl

HRISHI: Even the ones without six toes are polydactyl right?

JOSH: Oh because they have multiple toes?

HRISHI: Yes.

[laughter]

JOSHI: I guess just polydactyl suggests just more than one toe.

HRISHI: Polydactyl cat is a cat born with more than the usual number of toes.

JOSH: Ok.

HRISHI: On one or more of its paws.

JOSH: Although you make a good point, it does technically literally seem to suggest that they have two toes or more.

[laughter]

HRISHI: Hyperdactyl would be more than you might expect.

JOSH: Well how do you know how many I expect?

[laughter]

JOSH: I expect over 100 toes on a cat.

[Josh laughs]

JOSH: I always have and I always will. That's a firm policy, don't try to push me off it.

HRISHI: You just live with a lot of disappointment every time you come into contact with cats.

JOSH: Oh I'm an actor, I live with a lot of disappointment every time I wake up.

HRISHI: [Laughs] Oh my gosh.

[guitar]

HRISHI: [singing] He goes to Hemingway's house.

[laughter]

JOSH: You know Hemingway's house has the same initials as you.

HRISHI: That's true.

[laughter]

JOSH: Even the reveal of Castro was so absurd. Or the semi-reveal.

HRISHI: His shadowy figure.

JOSH: Yes the adumbrated Castro. I was like, you know, was it even a person? Was it a bunch of pillows and a beard? "I know how we can save money."

HRISHI: The best thing about Castro's appearance is that it gave you a chance to use the word adumbrated.

JOSH: Yeah, thank you.

HRISHI: How about that for a show that sometimes dances around real-world figures, they actually put one on screen right there.

JOSH: Indeed they did. Why did they start there?

[laughter]

HRISHI: One thing that has been pointed out that I don't, again, think we've actually ever discussed. There's a shot of the Situation Room at some point from the show, you can find it online somewhere, people have pointed this out. There's a portrait of Bill Clinton in the Situation Room.

JOSH: Yes. Many people have brought that to your attention, not that we hadn't noticed ourselves.

HRISHI: Which really again makes this whole thing very confusing.

JOSH: It would be funny if that portrait was always in shadow when it's on screen. We can have real figures, but you can't see much of them.

HRISHI: So they put Castro on screen but we never actually get to hear from him directly. Leo comes back and reports. So the spy thriller part of this episode comes in with the inclusion of our super spy, our lone super spy on this series, Kate Harper.

JOSH: I mean, I will actually even say, even though I don't, you know, things aren't quite paid off and I really don't like this episode, I'm becoming more and more intrigued with Kate Harper. I mean the potential for the character is huge. I mean she really is interesting. She seems like she speaks, I don't know, 20 languages.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: She's had multiple husbands. I actually, I even like the moment when we saw her heavily redacted file. I was like "Oooo."

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: So, I'm getting more and more fascinated with the character, even as I'm kind of disappointed in what we're ultimately given about her.

HRISHI: No, I think she's great and I would love to watch whatever tv show she's supposed to be on.

JOSH: Mhm. Yeah, well I hear what you're saying.

HRISHI: Her character, in this episode at least, seems to be more from *Alias* than from the *West Wing*.

JOSH: This is true.

HRISHI: Speaking of her redacted file though. So, C.J. asks for Kate Harper's file because it is...

JOSH: It's actually pteradacted because it was redacted in multiple places [Hrishi laughs] or at least two places.

HRISHI: You mean polydacted?

JOSH: Oh yeah, that's what I meant, let me try that again. I was thinking of a pterodactyl.

[laughter]

JOSH: They're never far from my mind, dinosaurs. [cross talk]

HRISHI: [cross talk] I know.

JOSH: Let me try that joke again. It was actually polydacted, because it was redacted in multiple places. Or may that just suggests it was redacted in more than one place but it was hyper-redacted.

HRISHI: [laughing] Please let us keep this whole thing in. Please let us keep the pterodactyl in there.

JOSH: That's fine with me.

[laughter]

HRISHI: Ok, good.

JOSH: And it really was because earlier, I was trying to load up how I could get to that one of my cats is a pterodactyl and flies [Hrishi laughs] around the house attacking the other animals and I thought now that is literally just too stupid, but now I've gotten there anyway.

[Ad break]

HRISHI: So, C.J. asks for Kate Harper's file and actually before we get to the file itself, I want to give a shout out to *The West Wing's* Margaret for giving me my favorite part of the whole episode, the best part of the episode, the only bright spot in the whole thing. This great exchange:

[West Wing Episode 6.19 excerpt]

MARGARET: You're concealing something.

C.J.: It's my signature. What are you a counterfeiter? Some handwriting analyst?

MARGARET: My great uncle was, right after the Civil War. He was a dashing man with a mustache and one arm.

C.J.: Ok by now we could have written it...

[end excerpt]

[laughter]

HRISHI: I love that whole section.

JOSH: I liked it too.

HRISHI: I would really love to see a show that's just C.J., Margaret, and Kate doing spy [expletive deleted].

JOSH: [laughter] I'd watch that too.

HRISHI: Margaret, or really it could just be Margaret and Kate. Margaret as sort of the Money Penny or like, I don't know if you saw *Spiderman Homecoming*.

JOSH: No, I want to though, I hear it's great.

HRISHI: He has a friend whose desire is to be, like, the guy with the headset and Margaret could be, you know, the person with the headset and Kate could be the super spy. It's also the dynamic explored in *Spy*, which I highly recommend, where Melissa McCarthy starts off as the person with the headset.

JOSH: True, that's right, good point.

HRISHI: Anyway, I'd watch that. Margaret Hooper and Kate Harper. Hooper and Harper. Come on.

JOSH: Oooo nice.

HRISHI: Ok but so now, the file itself, one thing is there's some talk about JFK and of course on an episode of *The West Wing* that deals with Cuba, it's not surprising JFK comes into it anecdotally. But in the file itself, for Kate Harper, the redacted pages that we see C.J. flipping through.

JOSH: Oh did you stop and search?

HRISHI: I looked and for one thing, it's the same page both times, just with different parts redacted.

JOSH: No way.

HRISHI: It is.

JOSH: Wow, everybody just took the week off.

[laughter]

JOSH: Including the props department.

HRISHI: It's the same page. But yeah, if you're just looking, they just blacked out different parts. But the thing that they've actually used to redact is an actual FBI memo about JFK's mistress. It's an FBI memo from 1962 about Judith Campbell, about calls between her Los Angeles residence that were made to Evelyn Lincoln, the President's Secretary at the White House.

JOSH: Really? How'd you figure that out?

HRISHI: I just paused it and read it.

JOSH: Nice.

HRISHI: And then looked up what the text was and we'll put a link to it on our website and you can read the original FBI memo from dated March 20, 1962. There's some moments in this episode it feels like just word salad.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: Or letter salad. Here's some of my favorite letters Josh.

[West Wing Episode 6:19 excerpt]

ROLLIE: FBI DEA NSA NIA INS

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah that reminded me, there's a little snippet of a song in *Hair* where they have all these acronyms.

HRISHI: Uh huh

[Hair excerpt]

HAIR CAST: LBJ took the IRT. Down...

[end excerpt]

[laughter]

JOSH: It put me in mind of that.

HRISHI: And then following that, C.J. says "This doesn't answer my question" and Kate says:

[West Wing Episode 6:19 excerpt]

KATE: We may never get a straight answer, Miami-South Florida, South Florida-Miami, it's Chinatown.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I had a lot of shruggy moments at dialogue in this episode, including that one.

HRISHI: What does that mean?

JOSH: I don't know. Geographically speaking, she's on solid ground.

[laughter]

HRISHI: Ok, so in this episode we've got a lot of people warning our administration not to go ahead with this plan to try and establish diplomatic ties with Cuba. One is Kate's former colleague from the CIA, who introduces himself, as I assume, I just figure you know, when two CIA former colleagues meet, this is how they introduce themselves. Kate says "I wasn't gonna come," and the other guy says "And stand up a former CIA compatriot after all these years?"

[laughter]

JOSH: From the department of exposition?

[laughter]

HRISHI: Yeah exactly. He's like, "Uh, we're in a crowded public place, which is why I need to announce that I am a part of the CIA."

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: They're in a bar in DC I guess, I just, anyway. That's one person.

JOSH: It could be a bar entirely that serves solely ex-CIA.

HRISHI: Mhm.

JOSH: So they're safe, so it's ok to say out loud how they're all in the CIA

HRISHI: I think this person is still currently in the CIA.

JOSH: No, I think you're right, clearly, hence he's a good source.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Also, I mean, when I first saw him I thought, he must be one of her poly-ex-husbands. Then I guess it's made clear not because he refers to her ex, but do you think there's something romantically? It seems like every episode Kate is in, whoever she's speaking to might have been an ex-lover.

[laughter]

HRISHI: I didn't get that sense from this guy.

JOSH: Oh ok, I thought maybe there was something there.

HRISHI: One of the things I do like about that bar scene is that we get to find out a little bit more about Kate's other ex-husband. We knew that one of them is from the State Department but we find out that her other ex-husband, well we don't know what his deal is, I thought maybe he's Cuban?

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Maybe this explains some of her feelings about the sanctions. Wouldn't that be cool if it was somebody she met in her dealings as a spy?

JOSH: True.

HRISHI: Or it's possible that he's someone who's also CIA and this guy says, this guy in the bar says, "I saw your ex-husband not long ago. He's still down there."

JOSH: Down there.

HRISHI: Which could be Cuba or it could be South Florida, Miami, or it could be Miami, or South Florida.

[laughter]

JOSH: That's a very good point.

HRISHI: This guy from the CIA is saying "Look you're gonna get found out." He keeps making references to sort of like a debacle that Kate was involved in between Miami, South Florida, and Cuba and we don't actually know what that was. In fact, we never find out.

JOSH: Nor will we ever.

HRISHI: Yeah which is another one of the frustrating things about this...

JOSH: Very.

HRISHI: Episode.

JOSH: Usually when an episode like this culminates in a flash back, on another series, that flash back would then sort of explain all the mystery that has led up to that moment.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Or led up to that scene.

HRISHI: You're talking about the final scene in which we're actually in 1995.

JOSH: Well I guess the final, final scene is Bartlet and the weak sauce speech that he's giving about Cuba.

HRISHI: True, yeah.

JOSH: But, yeah, the penultimate scene is 1995. We get Brian Dennehy in this episode - excellent actor.

HRISHI: Yeah Brian Dennehy is the other person besides the CIA guy who's saying, "Don't move forward with this." The CIA guy has a feeling of "You're going to get stuck again, you're going to be in trouble, just like you were back then," how we don't actually know. And yes the other person is Senator Framhagen.

JOSH: Yes and I love that they actually consulted Jerry Lewis in the naming of the character and came up with Rafe Framhagen.

HRISHI: Senator Framhagen who is such a sexist pig he makes Marbury look like Gloria Steinem.

JOSH: No kidding.

HRISHI: Cliff Calley goes in to take a meeting with him and he's got an aide come in and he's basically like, he's like winking at Cliff about how hot she is and talking about it in front of her in a Foghorn Leghorn kind of vernacular.

[West Wing Episode 6.19 excerpt]

FRAMHAGIN: Sashaying piece of pulchritude.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: [In a Foghorn Leghorn voice] Well I say, I say.

[laughter]

JOSH: Yeah it was laid on a bit thick, although certainly such people exist.

HRISHI: Sure and thankfully they don't limit him to just this one aspect of his character. He's also the person who gives voice to why Castro is so horrible.

JOSH: Mhm.

HRISHI: You know there's all this effort towards diplomacy with Cuba, but it's only really Brian Dennehy's character who lays it out explicitly when he's talking to Leo.

[West Wing Episode 6.19 excerpt]

FRAMHAGEN: The reason for Cuba's tragic reality is Fidel Castro: a vicious dictator who refuses to allow free press, free elections, who jails even the slightest opposition.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I was glad they had him say it, too. That was actually, I think as this episode goes, a pretty good scene between these two old mavericks and I was glad that they balanced the conversation.

HRISHI: Yeah, that was where I thought "Ok good," I'm glad that they used Brian Dennehy for something other than, in that first scene with Cliff, I was worried that he was going to be just this buffoonish cartoon character who was gonna be...

JOSH: Straw man.

HRISHI: Yeah, easy to vilify, but then they gave him a significant view point.

JOSH: By the way, in another attempt to pull something good out of something not so, I wanted to mention there's a discussion of Diet Coke in that episode, as Cliff orders a Diet Coke while Framhagin drinks Screwdriver after Screwdriver and one of my all time favorite tweets is about Diet Coke, so I want to give it a plug. It's a woman named Alison Leiby who can be found @alisonleiby and she tweeted 'Stop making new flavors of Diet Coke, the original flavor "Chemicals" is already perfect.'

[laughter]

JOSH: She's just, that tweet killed me. Oh, how I loved that tweet and every time I drink one I think of her.

HRISHI: Mmm that's good

JOSH: And she's right.

HRISHI: One of the many threads that doesn't pay off is Congressman Cabrera.

JOSH: Mmm

HRISHI: Who that is, what he's done.

JOSH: Poly-referenced and yet unclear.

HRISHI: What the significance of his election and his recount might be we don't know. It's so unresolved that I feel like it just muddies things up in an unnecessary way. Like you could just remove all mention of that character.

JOSH: I guess it casts dispersions on Framhagen's credibility. Because it seems that somebody in his, some relative of his, was involved in the recount.

HRISHI: Cabreras's sister-in-law worked for Framhagen and was the Chief Monitor of the recount.

JOSH: So we know something wasn't kosher with that election, perhaps, I don't know.

HRISHI: It's so confusing. And maybe there was something there and maybe there was, there was actually one moment where I noticed an edit, which is not something I notice often. I can't remember actually another moment where I've seen, or in this instance really actually heard, something being cut in the episode, but there's a point where Leo's speaking to C.J. and I wonder if other people will be able to hear it if we just play the audio.

JOSH: So, it's an audio edit.

HRISHI: It's an audio edit. You know sometimes you can tell edits are being made, because they cut to a different shot.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: And it's a way to mask discontinuity in the other person speaking. Leo's talking about this gathering of Bay of Pigs veterans, which is what had brought him to Florida in 1995 in the first place.

[West Wing Episode 6.19 excerpt]

LEO: These aging warriors, enemies. fellow countrymen. And I had high hopes we were pulling together, strand by strand, a dialogue with the Cuban-Americans and Cubans.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: The way that John Spencer speaks there, he kind of goes into a nostalgic cadence, where he's speaking a little bit slower.

JOSH: Mhm

HRISHI: I don't know exactly how to describe what the sound is, but basically the cut comes too abruptly after the word "countrymen," before he says, "and I had high hopes." It's also the moment exactly when they cut to C.J.'s face away from John Spencer. There was more story there or there was more to it that we lost and maybe there was some more clarity that we would have gotten if we had heard all that dialogue.

JOSH: Perhaps so.

HRISHI: But you know, they had to make room for all the termite stuff.

JOSH: [Laughs] Yes, yes, you don't want to give up that gold.

HRISHI: I think probably my least favorite part of the entire episode and this, therefore, puts it in competition for maybe my least favorite thing in maybe the entire series, is the first exterminator who shows up:

[West Wing Episode 6.19 excerpt]

YOLANDER: Probably swarmed in through a crack I saw in the foundation. There was some damage under a window.

CHARLIE: Swarmed? What window?

YOLANDER: Window near that weird round room that overlooks the Rose Garden.

CHARLIE: The Oval Office.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Rough.

[laughter]

HRISHI: Just imagine a world where someone knows the name of the Rose Garden, but doesn't know what the Oval Office is or just somebody who goes to the White House...

JOSH: I agree. And with no pay off. It's not funny.

HRISHI: There's another moment that made me laugh out loud that I had to pause it and chuckle even though it was just...

JOSH: Yes yes?

HRISHI: There is an attempt to have a little call back to what the president said in 6.03 when he says"

[West Wing Episode 6.03 excerpt]

LEO: *Remember what you told me when you offered me the job?*

PRESIDENT BARTLET: *I need you to jump off a cliff.*

LEO: *And I did.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: They make a callback to that when they're trying to decide whether or not, despite all the negative ramifications, especially for the Democratic candidates, and the Florida Primary, and the General Election, they're gonna go ahead, they're gonna tell everybody what they're doing with Cuba. The president says:

[West Wing Episode 6.19 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: *It's here, isn't it?*

LEO: *Another cliff? Yes, sir.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And everybody seems to know what they're talking about.

JOSH: Cut to Cliff Calley.

HRISHI: Well, that's the thing. He's like another Cliff! And if I were in that room, I would look to Cliff Calley to be like, "Is there someone else here named Cliff, besides me?"

[laughter]

JOSH: They missed an obvious joke. Sorry I raced there before you.

HRISHI: It's ok.

JOSH: I actually did wonder during that scene, whether perhaps that scene, either explicitly or subconsciously, influenced Shonda Rhimes' decision to make jumping over cliffs such a recurring light motif of *Scandal*.

HRISHI: In dialogue or actual cliffs?

JOSH: In dialogue.

HRISHI: In *Scandal*, I would accept either.

JOSH: Absolutely. In the dialogue in the sense that when you're a Gladiator and you're part of OPA, Olivia Pope and Associates, and her team, and you're one of the Gladiators, you're willing

to go over a cliff. There's a lot of that like, it's kind of the *Scandal* version of "I serve at the pleasure..." You know it's "over a cliff."

HRISHI: Yeah. How about this moment of cold, harsh reality when Framhagen says to Leo:

[West Wing Episode 6.19 excerpt]

FRAMHAGEN: Whatever dumb thing you do to prop up Castro will be reversed next year.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Are we talking about Obama/Trump now?

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Indeed, and it was in a year's time right? 2016 Obama eases travel restrictions, remittances, and banking issues with Cuba and by 2017 Trump had re-imposed those sanctions.

HRISHI: Yeah. I think the episode actually got so much right about how this would actually end up playing out in terms of its future predictions and that part is impressive, both in terms of yeah, how a Democratic president might handle thawing out...

JOSH: Relations with Cuba.

HRISHI: And the fact that as soon as that president is out of office, things might revert back. That's exactly what happened.

JOSH: Nailed it. Is it time to jump to the flashback scene?

HRISHI: Let's jump. Over the cliff, into the past.

JOSH: Indeed. Over the cliff of good taste.

[laughter]

JOSH: And there were, I thought hints of what I would come to fully accept in this scene, which is that this episode plays out a bit like a piece of fan-fic.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Like people are like, "Let's... what if."

HRISHI: What if Leo met Kate 10 years before the events of...

JOSH: Yeah and by the way, maybe it's just me now and something I'm bringing to the table, but I thought, are they gonna hook up?

[laughter]

JOSH: During the flashback scene, I thought there as a little bit of a hint at that, because first of all, we head into the past off of Leo's admitting that he doesn't remember her and the suggestion, I think, on her face that, I don't think she explicitly says that she remembers him.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: That they have indeed met before and then we get to see it and they, an absolutely wrecked, drunk Leo stumbles, is it out of that meeting?

HRISHI: Yeah, that meeting, he's with Framhagen, it's that time, yeah.

JOSH: They've been utilizing and we're left to wonder many things, for me including whether there is some sort of romantic hook up in the offing, but also why they couldn't find a better wig for Kate and also was she sent there to keep an eye on him? Or to disrupt this meeting that we know in present day Leo attributes the failure to his having left the room. But maybe the CIA had sent Kate and others down there to either keep an eye on Leo or to subvert the actions of this meeting all together. It raises a lot of interesting questions, but it plays out strangely and I think unconvincingly and in an unsatisfying manner.

HRISHI: Yeah, I thought maybe Kate was there to, yeah, monitor the situation, but then the fact that she actually drives Leo to his hotel made me think that maybe her specific assignment was, in fact, Leo. As the Secretary of Labor, maybe the CIA was keeping tabs on him and that was Kate's particular assignment because otherwise, it's a little bit weird that she would peel off of whatever else is happening.

JOSH: Completely.

HRISHI: To take him away, without letting anybody else know.

JOSH: Do you think she was there to take care of him, keep him alive? There's also, I mean she basically, possibly saves his life in this scene because he's trying to get in the driver seat of a car.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: And he's hopelessly drunk.

HRISHI: Yeah, so we don't know. And maybe she was there to just monitor the situation generally and then she sees this and realizes, you know, her spy instincts are like "this is the thing that I need to deal with right now." But then who's looking at the rest of what's going on in the meeting?

JOSH: Someone else in another wig.

[Hrishi laughs]

JOSH: And then there's a moment in the nadir of an already low hanging scene, there's dialogue that was so on the nose that I had to touch mine.

[laughter]

JOSH: And I literally, I physically did, when she says something like:

[West Wing Episode 6.19 excerpt]

LEO: I'll remember this.

KATE: No, you won't.

LEO: Yes I will.

KATE: No, but I will.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I was just like, what? We're already in flash, she's literally remembering this for us, in the episode, why have her say that? Like "Oh my God the irony. She did! She did remember it!"

HRISHI: [sigh] Oof. It is such a strange one in the timeline of what's going on. We've got so much momentum in the election story lines, we've got some interesting things going on in and out of the White House, even the way that Toby gets involved in drought conditions with Ricky Rafferty's campaign, you know that people who aren't explicitly part of the Russell or Santos campaigns still can be included in those plots is really cool and I was looking forward to more of that and like I said in past episodes, I feel a little bit bummed out when we leave that stuff, but this is just out of left field and takes us so far away from anything.

JOSH: To paraphrase Toby Ziegler, the campaign story line is where all the blood is going.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: And there's nothing left for an episode like this. Were I ever to contemplate a re-watch of the entire series, this would be a skipper over for me, I think.

HRISHI: For me too.

JOSH: Also, just one moment, Toby makes a pedophilia joke in the press room.

[West Wing Episode 6.19 excerpt]

STEVE: The CAA issued a report that Cuba has replaced East Asia as the destination for pedophiles and sex tourists.

TOBY: No, I can't issue you a visa.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Funny, but wow, really? This is what he, this is what he chooses to say?

HRISHI: Yeah, the actual attempt to tie this to the campaign stuff, besides just mentioning that it's gonna be devastating for the Democrats, is so funny, it's really Toby has one scene where he's trying to talk to Donna and Josh about what's going on and they just can't hear each other.

[West Wing Episode 6.19 excerpt]

JOSH: I can't hear you, it's crazy down here. It's Guatemala.

TOBY: Hello?

DONNA: I lost you, how are you?

TOBY: What's goin' on down there, Donna?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: They're in the shambolic midst of a campaign and for some reason they all tie it to Guatemala? "It's Guatemala," which I thought was a weird, weird little moment to describe chaos and disorganization like in this episode, that's what's picked out of thin air?

HRISHI: Right, we're gonna pick a different country...I don't know. But so we get Toby trying to be on the phone with Josh and Donna, and then they can't hear each other, and they lose each other, and then that's it.

JOSH: It's almost like a representative of the writers decided to try to include that storyline to just sort of touch on it and they tried and couldn't.

[laughter]

HRISHI: It felt a little bit like a desire to just remind us that, "Also, we have these characters."

JOSH: Yeah, I mean I guess it also was a way to acknowledge that the White House's taking on Cuba in any form would have massive implications for the candidates and the campaigns but they didn't actually give us any of that.

HRISHI: Yeah but they say that in the rooms without actually showing the campaigns and I think they really did not add anything with this phone call, where they never actually say anything, all Toby says is "I wanted to ask you about the Castro thing."

JOSH: You are correct.

HRISHI: And Josh says, "Hey, what's with Castro, what's going on with that?" Toby says, "That's what I wanted to ask you," and then they get cut off.

JOSH: "I can't talk about Cuba. It's Guatemala over here." What?

HRISHI: What about, let's just for a second, end with the ending.

[West Wing Episode 6.19 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: My fellow Americans, in 1961 president John F. Kennedy bought some cigars, they happened to be from a country called Cuba.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I was just like, wow, even Toby took the week off, or whoever wrote that.

HRISHI: They happened to be from a country called Cuba. I don't, did we miss the moment where it turns out the President is also visiting the set of *Sesame Street*?

[laughter]

JOSH: It's rough. It's very rough and odd. It just defies explanation.

HRISHI: Yeah. And yet here we are, we tried. And with that, maybe it's time for us to go off and write our pilot episode of *Harper and Hooper*.

JOSH: Yeah, let's do it.

HRISHI: It will probably just come out to be a lot like the pilot episode of *She Spies*.

JOSH: Which I was in.

HRISHI: Which you were also in.

JOSH: Thank you. All right that does it, you've slogged through another episode of *The West Wing Weekly* with us. Thanks for joining us. Thanks to Margaret Miller, Zack McNees, and Nick Song for their fabulous work.

HRISHI: And thanks to Radiotopia for having us as part of the family of podcasts that they've collected under one roof. You can learn about all the other shows at radiotopia.fm. Next week we'll be back on the campaign trail with us and we're very excited because we'll have a very special guest:

[excerpt]

ALAN ALDA: I'm really glad to talk with you both about West Wing, it's just a wonderful program.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Alan Alda

JOSH: Woooo

HRISHI: Until then.

HRISHI: Ok

JOSH: Ok

HRISHI AND JOSH: What's next?

[Outro Music]