

The West Wing Weekly
6.20: "In God We Trust"
Guests: Alan Alda and Rev. Katey Zeh

[Intro Music]

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

JOSH: And I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: And today we're talking about "In God We Trust." It's episode twenty from season six.

JOSH: It was written by L.O.D. - Lawrence O'Donnell. It was directed by C.M. - Christopher Misiano. And it first aired on M.T...

HRISHI: No.

Josh: ...T.T.F. - March 23rd, 2005. I think I got that right.

[Hrishi laughs]

HRISHI: Forget about all that nonsense, because we've got a special guest coming up. Later on, we're going to be talking to Alan Alda.

JOSH: A.A!

[Hrishi laughs]

JOSH: It'll be a 12-step interview. Huzzah.

HRISHI: In this episode, Senator Vinick has clinched the Republican nomination. And then we see what happens next. His campaign has to figure out who's gonna be the vice presidential nominee and the White House has to figure out how to slow down the momentum and make it seem like the Democratic Party isn't in shambles. And one thing that I really like about this episode is that it really kind of unifies around one single story. I mean we see different characters and different viewpoints, but, as opposed to sort of A-story, B-story, C-story fragmented nature we sometimes see in *West Wing* episodes, this really feels like all of the characters are in the same storyline.

JOSH: Yeah, I agree. I liked the sort of singular focus of the episode.

HRISH: Yeah, in fact the episode begins in a way that really ties everyone together. Because there is a news report announcing the results of both the Republican nomination win for Vinick and the lack of result in the Democratic primary for New Jersey, which is, at that point, too close to call between Santos and Russell.

JOSH: We learn that no matter who wins, neither is going to have enough delegates going into the convention to clinch the nomination.

HRISH: Exactly! I mean really, you couldn't put these two primary storylines in different places. One has a clear winner, the other is really split. But I love the way that the episode depicts this

sort of unity because it cuts between all of our different characters, sort of in their different spaces and viewpoints, all watching the same report. And so you see C.J. and Toby and the Russell campaign, where you see Will and Donna, and the Santos campaign, where you see Santos and Josh. None of them are saying anything, it's actually just the voice of the newscaster that we hear and it's this sort of continuous cut as we go through and it's really neat; it's an unusual thing to have everybody kinda focused around this one moment.

JOSH: It's a cool device.

HRISHI: Yeah. And then it ends at the Vinick campaign, we get Patricia Richardson, who plays Sheila, who's great in all these episodes as Vinick's Chief-of-Staff, I'm guessing?

JOSH: Or is she his Campaign Manager?

HRISHI: Oh yeah! You're supposed to have a separation between your campaign staff and your senatorial staff, but here it really kind of seems like it's all one group of people.

JOSH: Mhmm.

HRISHI: And she comes in to tell Senator Vinick that he's gonna to talk to Reverend Don Butler, who he just defeated for the nomination. I love this episode!

JOSH: I do too! Yeah, I really liked it.

HRISHI: I think there's something really miraculous about it because it feels like this alternate universe *West Wing*, where Alan Alda is the star instead of Martin Sheen and it still completely works! And I think the thing that makes it so surprising and impressive is that he's a member of a totally different party...

JOSH: Mhmm.

HRISHI: ...has totally different viewpoints, and yet there is still something that Lawrence O'Donnell has identified that makes the show essentially what it is. It's often described as a liberal fantasy, but I think he's found, actually, the thing underneath that that really makes it quintessentially *West Wing*.

JOSH: Yeah, I agree. This episode does an excellent argument for a Vinick presidency.

HRISHI: Absolutely.

JOSH: And I suppose you could say that Arnold Vinick is a bit of a Liberal fantasy of the ultimate [cross talk] Republican.

HRISHI: [cross talk] I suppose that's true. You're probably right.

[Josh laughs]

JOSH: But yeah, this episode really makes Vinick out to be a classic *West Wing* hero.

HRISHI: Yeah, I think, in fact, they do something in this episode that has never been done before. Which is to create a genuine peer for President Bartlet.

JOSH: Mm.

HRISHI: I think you could argue that the First Lady and Leo are both sort of peers of the President, that they speak to him freely and they shape his opinion and have a lot of influence over him. But at the end of the day, it's still sort of like he's the president and, in the case of Leo at least, you know like Leo still works for him, and we saw how that fell out. So they're peers but there's some kind of

JOSH: ...different dynamic, sure.

HRISHI: Yeah. But when you finally get - and I'm skipping far ahead...

JOSH: We're gonna get right to the ice cream scene aren't we?

HRISHI: Yeah, but...

[Josh & Hrishi laugh]

HRISHI: I always wanna skip right to dessert.

[Josh laughs]

JOSH: Excellent.

HRISHI: When you see the two of them together, it really feels like something new where the president gets to have this intimate conversation with somebody. It's not like he's talking to a Head of State over the phone, through a translator, where there's all these sort of formalities. It's a real, genuine interchange between two real people. But they're two people where, the president doesn't have anything to offer Vinick really, like he doesn't need anything from him.

JOSH: Well, pistachio at the very end.

[Hrishi laughs]

HRISHI: I guess a little ice cream and a little bit of deal making in terms of the minimum wage bill and the debt ceiling legislation. But you know what I mean?

JOSH: Yeah, I do. It almost works for me on both levels, which is that you get two actors of tremendous stature...

HRISH: Yes!

JOSH: ...going mano a mano. And two characters of great stature and character going mano a mano. So it's just everything is just, it's clickin', it's firing on all cylinders, it's just exactly what I want from this show. And we're finally seeing the two of them together. I will tell you, the only thing I don't like about that scene is that they seem to be eating out of multi-gallon containers and I can't stand the waste! You know, they're not gonna put 'em back?

HRISHI: Of course they're gonna put them back!

JOSH: You're gonna eat out of a two-gallon thing and then put it back?

HRISHI: Sure!

JOSH: Grab a plate for the love of God!

[Hrishi laughs]

JOSH: Really, this is one thing. Then towards the end I'm like "Ahhh! He's taking out another one!"

[Hrishi & Josh laugh]

JOSH: It worked visually but there's something in me that cringes at waste and food waste and I just thought, "You can't put that back."

HRISHI: I'm surprised, given your penchant for ice cream, I thought you would have looked at it the way I looked at it, which is those six tubs of ice cream should last them through the night.

JOSH: They weren't eating with a focus and a vehemence that suggested to me that they were gonna be rattling around at the bottom by the end. I mean, I could put that all away.

[Hrishi laughs]

HRISHI: Do you know, presidents and ice cream have a long history?

JOSH: I don't think I did know that.

HRISHI: George Washington was a big ice cream fan. And he spent \$200, which is equal to about \$5000 today, on ice cream in the summer of 1790.

JOSH: Wow. You know in the fall of 1790 his teeth were replaced with wood.

[Hrishi laughs]

JOSH: I think there might be a connection.

HRISHI: Also when he was a boy...

JOSH: Yes, yes.

HRISHI: He chopped down that cherry tree just with the strength of one of those ice cream fueled farts.

JOSH: WOW! I was trying to get ahead of you and figure out where you were going, never would have gotten [cross talk] there...

HRISHI: [cross talk] Blew right past you.

[Josh laughs]

JOSH: Boom.

[Hrishi & Josh laugh]

HRISHI: So, ok, let me backpedal a little bit. So there is this legislative issue in this episode where the debt ceiling needs to be raised. It's something that I'm sure every one of our listeners is familiar with because it comes up all the time.

JOSH: Indeed.

HRISHI: And it's a routine enough vote in this fantasy world of the *West Wing*, where there isn't maybe going to be a government shutdown, but then, the senate Democrats propose attaching an amendment to raise the minimum wage. And suddenly, what would be a simple vote, becomes more complicated.

JOSH: Mhmm. And we learn that in Bartlet's seven years, he has failed to do anything for the minimum wage.

HRISHI: Yeah, and so this amendment has sort of two possible positive outcomes for the Democrats. One: they'll get to actually raise the minimum wage because they're betting the Republicans won't let the debt ceiling...

JOSH: ...won't let time run out.

HRISHI: Yeah. The other upside is that it seems to potentially hamstring Vinick's momentum because it puts him in an awkward position because he actually supports raising the minimum wage and it could cause an internal kerfuffle for the Republicans.

JOSH: Well said.

HRISHI: It's a little bit of gamesmanship that I think certainly happens in the *West Wing*, but I think it doesn't happen too often that it's supported by the Bartlet Administration. I feel like they're often stymied by it. And they have to deal with it and play politics with it and maybe make compromises, but it's rarer that they sort of endorse a move like this.

JOSH: True.

HRISHI: But, Toby says, it's the only way we're gonna get an amendment on the minimum wage this year. And ultimately, it's Vinick, it's not the Speaker of the House. He has emerged now, because of clinching the nomination, as the de facto leader of the Republican Party.

[West Wing Episode 6.20 excerpt]

SENATOR VINICK: You didn't have to come all the way over here Mr. Leader.

ROBERT ROYCE: Ah, cut it out Arnie! You're the real leader of this party now. And I just want you to know, I'm at your service.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: He gets asked to speak to the president, and it has this weight, people stop and watch him walk in and you know arrive at the Oval Office. And then they have this great, if very short, negotiation. And again, I love the way it plays out where Vinick gets to have the sort of heroic moment. The President also gets to have a heroic moment where he gets to get the policy that he wants without having to... but he has to do it in a selfless way.

JOSH: Mhmm.

HRISHI: I love that whole conversation:

[West Wing Episode 6.20 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Anything else?

SENATOR VINICK: Help me keep a secret.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: What's that?

SENATOR VINICK: That I just gave you more than you asked for. Let me hang around for a while, as if we're really slugging it out in here.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: The president's stance was ok, fine, we'll take the amendment off, but then you need to give them a vote on the minimum wage. And he says, I'll do you better than that...

JOSH: I'll get it passed.

HRISHI: Yeah, that it can pass.

JOSH: It's terrific. I love that it's wrapped up all so easily and cleverly and then that we see that political side of Vinick, that he is a political animal also. When he says "Give me a little extra time," so it appears that I had to work you over to get this deal. That's a great little button to the scene.

HRISHI: And he gets to take the credit for clearing out the gutters that the senate Democrats have stuffed.

JOSH: Mhmm.

HRISHI: There's a moment where Vinick says to Sheila about Russell and Santos...

[West Wing Episode 6.20 excerpt]

SENATOR VINICK: If one of those guys had Jed Bartlet's political instincts, I'd be 20 points behind.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And it's a compliment to the president but he's clearly also extremely savvy.

JOSH: Oh, absolutely. And I think it's also a subtle indication that he thinks he's superior to his competition.

HRISHI: Yeah, absolutely. This whole episode is kind of overcast because of the sentiment that Leo expresses...

[West Wing Episode 6.20 excerpt]

LEO: We've got no one who can beat him.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Mhmm.

HRISHI: And it really feels like that. You know we've had these different campaign episodes, and we see the Hoynes and Russell and Santos and even Ricky Rafferty, you know different people all vying and no clear winner; it's a dog fight. And then, meanwhile, Vinick is just sailing straight through.

JOSH: Well also, he faces some adversity in this episode, but he handles it with such aplomb that you just gain more admiration for the guy.

HRISHI: That's true.

JOSH: I mean he definitely has some obstacles, but he handles them rather elegantly, convincingly.

HRISHI: It's interesting because the adversity that he faces is over his stance on abortion, primarily, but it clearly wasn't such a big deal to the primary voters that he didn't clinch the nomination.

JOSH: That's true. That is an interesting point. And, presumably, in a primary, your position has – you know, if you're a Republican – has to be further right, then it's going to be in the general, right?

HRISHI: I don't know, I think that's the question that they pose here. Because, first of all, we get the return of Bruno Gianelli, which is fantastic, but [cross talk] he's...

JOSH: [cross talk] Yes.

HRISHI: ...here, not for the Democrats, but for Vinick.

JOSH: Yeah, the thing that's odd though is I couldn't quite tell if he's getting paid or not. Did he join the team sort of without our seeing it mid-episode? I mean he came in, and I assume his pitch is... I don't think he does this [cross talk] for free.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

JOSH: So it was kind of subtle, like I couldn't quite tell what was going on. At a certain point, he gave so much away in that initial meeting, I thought they might have said "Ok, take care."

[Hrishi laughs]

JOSH: "We got what we need."

HRISHI: It's true, he has to kind of audition at first and it's really set up like an audition, he's just gonna come in and he's gonna try and convince them to hire him. But then, they just keep coming back, and, yeah, he's acting like he's their advisor, and I'm like, is he still just auditioning?

JOSH: Yeah, well what's interesting and sly about Bruno also is, I assume it's essentially a job interview too, and this guy wants to be hired because that's what he does, but there also is an element in the way he expresses himself that suggests that he's almost personally open to a Vinick Presidency, like that he admires this guy.

[West Wing Episode 6.20 excerpt]

BRUNO: You don't have to do that to win. Not this time. You do this right; you can do a lot more than win. You can stop using politics to divide this country. You can show us how much we agree, instead of how much we disagree. You can put this country back together.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I think so. And you know there's this other piece of information that we have about Bruno, from around the first episodes that we met him, when Margaret asks Leo "Who's Bruno Gianelli?" and Leo says:

[West Wing Episode 3.02 excerpt]

LEO: Strategist.

MARGARET: Really?

LEO: He got five senators elected, three governors. He got Hackett elected where they haven't elected a Democrat in 46 years. He got the Prime Minister of Israel elected. And it's entirely possible that he's never voted in his life.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I think it's that last sentence that paves the way for him to come and be a strategist for a Republican nominee.

JOSH: Good point, good memory.

HRISHI: Back to the issue of abortion and the primaries, I think what Bruno says is that, at that moment, the majority of the country is in line with Vinick's stance on abortion. And so, even if he might have lost voters on that front in the primary, I think it speaks to how well he must be doing on all the other issues that he was able to win.

JOSH: To win the nomination handily, yeah.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Well that's what I'm saying, I'm saying now that he's made it through the gauntlet, if you will, of the Republican primary season, his more middle-of-the-road appeal can be very effective.

[West Wing Episode 6.20 excerpt]

BRUNO: This campaign should be all about you. The reasons you should be president, and those reasons are exactly where 60% of the voters are: pro-choice, anti-partial birth, pro-death penalty, anti-tax, pro-environment and pro-business, pro-balanced budget, and I could go on.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: He's staked out positions that might appeal to both sides of the aisle. You might have a little problem with this one, but then he's good on this and that sounds to me like it could have been problematic during the primary season, it wasn't...

HRISHI: Mhmm.

JOSH: ...we know. And so now he feels, Bruno feels, that Vinick is positioned for a potential landslide win, a mandate victory.

HRISHI: Yeah, but I think that there's this other issue of Republican voters staying home in a general election if they don't find him palatable enough or inspiring enough or voting on their single issue the way they want him to vote. And so he might have to tack to the right, away from his own beliefs, in order to get those voters to come out for him.

JOSH: Sure, and then the whole position is also framed as "Are you going to pick a running mate who balances you out a bit?" Which sets up the look at political expedience as the sort of theme of the episode, character versus political expedience.

HRISHI: Yeah, that's right. That theme gets explored a few times in this episode, but I think it gets expressed for the first time when Vinick and Sheila are in the limo. They're off to an event with donors and they're talking about a piece of energy legislation that those donors are going to be concerned about. They're from the energy industry and they wanna know how he's gonna vote, and Vinick says:

[West Wing Episode 6.20 excerpt]

SENATOR VINICK: Hey, if you can't drink their booze, take their money and then vote against them, you don't belong in this business.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yes, a fantastic quote that I found to be potentially a paraphrase of something that Texas Democrat Sam Rayburn, who was Speaker of the House... I think he was in the House from early 20th century all the way into the 60s or something. But sometime around 1950, was the Speaker of the House and attributed to him is the following quote: "Son, if you can't take their money, drink their whisky, screw their women and then vote against them, you don't deserve to be here."

HRISHI: Huh. It's funny cause I found that same quote attributed to a different politician...

JOSH: Wait a minute...

HRISHI: I Googled the phrase...

JOSH: Yeah...

HRISHI: ...and the first thing that came up for me was Jesse Unruh – I'm not sure if I'm pronouncing his last name correctly U-N-R-U-H – and, who knows what might be the truth and what might be folklore and what might be, maybe he heard it and said it and then somebody attributed the quote to him, but yeah, this is a quote about lobbyists: "If you can't eat their food, drink their booze, screw their women, and then vote against them, you've got no business being up here."

JOSH: Huh. Interesting. So this one's maybe lost in the ether as to who's the... maybe George Washington first said it over ice cream.

[Hrishi laughs]

HRISHI: That's true. All we know is Lawrence O'Donnell stole it from someone.

JOSH: That's right. Exactly.

HRISHI: And gave it to Arnold Vinick.

JOSH: It's a good line.

HRISHI: It is a good line. And so, what's so easy for Vinick to say about energy regulators ends up being a pretty tough issue for him when it comes to the issue of abortion and also when it comes to the issue of faith. Because the abortion question, which is public, everybody sort of knows what his stance is, they know what Reverend Butler's stance is, they know that they're at odds. And they know it's the reason why Reverend Butler won't accept an offer for the Vice Presidency from Vinick. All those positions are sort of known, what isn't known is what emerges from that, which is that the Senator doesn't go to church.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: It's funny that it's just taken for granted that he does, maybe people aren't paying attention to it but, his own staff is surprised when they find out that it has been years since he's gone to church.

JOSH: Right. And I think that that taking it for granted is just a bi-product of "You're a politician, how can you not go to church?" That's like, "What do you mean you don't own a suit?"

HRISHI: Right [laughs].

JOSH: This is one of the things that is a prerequisite for being a politician.

HRISHI: And yet, that's also at the heart of the resolution of this. Where Vinick says to the press in the end in this fantastic speech that this is the easiest lie for a politician to tell you. And

it's true, because all you really need is the photo op, and then you can sort of avoid that question.

JOSH: Right, exactly. It's a lie you can tell without moving your lips. You just show up.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And what it means to you is..."Let someone else figure that out."

HRISHI: I looked up some stats about how voters feel about faith.

JOSH: Hmm.

HRISHI: 'Cause I know that Atheism historically has been an extremely unpopular attribute in a candidate. But that has been changing. Of all faiths, it seems to be the one that is still the most problematic for voters. But as of this year, according a Gallup poll, Americans have warmed to the idea of an Atheist candidate over the past several decades. Currently it's 60% would vote for an Atheist. When they first did this measure in 1958, it was 18%.

JOSH: Hoo! Wow.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I was gonna say it is surprising to me that only 60% would consider voting for an Atheist but I guess apparently it's been a lot of progress there.

HRISHI: Yeah. Here are some of the other breakdowns: Would you vote for a woman? 94% said they would, which is like "Great, that's almost everybody!" But the thing that's crazy is, it's not everybody.

JOSH: That's true. Although I wonder if you asked "Would you vote for a man?" are you gonna get 100%? Or is it gonna [cross talk] be...

HRISHI: [cross talk] That's funny, that's not one of the questions.

JOSH: Yeah. How are Jews doing?

HRISHI: 93%

JOSH: Really!?

HRISHI: 93%, up 2% from 2015 where they were 91%. Atheists are up 2% as well. Muslims were at 60% in 2015, they're now at 66%. So an increase of 6 percentage points. Still you might think, based on some of the rhetoric that that would be the most embattled demographic but no, Atheists more so.

JOSH: Hmm.

HRISHI: And the attribute that fared the worst was Socialists: 47%.

JOSH: Sorry Bernie. Well, how about that. Let's not run by the Butler-Vinick scene. I like that. I was surprised, it was the first time we really see Vinick sort of caught off guard as he says afterwards in response to "Did you offer him the Vice Presidency slot?" He says "I tried to."

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Which is funny 'cause we don't 100% know exactly what's gonna happen in the meeting but then it does seem during it. It's all very well written and acted and subtly done. And we sort of do get the impression that Vinick says to Butler "I respect your position. Obviously, I disagree but I respect it." And then before he can say much more Butler turns it down and I think also using similar language says he just doesn't respect Vinick's position. And it's kind of a great little, I thought, surprise and twist. And whatever else you think about him, an act of character on Butler's part.

HRISHI: I love that it seems like we see Vinick decide in the middle of the conversation that he's actually gonna go ahead and offer it to Butler.

JOSH: I think you're exactly right. And that's pretty great acting.

HRISHI: It is pretty great. And I think that he decides based on their interaction. He said that one of the qualifications for why he's considering him is that he's the funniest one of all the other people who ran. And I think, despite the fact that they were in competition for one another, they were, they have this nice rapport you know as he comes in, as Vinick offers him a seat, it feels very comfortable between the two of them.

[West Wing Episode 6.20 excerpt]

REVEREND BUTLER: I hit you pretty hard during the primaries. And I just want you to know, it was never personal. Abortion is not a political issue with me.

SENATOR VINICK: I know. I respect that.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And so I think, even within the first few sentences maybe Vinick doesn't know what he's gonna do. But yeah, what a great piece of writing and acting to see him sort of decide in that moment. That Vinick-Butler conversation is in some ways, it reminded me a little bit of "The Short List", where, in a flashback to early days of the administration, they're trying to figure out who's gonna be on the [cross talk] Supreme Court...

JOSH: [cross talk] Right.

HRISHI: ...they're trying to decide between Peyton Cabot Harrison III, who's gonna be easy to confirm, versus Mendoza, who would be a really interesting, but harder to secure choice. And they try going with Harrison, they offer it to him in fact, and then it all goes wrong and then they have to give it to Mendoza, who as they say:

[West Wing Episode 1.09 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: You were not the first choice, but you are the last one, and the right one.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Good analogy. Worth mentioning, Don S. Davis, as the Reverend Don Butler. He's excellent in the role.

HRISHI: Yeah. I think it's interesting how they portray Reverend Butler because, on paper, he's somebody who's politically opposed to Vinick, our hero, at least for this episode, and they've been at odds, he turns him down. There are all these things in terms of the plot where you could turn this character into a villain, or at least maybe be somehow two-dimensional.

JOSH: Mhmm.

HRISHI: But they don't do that. He seems like a real person and a sympathetic, interesting one, like a thoughtful person who's principled. And this is sort of what I meant about finding the thing that's at the heart of *The West Wing*, is that they've framed people with opposing viewpoints, not as enemies in conflict but just people who disagree. And then have to figure out what to do once they realize that they disagree.

JOSH: Yeah, I agree that he's turning down a position of great power and, you know again, a heartbeat away from the Presidency itself, but he also does it, at least I think in a kind of classy way which is he could have waited to be offered it...

HRISHI: Right!

JOSH: ...to turn it down, and thereafter he could always say "You know, I was offered to be on the ticket." But he saves him the embarrassment or the awkwardness... he's not looking to get anything else out of it other than to deliver his message.

HRISHI: Yeah, he really does save him both from having to answer that question with the press dishonestly, or whatever, or honestly and lose face or something, but later, even in this episode, when he eventually does offer it to Ray Sullivan, Sullivan asks:

[West Wing Episode 6.20 excerpt]

RAY SULLIVAN: Did you offer it to Butler?

SENATOR VINICK: No.

RAY SULLIVAN: Good. I don't wanna be anybody's second choice.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And he gets to honestly tell him, "No, I did not."

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: It's a really kind thing that he does for him.

JOSH: Yeah. I also like the way the Reverend handles the press when he leaves and is posed the question about will he pray for Vinick to change his mind, or pray for him...

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: ...altogether. I like how he says:

[West Wing Episode 6.20 excerpt]

REVEREND BUTLER: You know I never heard a good idea from a reporter before. Yes. Yes, I will pray for Senator Vinick and he's welcome to come down to my church any time he wants and pray with me.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I like the dude a lot, despite his pro-life stance.

JOSH: By the way, it's worth mentioning that we're discussing this on the day when Alabama Governor Kay Ivey has signed the most Draconian abortion bill in the country.

HRISHI: Yeah, I think that's actually coloring my... When I say things like "Despite his pro-life stance."

JOSH: That can be a principled position. This is a day when we're talking about potentially criminalizing doctors who perform abortions and penalizing them with life sentences. I mean this is a piece of legislation designed to just work its way up to the Supreme Court and challenge *Roe v. Wade*.

HRISHI: Well, I mean let's not even mince words that much, it's a piece of legislation designed to regressively oppress women.

JOSH: Yeah, I think that is true.

HRISHI: Yeah, I can't remember a day that I was as angry as I was yesterday. I just can't believe that this is happening now. We're talking about an episode that's 14 years old, and there's legislation in motion to set us back decades before this episode.

JOSH: Yeah. To be looking at an episode from this long ago that posits even in a fictional world a Republican candidate for President who is pro-choice and to look at that in distinction with what we're dealing with today is stark. So this episode presents us with Arnold Vinick, a non-religious, pro-choice, Republican candidate and Reverend Don Butler, a conservative televangelist, who's staunch anti-abortion stance prevents him from joining the ticket. What we don't hear is any kind of faith-based, pro-choice viewpoint. And in order to open up the conversation, HrishI spoke to Reverend Katey Zeh, who is a Baptist minister and the Executive Director of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Rights. Here's that interview:

HRISHI: So this episode puts Arnold Vinick, a moderate non-religious, Republican, who's pro-choice and then there's Reverend Don Butler on the other side of the issue. And in the context of a fictional show about politics, having a religious candidate who's opposed to legal abortion makes sense because you don't need to explain that backstory or his motivation is kind of taken for granted. And I wanted to look at that, I wanted to look at the fact that it's taken for granted that a religious character would speak about their opposition to reproductive rights. And I wanted to think a little bit more about what Josh and I had discussed a couple of episodes ago

about how often suffering seems to be ignored when a political issue is framed religiously. It's often about life or death, and just in this truly binary consideration. So to help me with all of this, I'm joined now by Reverend Katey Zeh. She's a Baptist minister and the Executive Director of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Rights, which describes itself as a broad-based, national inter-faith movement that brings the moral force of religion to protect and advance reproductive health, choice, rights, and justice through education, prophetic witness, pastoral presence, and advocacy. Thanks Katey, thanks for joining me!

KATEY: Thank you so much for having me.

HRISHI: So I asked you to watch this episode, "In God We Trust", what did you think?

KATEY: I thought "Well, here we go again," a very stereotypical representation of what it means to be Christian. To be a Christian pastor, we have this character, who I think is probably modeled after Pat Buchanan...

HRISHI: Ahhh.

KATEY: ...who's white, male, Southern, presumably Evangelical, and also, of course, anti-choice. And it's just like any other time I've seen Christianity depicted in the media. In like a fictional world, that's typically who we see. So I wasn't totally surprised, but I will admit I was a little annoyed.

HRISHI: Yeah. So you're a Baptist minister, does it change when it comes to depictions of Catholics? 'Cause in *The West Wing*, the president is sort of modeled after JFK in some ways; he's a Democrat who is New England Catholic. And so he has to kind of wrestle with his faith a little bit.

KATEY: Well I guess the distinction in this show is that the president is a Catholic person but not part of the religious hierarchy. Whereas Reverend Butler is a minister and also running for office. So I think there is a distinction in terms of who holds theological authority.

HRISHI: Right.

KATEY: While they both might have to wrestle with their faith, Reverend Butler is a representative and a religious authority. So that way, it is a little bit different.

HRISHI: Yeah, that absolutely makes sense. That's a great point. I think also, part of the reason why I felt compelled to want to talk about this too, is just the context of the last couple of weeks in which we're watching this. The episode is from 2005, but now in 2019 there are all these restrictive laws being passed at the state level. Has that made things for your organization, for the RCRC, exceptionally busy right now?

KATEY: Absolutely. I was just in Washington, DC for a rally, the Stop the Bans rally, in front of the Supreme Court and yeah, it's been really hard to keep up with who has the most Draconian abortion ban and what state. They seem to just be popping up like wildfire across the South and the Midwest. And we have talked about it at RCRC as the race to the Court. It's who can get to the Supreme Court the fastest to challenge Roe. And which law will be the one that they take on, and perhaps overturn, Roe versus Wade. That's what we're anticipating with all of these really extreme laws that remove exceptions for rape and incest which we've seen supported by a majority of Americans for a long time, even among Catholics and Evangelicals, people of faith

who can no longer remain silent about these because it's so extreme. I think a lot of folks have been hesitant to speak out about their faith-based views on supporting access to abortion, but now that it's gotten so extreme, we see people, for the first time, being willing to preach and talk publicly about their support for reproductive rights as people of faith.

HRISHI: What is that message sound like? How do you frame a stance that's for reproductive rights in the language of Christianity?

KATEY: Well there are lots of folks who have been doing that. And I think it's also important to remember the history in the United States that in the years prior to Roe versus Wade, clergy, both Protestant and Jewish and some Catholic nuns, as well as laypeople, were helping women get access to safe abortion, even when it was illegal. And back then the arguments, they're not that different right now, was really about seeing women dying in their congregations from unsafe abortion. It was a public health crisis that women were dying from unsafe abortions or being forced to give their babies up for adoption, being coerced into maintaining their pregnancies. So I think the language for those of us who support abortion rights now, is similar but we have learned so much over the last 50 years, in particular from black women who framed something called the Reproductive Justice Movement, which puts abortion rights within a much larger framework. What I saw in this episode of *The West Wing* was really an extrapolation of abortion from a much broader understanding of what does it mean for our entirety of our reproductive lives. In which case, sometimes we need to terminate a pregnancy, at other times we need to carry one to term, and at other times we need to be supported as parents. And so seeing it as not connected to how we live our full lives was really, that's really what stuck out to me. And I think we see people now talking about this in the broader scope of healthcare, around bodily autonomy, women's rights more broadly on the heels of MeToo. This is really about control of people who identify as female.

HRISHI: Yeah.

KATEY: And it's not about valuing life, and I think the hypocrisy of anti-choice politics is really showing itself when we think about immigrant children being detained and dying in our hands. It's like "Well, whose lives really do matter? What life are you talking about protecting?" And I think people are calling out the hypocrisy in a way I haven't seen before.

HRISHI: Do you have other people who have positions of authority in faith-based organizations who, like, vocally oppose you and will point to say excerpts from scripture and say you're wrong and these are the reasons why the Bible says you're wrong?

KATEY: Well the thing is, the Bible doesn't actually say anything specific about abortion. It's just not a topic that comes up. So it's really up to us to interpret and think about kind of more broadly what does it mean to be a person of faith called to compassion, called to love and care for the neighbor, and for me, people who need to have an abortion who are experiencing an unintended pregnancy are some of the most marginalized people in our society, and so to turn away from what they need to live and to thrive is really a rejection of our Christian values. And so, I don't do a lot of arguing online with people who disagree with me, but I do challenge anybody who says "The Bible says that God is against abortion," because it simply doesn't say that.

HRISHI: Hmm. And do you find specific passages that bolster your position and articulate your viewpoint?

KATEY: So I'm not usually one to proof text, I like to look at stories in their fullness, and I just published a book called *Women Rise Up: Sacred Stories of Resistance for Today's Revolution*, and I looked at 10 different stories of women in the Bible finding ways to resist oppression under really misogynistic circumstances. And while each of those women is complex and we should critique her as well – 'cause they do a lot of problematic things – but what I see as a theme is there is a lot of reproductive oppression in the Bible. There are stories like Sarai and Hagar, Hagar is a slave who is forced to marry and be a surrogate for a more powerful woman, a more powerful family. We see stories like in the book of Exodus, where the Egyptian Pharaoh commands the midwives to kill all of the Hebrew baby boys who are seen as a threat, and they refuse, and they defy the law to save the Hebrew baby boys. So I mean there's a lot of times in which there's reproductive oppression happening and there are faithful people in the Bible who resist it. So for me, thematically what I see overall after having studied these stories for so long, is that we're called always to resist unjust laws. Even if that means doing something that's illegal.

HRISHI: Both of those examples you gave I think are from the Old Testament.

KATEY: Yes.

HRISHI: Are there also examples in the New Testament?

KATEY: Less so, but the one that sticks out to me that I think has the most resonance, is the story of an unnamed woman who is hemorrhaging, she's been hemorrhaging for 12 years – and if that really happened, she probably would have died – but she's considered impure and unable to, kind of, operate within the society as normal because of this bleeding that she is experiencing. And she again kind of resists unjust laws, the purity laws, and goes and touches the garment of Jesus while he's walking by and she is healed immediately. And he turns and says, "Who touched me?" and they have this exchange where she shares everything that's happened to her, all of her suffering, including going and spending all of her money with doctors who made her worse. Right, so there's the connection. The suffering of a woman compounded by healthcare. And what he says to her is, "Daughter your faith has made you well, go in peace." So what I love about that story is that women have the power to heal themselves, they have the power within themselves to reach out for what they need and take it, even when it's not granted to them. And I think that has the most resonance for me when I think about, this is really about questioning whether or not women have the moral agency to make decisions about their lives, their bodies, their families, and their futures. And so that's the story that sticks out to me as I think about the New Testament in terms of Jesus really affirming a woman and making a healthcare decision for herself, and not asking for permission.

HRISHI: That's awesome. Katey, thanks so much for talking to me about this.

KATEY: My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

HRISHI: We'll put a link up to your Twitter so people can follow you if they want and also a link to the RCRC and your book.

KATEY: Perfect. Thank you so much.

[Transition Music]

HRISHI: I liked Butler but I also liked that they brought him back to show his reaction to Vinick's final speech.

JOSH: Mhmm.

HRISHI: There's kind of a mirroring of the beginning of the episode where everyone's watching the television here as Vinick is on the news. They show people watching his speech and sort of taking it in as well. And one of the people you see is Butler and I thought that was nice. We don't totally get what Butler's...

JOSH: ...Exactly what his take is.

HRISHI: Yeah, take is. But we do see the president's and you can see that he approves.

JOSH: Yeah. I suspect, in his heart of hearts, that Reverend Butler would approve.

HRISHI: I think so too.

JOSH: He's saying it would be a charade.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: So I think that being the case, Butler would just as soon not have him there. Not have him come to church.

HRISHI: Exactly. I'm sure Butler would like him to change his mind, like he said, "I pray for him to change his mind," but he'd rather him, as a person who says "I can't go along with you even though it would confer power for me," I'm sure, yeah, he would rather someone actually believe it than just pay lip service to it.

JOSH: That's right, and he's not looking to provide cover for Vinick...

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: ...and that's what it would be. It would be a political stunt in which he would participate.

HRISHI: Yup. I feel like Lawrence O'Donnell wrote this episode with no sense of casting Vinick as an 'other' or like in opposition. Like the heroism of this character is so apparent and they're really, I feel like they're swinging for the fences with how awesome he is. I love the idea that they sort of split the writers up and Eli was covering the Santos campaign and Lawrence O'Donnell was covering this side of things. And Lawrence got to write a character that's just as interesting and cool and worthy of being the star of his own series. We've had all these episodes with Santos, and I think they, you know they're setting up his struggle and his wins as these sort of hard-fought milestones as he tries to get closer to the nomination. We're investing a lot of time with him. And so when we get one episode with Vinick, it feels like somebody playing devil's advocate. But what I love about this episode as the devil's advocate position, is that they aren't pulling any punches. That's gotta be a hard writing challenge, I think.

JOSH: Yeah, or maybe it's a lot of fun. I don't know, maybe it's gets his gears going. I would add to that that what little screen time Russell and Santos, or Sahn-tos as the president would have it, have in this episode leaves them coming across not in a particularly charming fashion.

They're sitting without anything to say to each other in the Oval Office before they get their sort of verbal upbraiding by the president about how they have to play nice, or there will be consequences. And they don't come across great.

HRISHI: No, they come across as sort of wan and strained.

JOSH: Yeah. And there's also, I think, something childish about their sitting there in the Oval with nothing to say to each other. Like, yeah I get it, they're running against each other and things are close and things are tight but that's it? You got nothing?

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: And, I do, I like that scene as well, by the way. I like President Bartlet's sort of non-nonsense approach.

[West Wing Episode 6.20 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: No attacks on each other. I'm gonna be watching. And if I think you've overstepped the line, I'm gonna grab the nearest microphone and say so and don't be surprised if I endorse the other guy while I'm at it.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I kinda like the sort of backroom political approach.

HRISHI: I think that it is one of the reasons why the dynamic between the president and Vinick feels so different because he does have this kind of parental relationship to Russell and Santos.

JOSH: Mhmm.

HRISHI: Yeah, he puts them in their place. And it feels like he's the adult and they're kids. And then Vinick comes in and he's another adult.

JOSH: Yeah, that's very well put. There's a sort of "Don't make me separate you two!" kind of feeling to that scene in the Oval.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: There's a nice long, travelling steadicam scene between C.J. and Will that I really dug.

HRISHI: Yeah?

JOSH: Yeah, Will is chasing C.J. down. He's imploring her, I think to modify the plan for the photo op.

HRISHI: Yes, he wants to have a little bit more time for the Vice President, out of deference for the fact that he *is* the Vice President.

[West Wing Episode 6.20 excerpt]

C.J.: It's the President's idea.

WILL: *I can't believe this. Can't you see this is an insult to the Vice President? To bring them in to his White House?*

C.J.: *No, the Vice President... (fades out)*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, and he's not getting his way. And I just love the way that Christopher Misiano directed it and staged it, blocked that scene. There's just an incredible amount of movement although it doesn't feel like the satires of *The West Wing* walk-and-talk, where they're kind of walking for no reason. It all feels very organic and the places they're going, and they change directions. And I just liked also that he had me kind of chasing after C.J. I look physically insignificant next to her. [Josh laughs] And also, I notice that I looked over my shoulder a couple of times, almost as if I'm completely uncomfortable, it's embarrassing to be talking like this in public and to be having to be reduced to beseeching C.J. for these crumbs, and then ultimately I'm just sort of left alone. I just like this scene, the way it was shot.

HRISHI: That's true. I do love the look over the shoulder while you're trying to engage C.J., you're conscious of your environment in a way that makes you seem anxious.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: It's really great. I wanna go back for a second to the conversation with Butler that Vinick has. Because the other thing that I love about the way this plays out, this is now after Bruno has come in and advised them. Where he's said, he's given them this idea to go for a very idealistic, big picture strategy. A 50-state win.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: It feels very *West Wing*. You know that it's gonna be just "Let Vinick Be Vinick", and you can win every single state. Something that's never happened. The last time that somebody won all of the states, there weren't even 50 states, it was James Monroe who ran unopposed in 1820. And then George Washington also ran, effectively unopposed, and won every state then. But nobody has won all 50 states. Last time somebody came close was Reagan. Reagan won 49 states, Nixon won 49 states. But anyway, so he's got this strategy for them, outlines it and says the only way you can do this though is if you don't choose Don Butler. Because it will automatically polarize your candidacy. And so, to take that road would be a very *West Wing* kind of move. But then in that moment, when we have that conversation and he makes that decision to offer it, or try to offer it to Butler, he's not going for Bruno's strategy, he's going for the alternate which is the sure win. The alternate: go with Butler. He's maybe compromising some things, he's putting someone who he disagrees with so close to the Presidency, but he assures his own victory.

JOSH: Right. And this is also what Sheila would have him do.

HRISHI: Exactly. And so many people would have them do. It's what Josh Lyman would probably have him do as well.

JOSH: I'm sure.

HRISHI: Like he says, "In order to govern effectively, first you have to win."

JOSH: Right. Certainly what Will would have him do.

HRISHI: Yeah. [Hrishi laughs] And I think we've seen that kind of dynamic play out where someone doesn't take that road and they go for the more difficult but principled path. But then he doesn't even get the option because Butler refuses before he can even give him the chance. And so the default strategy that he has to take is the principled one.

JOSH: Hmm. Right.

HRISHI: Which I think is neat. He ends up taking the less practical, more idealistic version but...

JOSH: But only because the other option's not available to him. By the way, when Sheila and Vinick are discussing what Bruno had to say, that little scene, which takes place in a car, in the back seat on the way to some event, is one of my little pet peeves that I know I've mentioned before and that's when a conversation takes place at a time and location that isn't credible. To me, after Bruno got up from the meeting with Sheila and Vinick and left the room, Vinick would have leaned over and said "What do you think of what Bruno said?" But instead, I think it's the opening line of the scene in the car or whenever it is later, he says something almost as simple and introductory as "What did you think of what Bruno said?"

HRISHI: He says, "You think Bruno's right?"

JOSH: And there's no way he didn't ask that question earlier. Probably as soon as Bruno left the room. What do you think? And I don't know why and I know it's just a niggling little point, but it bothers me.

HRISHI: Well, here's my apologia, the thing that Sheila says right before he says that is: "Your meeting with the Reverend Butler first thing in the morning..." and then Vinick says "You think Bruno's right? We shouldn't put Butler on the ticket?" I mean I think you're right, they would have obviously discussed it after Bruno left the room, but the prompt here is they didn't know when they might actually have a conversation with Butler, or if he would even agree to have the conversation in the first place. And so now they know that he's gonna come in in the morning, first thing in the morning and so now Vinick's like "Alright, so what do you think about that?"

JOSH: Ok, yeah, you know, not impossible. All I can say is that at the beginning of that scene, I'm already going, "What? Come on! Now you're talking about it?"

HRISHI: It's funny, the issue I thought you might have taken in this scene is when Sheila asks Vinick for what the formula is to find the area of a parallelogram.

JOSH: Ah. Why is he incorrect?

HRISHI: Kind of, yeah.

JOSH: Cause it's length times width.

HRISHI: It's actually base times height.

JOSH: Mmm.

HRISHI: She says "Same as a rectangle?" Which is true. It is the same as a rectangle in that a rectangle you also find a rectangle's area base times height but, in a rectangle, base times height is also length times width. With a parallelogram, it's a little bit different, because the actual total width or whatever, extends past what the length of the base is.

JOSH: I'm gonna take your word on that.

HRISHI: I was surprised my version, by the way, of your objection to the Sheila-Vinick conversation, was when Vinick leaves his office at one point and gets hounded by the press about whether or not he's gonna accept Butler's invitation to go to church. And he really flounders, he basically gives the equivalent of "I think I have to wash my hair that night."

[West Wing Episode 6.20 excerpt]

REPORTER: Are you going to accept his invitation to come to his church this Sunday?

VINICK: I-I-I- I think I'm gonna...I have some TV commitments that day.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Seemed uncharacteristic for him.

HRISHI: And of course then that causes more trouble because they say, "Oh, is the press more important than going to church?" I just thought, how are they not prepared for that? How does he not have a strategy? They know that's coming.

JOSH: I had a similar thought at that moment too. Like really? They walked out there like "Oh I can't believe this was brought up"?

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Yeah, that should have been a 30 second conversation about what's the response gonna be. And if not, I also think Vinick is so good on his feet that he would have come up with something slightly better. Although what I also like is he then goes into his offices and Sheila's daughter is there and says "You oughta go to church more" and he's a little flummoxed by her as well.

[Josh & Hrishi laugh]

JOSH: You know, he wraps that up with "Well, ok, yeah, I gotta go."

[Josh & Hrishi laugh]

JOSH: It's like he still hasn't worked out a great response, even to a seven-year-old.

HRISHI: I love Tina's version of "If you can't drink their booze and then vote against them, you don't belong in this business."

[West Wing Episode 6.20 excerpt]

TINA: My best friend Maggie doesn't believe in God because her parents don't believe in God. But she still comes to our church on Christmas Eve to see the Nativity play, because I'm always in it and she's my best friend.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Ok, sure, in her heart of hearts she doesn't believe in God, she doesn't believe in this thing that this place is built for but she has other allegiances which are also important, which is supporting her friend and seeing her act in this thing that's important to her.

JOSH: That's a nicer take than the other quote. Which is really: I'm just gonna wring everything out of them that I can and give them nothing in return.

HRISHI: Right, no, no. It's definitely [laughs]...

JOSH: It's a nicer take on that comment.

[laughter]

HRISHI: For sure. Yeah, it's a less cynical version, but I think it's still that same sort of idea of can you compromise some core belief that you have, in order to serve something else that you believe in?

JOSH: Hmm.

HRISHI: And Tina's friendship with this other girl, who's an Atheist, is more important to her, the friendship is more important to her than some kind of rigid stance that she might take on not going to church because she doesn't believe in God.

JOSH: Ok.

HRISHI: It's an interesting piece of advice that I think Tina's giving him. And it's a less cynical message than some of his advisors give, which is they say, "We just need the photo op and then we're done with it." I think that brings us back to the conversation between the president and Vinick over ice cream because they hypothesize about Lincoln's faith.

[West Wing Episode 6.20 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: You think Lincoln was an Atheist?

SENATOR VINICK: I hope not. That would mean all his references to God were just purely political.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: He didn't make any until he started running for office.

SENATOR VINICK: Hmm.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It's nice how messy they make the dilemma.

JOSH: Yes, it's not so neatly wrapped up. We mentioned earlier, just briefly though, can you imagine a credible Republican who could be described as pro-environment?

[Hrishi laughs]

JOSH: ...today?

HRISHI: Today? I don't know. I know there are some out there. Some of them might be in hiding. Here's a question for you. What's up with Charlie's moustache?

JOSH: Wow! I didn't even notice that.

HRISHI: The answer is no.

JOSH: The answer is no.

[Hrishi laughs]

JOSH: Is he sporting a full-on moustache?

HRISHI: It's sporting of you to even describe it as something that he's sporting.

[Josh laughs]

HRISHI: It's not my favorite Charlie look.

JOSH: Hmm.

HRISHI: Stephen Root's character is a little bit of a hack right?

JOSH: That's sort of the feel that he's the sort of bargain-basement Bruno.

HRISHI: He's not that great. I mean he just keeps on giving them ideas that seem to be proven wrong shortly afterwards and I just sort of thought, "How is this guy part of a team that's gone this far and done this well?"

[West Wing Episode 6.20 excerpt]

BOB MAYER: Just so you know, our polling shows that if you were to revise your position on abortion, you would...

VINICK: Flip-flop on abortion?

BOB MAYER: ...would take 50...(fades out)

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Hey Josh, do you remember when you first found out that Alan Alda was gonna join the cast of *The West Wing*?

JOSH: I just remember a general sense of elation; I can't say that I remember the moment itself. I think I remember hoping that I would get to work with him.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And then ultimately being disappointed that I really got to work near him.

[laughter]

JOSH: But he was nice just to meet and to be around and I was a huge fan and it was cool to meet him. And he was a lovely guy.

HRISHI: Where does your fandom of Alan Alda begin?

JOSH: I watched *M*A*S*H*. Although, it wasn't to Alan Alda, the first piece of fan mail I ever wrote, I wanna say I ultimately wrote two pieces over the course of my 53 years, but the first was to Gary Burghoff, who played Radar.

HRISHI: What did you say?

JOSH: I think I said something like "I really like Radar." I mean when was it on?

HRISHI: From 1972-1983.

JOSH: Ok, so from 6-17, somewhere in there. I probably wrote to him somewhere around 12. So it was just a young kid piece of fan mail. I think I probably thought he was Jewish so that might have been part of my being taken with him. I think he's actually a devout Christian, but not important.

HRISHI: Josh, would you say that you have a religious litmus test for your fandom?

JOSH: Yeah, yeah I do. Because the only two pieces of fan mail I've ever written were to Gary Burghoff, whom I thought was Jewish and Sarah Jessica Parker, who I probably thought was Jewish too.

HRISHI: [laughs] Josh, if you demand expressions of religious faith from your favorite actors, you are just begging to be lied to.

[Josh laughs]

HRISHI: I guess that just means they're good actors.

JOSH: [laughs] And actually, Sarah Jessica Parker I saw in an off-Broadway play when I was in high school and we all thought she was really cute and so I wrote to her. Never heard back. I still have my Gary Burghoff postcard though.

HRISHI: Are you and Sarah Jessica Parker around the same age?

JOSH: I suspect so.

HRISHI: Yes, you are. That's pretty adorable. So you wrote to her thinking maybe, just maybe, you might have a shot.

JOSH: Yeah, I think that's absolutely what I thought.

HRISHI: [laughs] And how old were you?

JOSH: I was in high school. And she was in a play called *To Jillian, on her 37th birthday*. Let me see if I can look it, now. Yes, ok 1984. Wow, 1984! I was 18. Is that possible?

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah, yeah...

JOSH: [cross talk] Looks like it was. I guess so. I really was hoping to score there. Anyway, certainly by then I wanted to be an actor so I'm sure I was taken with her performance. Ok, '83. And also, I remember we went on, I guess, a school trip to see this play and we all thought she was really cute, and I was like, "I'm gonna write to her!" Still waitin' to hear back...

HRISHI: [laughs] You've never met her?

JOSH: No.

HRISHI: Well, with that, let's take a break and then when we come back, we're gonna actually talk to Alan Alda.

[Ad break]

JOSH: Now it's time to talk, at last, to Alan Alda who, of course, played Arnold Vinick on *The West Wing* for which he won one of his six Emmy Awards. He has also won six Golden Globes, three DGA Awards, and, of course, he is an Oscar-nominee.

HRISHI: He's a legend.

JOSH: He is indeed.

HRISHI: Alan Alda, thank you so much for joining us.

ALAN: Oh, thank you. I'm really glad to talk with you both about *West Wing*. It was such a wonderful program. I can't wait to get into our talk.

HRISHI: Can we start with how you ended up on *The West Wing*?

ALAN: Yeah. It was really an interesting phone call. They said that "We want you to run for president on *West Wing*. Are you interested?" I said "Yeah, sign me up."

JOSH: [laughs] It was that involved, huh? A bit of a negotiation.

ALAN: Yeah, it was a really long, difficult negotiation. I said "okay."

[laughter]

JOSH: Was it John Wells who called you?

ALAN: Yeah.

JOSH: Did he pitch you the character with specifics?

ALAN: No, nothing. Just “Do you wanna run for president?” And it was an easy decision to make because the show was so well written and so well acted that I knew whatever they came up with would be fun as long as it was in my range.

HRISHI: So you’d already been watching the series?

ALAN: Yeah. Not religiously but I had seen it a number of times. And loved it.

HRISHI: And had you worked with other folks from the show before?

ALAN: No, I don’t think so. I had worked with Allison in a movie. It was funny, we were playing husband and wife. And she’s young enough to be my daughter, I know that because she went to college with my daughter.

[Hrishi laughs]

ALAN: I had reached a point in my life where I could do things that interested me and not do things that didn’t. It wasn’t like I was trying to keep a career going because I could never have a success again the way I had on *M*A*S*H**, because *M*A*S*H** was a once in several lifetimes experience. So I was freed by that. I could just do things that I thought were interesting. Sometimes they worked out and sometimes they didn’t. And it didn’t bother me. But this was one that worked out great.

HRISHI: Just to remind people, you directed and co-wrote the finale of *M*A*S*H** which is the most-watched episode of television in history.

JOSH: Can you imagine 100 million people watching one program at the same time?

ALAN: Yeah, the official estimates verified. Some people say 105 million, some people say 112. I don’t think anybody really knows, because they couldn’t... This sounds like boasting beyond belief...

JOSH: [cross talk] No, no.

ALAN: [cross talk] ...But it’s not, it’s just interesting to me. There were people gathering around their television sets, and in some cases in town halls, so the usual way they had of figuring of that 2.3 people per television set was the average, or whatever their figure was, I don’t know what it was, I don’t know if that applied in this case. Because there were more than the usual people gathering around television sets.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: I remember watching. I was one. I hope I was counted!

ALAN: I count you now.

JOSH: Thank you.

ALAN: I'm counting you right now.

HRISHI: So you said yes to the role and you started in season 6 playing Arnie Vinick, this episode that we're discussing is the episode where your character easily clinches the Republican nomination and then has to figure out his moves there. It feels in some ways like a foregone conclusion that he might win the Presidency because the Democratic side is in shambles. Meanwhile, the Republican party is already united around your character.

ALAN: Yeah. That particular episode boils down to the question of how willing is he to present himself as a church-going person? And can he answer the question honestly, "When was the last time you actually went to church?"

JOSH: Right. And will he accept an invitation to go to church as a sort of reach-out to his base? And you have a great speech at the end sort of explaining why you're not going to do that.

[West Wing Episode 6.20 excerpt]

SENATOR VINICK: I don't see how we can have a separation of church and state in this government if you have to pass a religious test to get in this government.

[end excerpt]

ALAN: Yeah, that scene in the basement of the White House where the president and Vinick eat ice cream together in the quiet of the night is a really wonderful scene because they're dealing with an issue that you almost never see dealt with in entertainment, and you don't see it dealt much with in the public arena. Which is, even though we live in a secular society, there still is pressure on some parts of our culture to ensure that you can be secular in politics, but you also have to give a nod to faith, to belief, to religion. And that's not how it was set up. I think it was very brave of Lawrence O'Donnell, and acute of him, to write this scene where these two characters could speak from the heart about how they felt about their own beliefs and how big a part that should play in the public sphere. How did you feel about that when you saw it Josh?

JOSH: Oh, I loved it. It's a beautiful scene and I liked also that sort of defying expectations Lawrence had. A devout Democratic President talking to a lapsed, Republican Senator.

ALAN: Yeah, it meant a lot to me because I found something at the very end of the Constitution that I had missed. I got it on my iPad here and I want to read it to you: "No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States." "No religious test" and yet, in actual practice, at least until recently, if you didn't have your picture taken leaving a church with a Bible in your hand, you were missing an important part of the electorate. And you had to make a show of your faith. I think the Constitution is really clear about the separation of church and state. 'Cause they say it in the Amendment, but they also say it at the very end again, it's like repeating it, "We mean it."

JOSH: Yeah, I was unaware of that, I always thought of it as a First Amendment issue. I think you make a very good point, that despite its being in the Constitution, it's sort of a de facto religious litmus test that many apply. We still have controversies: "Obama's a Muslim," or what books somebody is going to be sworn in on.

ALAN: Yeah. But in this last election, it seemed to disappear almost completely.

JOSH: Indeed.

ALAN: That was a striking example. Can you explain it? I don't know what happened.

HRISHI: It feels actually very related to a line in this episode where Bruno Gianelli, Ron Silver's character, says to Sheila that Butler, the Governor who is the anti-abortion advocate, he says:

[West Wing Episode 6.20 excerpt]

BRUNO: All I am saying is Butler's gonna make a decision to endorse you and rally his troops or not. There's nothing you can do about it.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I think that was what we saw here. So he's advising the Vinick campaign not to try and make an overture towards that base, and just sort of accept that they're gonna do what they're gonna do. And I think the same thing happened there. That even though Donald Trump clearly lives his life and stands for things that seems so at odds with what Evangelical Christians might believe, they decided to endorse him and that was that. He didn't need to make that declaration.

ALAN: Well I guess they made a political decision. And that's the way it works. I felt doing the show was an education for me. Because right after I did the show, when I would read a statement put out by the White House, I would imagine all the scenes that we would have acted on the show before that statement came out where every word would be analyzed to see how it would play with what group and where we were giving in and where we were taking the high ground, you know all those considerations. And it's a very intensive process that I didn't really guess at because I hadn't been in the room experiencing it before.

JOSH: Did you have input into the creation of the character or along the way, episode by episode? Or would you just leave it to the writers?

ALAN: No. I just left it to the writers. I tried to find out who I was from reading the script. Did you ever have any input into yours, Josh?

JOSH: No, I'm very text based. [laughs] Give me the text.

HRISHI: Can you tell us more about the scene in the basement with Martin Sheen eating all that ice cream. I mean, how much ice cream did you really have to eat?

ALAN: Not enough. I like ice cream.

[Josh laughs]

ALAN: All I can remember is... In fact, when I looked at it recently knowing we were gonna talk about it, I said to myself "Oh look, there's a moment where you were trying to remember your line!"

[laughter]

JOSH: You spotted that?

ALAN: Yeah, I can spot it on myself. I don't know if other people see it. You... [cross talk]

JOSH: [cross talk] No, no

ALAN: Do you have moments like that?

JOSH: Oh, I do.

[laughter]

JOSH: Yeah, when I'm looking up and to the left, I'm reading the script in my head.

[laughter]

ALAN: I don't always watch *M*A*S*H**, but once in a while, I've caught a minute of it or so, and two or three times I've said "Oh yeah, that was the day I was trying to get that scene done as fast as I could so I could get on an airplane and go home before I had to take the night flight."

HRISHI: Did you know what the results of the election would be ultimately?

ALAN: I learned, I don't know if it was during the shooting or afterwards, that they kept changing their minds about who would win. And at one point wrote an episode that made me very favorable to the audience, so the audience would be happy for my character to win. But they went back and forth so I don't know how to answer that without giving away the ending. But I was so involved in so much wanting to win that even though we had shot the final episode, as the returns were coming in, when I was watching the show, I wasn't sure which way it was gonna go.

[Josh laughs]

ALAN: I got so involved in it.

HRISHI: That's amazing. Even that, without giving anything away, knowing that there was back and forth about which way things were gonna turn out is really interesting.

ALAN: Yeah, I better not say anymore 'cause I'll give it away. That's kind of you to the listener to not do spoilers.

HRISHI: My dad is listening to our podcast and watching the show along with us, and he asked me this morning when I told him that we were speaking to you, and he was very excited, and he said, "So does he end up becoming the president?" and I said "You gotta keep watching Dad."

JOSH: Stay tuned. One of the reasons I asked whether you had input into the character was that now that I know that you left it to the writers, I think Lawrence O'Donnell and the staff did an incredibly good job of infusing Vinick with some of your great qualities, that desire to reach out, to communicate with the quote unquote other side.

ALAN: Well I certainly do have that desire. In fact, you probably know that the podcast that I do called *Clear and Vivid* is all about that. It's about how we can make human contact with the other person, whether we agree with them or not. 'Cause there are plenty of people in our lives who we believe we agree with, like our spouses or our parents or our children, and we don't really relate to them as truly and as effectively as we could. The relationship could be much stronger if we did. So I love doing the *Clear and Vivid* because I talk to people in all different fields who are concerned with relating. Comedians, violinists, Renée Fleming, Dr. Ruth, Sarah Silverman, and one person you may not have heard of, Chris Voss, who was the head hostage negotiator for the FBI, who uses very interesting techniques to get a hostage released and he says these techniques work in a marriage too.

[laughter]

JOSH: The ultimate hostage situation.

[laughter]

ALAN: I don't know from who's point of view, but...

JOSH: That's fascinating. It's a wonderful podcast and I've thoroughly enjoyed it and encourage everybody to listen. You're also, are you not, the founder of the Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science?

ALAN: Yeah, I helped found it. That's got the same mission. And we actually do train scientists and physicians to speak clearly and vividly and personally. The whole basis comes from what I mentioned before of starting with improvisation training and I realized when I was doing my science show on public television called *Scientific American Frontiers*, that we weren't doing ordinary interviews, they weren't the usual the interviewer comes in with a list of questions and the person being interviewed just gives stock answers. We had a relationship that we could establish because I simply wanted to understand what they were telling me. And it was personal. And I realized if we grounded them in some improv training and developed the content of what they had to say based on that relational experience, they'd be much clearer, and the audience would understand it better and it would stick in the audiences' mind better. And that's the basis of our training at the Alda Center for Communicating Science.

HRISHI: I feel like this is a natural extension of someone who's a great actor, but I feel like it also must play into how you approach portraying a character. Like the character of Vinick in the *West Wing* politically, I can only assume you disagree with some of the stances of the character, but certainly you play him with a level of humanity and dignity and three-dimensionality that feels like you've really inhabited it.

ALAN: I was able to take on his point of view, take on his perspective.

HRISHI: Right, and that requires empathy.

ALAN: It does require empathy. I think one of the services we do when we act is through the empathy, we have for the characters we play, to invite the audience to have empathy for that character as well. That's why it's so much fun to play the villain because if you play the villain like you know he's a villain and you don't agree with it, it's not nearly as interesting to watch but it's sure not as interesting to do. It's much more fun to climb into the mindset of a person you find even reprehensible. Here's what I know when I do that, I'm interested to know what you

think Josh. I first of all want, I need to know what the person wants. And I need to know that not only do I want it when I'm that person, but I deserve to get it.

JOSH: Hmm. Yeah.

ALAN: It's mine, there's no dallying about it. That's my objective. And it's not something I'm headed toward, it's something I must have because I deserve it. How do you feel about that?

JOSH: That's beautifully articulated. I was wondering whether there's a role or two in your career in which it was hardest to find that empathy or the humanity of the character you were playing.

ALAN: Yeah, oddly enough it was Hawkeye.

JOSH: Huh. That's very interesting! Because one of the things I've always thought is Hawkeye on paper is an anti-hero but somehow you brought such humanity to it, he plays as the hero of the piece.

ALAN: I know. But when I started working on it, we had ten days of rehearsal and at the end of each day I thought, well I'm playing these scenes, but I don't see myself as this guy yet. I don't really incorporate him into my way of looking at things.

JOSH: Hmm.

ALAN: And that lasted right up until the first shot I was in, where I was standing in that metal building waiting to walk out across the compound and I hear them call for quiet on the set and I look down at my boots and I'm thinking, "I'm supposed to get the character from the boots." Actors all say you put on the shoes... [cross talk]

JOSH: [cross talk] That's right.

ALAN: ...right and you got, not me! I'm still looking at these alien boots on my feet.

[laughter]

JOSH: When did it click?

ALAN: They called "Action" and I opened the door and walked out still not convinced, and I saw a nurse coming towards me and as Hawkeye would, he recognized her, he knew her, I threw my arm around her and gave her a hug. Now that wasn't rehearsed, I just threw my arm around her and she laughed and pushed me off. And I thought, "Well, that wasn't so hard. Now I'm Hawkeye."

[laughter]

JOSH: That's wonderful.

HRISHI: What did it take to step into Arnie Vinick's shoes?

JOSH: You know you were polishing your shoes, I think, when we met you early on.

ALAN: Oh, that's right!

[laughter]

ALAN: Yes! That right, that was my first scene, I forgot that. I liked that, I loved that. That's interesting, that's a good question that you inadvertently raised. Because I like to shine my shoes, ever since I was in the army. It's one of the few things that I enjoyed about the army, was shining my shoes. So the first scene establishing me as Arnold Vinick was that he shines his own shoes and every time I brushed the shoe, I thought, "This is me, this is me being me being Arnold."

JOSH: But that was scripted, that was not your idea?

ALAN: No, that was a lucky hit on the part of the writers.

JOSH: Ah, hit the nail on the head.

HRISHI: One of the things I really like in this episode is the indignation of Vinick's character. At the end, that final scene, the press conference that happens:

[West Wing Episode 6.20 excerpt]

SENATOR VINICK: So every day until the end of this campaign, I'll answer any question anyone has on government. But if you have a question on religion, please, go to church.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: The way the beginning of that speech begins and where it ends, you know it starts off kind of measured and respectful and maybe even a little bit cautious, but then you start to pick up steam and passion and by the end there's this feeling of indignation, I really liked it because it felt like it, in some ways we got to see a glimpse of that character's true thoughts, but also it felt like maybe he'd lost the polish that one might expect a politician to have in such a crucial moment.

ALAN: Yeah, you're reminding me of that moment. That's interesting. I can't remember how that happened. I can't remember if I chose to get heated in the middle of that speech or if it was all the feeling that I was expressing to you before about how I feel about the importance of remaining a secular society regardless of what beliefs we hold...

HRISHI: Mhmm.

ALAN: ...that may have boiled up in a way that suited the moment and suited the character.

HRISHI: But it sounds like it wasn't too hard to find the humanity in Vinick.

ALAN: No. And it didn't matter to me that on particular policy points I may not have agreed with him; the point was who was he as a person and what was his humanity?

HRISHI: Most of your scenes in this show are next to Patricia Richardson, who plays Sheila, Vinick's Chief of Staff.

ALAN: Right.

HRISHI: One of the things that I was so impressed by was how fully-fledged that relationship seems to be.

ALAN: Yeah. I was interested in seeing the show a few days ago, I hadn't seen it since it was on the air originally. And I was impressed by that relationship too and I don't know how that happened because we had never met before. I think it came from the writing because what struck me as I watched it this time was how he was clearly the main cheese, but she said things to him that he was bound to listen to; he was guided by her.

[West Wing Episode 6.20 excerpt]

SHEILA: I'm pulling all our press events off the schedule.

SENATOR VINICK: What about the fundraisers?

SHEILA: No press will come out.

[end excerpt]

ALAN: That part of the relationship I think really happened, it wasn't perfunctory, but that was in the writing and we both fell into it comfortably. But it was nice to see, I enjoyed seeing it, a relationship between a man and a woman working together with utter respect for each other even when they didn't agree about things.

HRISHI: I think it was a really smart writing choice to have Sheila's daughter, Tina, there...

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: ...so that the relationship wasn't just between Vinick and Sheila, but also between Vinick and Sheila's daughter. It suddenly made their dynamic more familial and not just professional. And especially the way you played those scenes with that little girl.

ALAN: Yeah, that was nice. I liked that. I love kids, so that came out as Vinick, I'm sure.

JOSH: And she puts you on the spot at one point kind of pressuring you on your lack of church going, it's kind of a great moment.

[West Wing Episode 6.20 excerpt]

VINICK: I haven't gone to church for a while.

TINA: I think you should.

VINICK: Yeah.

TINA: Unless you don't believe in God.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: This episode was directed by Chris Misiano. Having had your experiences as a director, is it harder for you to walk into a set and then be directed for an episode of TV?

ALAN: Boy, not at all. In fact, the only unfortunate thing about having directed movies and television, is that sometimes directors think that I'm gonna be second guessing them because I have that experience. They don't realize, it makes me so happy that I don't have to be the one to figure out where I'm gonna put the camera.

HRISHI: Hmm.

ALAN: Or how to talk to the actors. I love actors, but you gotta be a master psychologist to talk to actors 'cause everybody has a different approach and you have no time to really devote to the process, you gotta really do it on the fly. You gotta be lucky. I worked with a director of a play once and the actor was not giving the performance he was capable of and the next time I saw the performance, I said "What happened? He's brilliant, what did you say to him?" He said, "I told him to be more French."

[laughter]

ALAN: I mean it changed everything about his performance, I couldn't believe it. That he had the ability to boil it down into that amazed me.

JOSH: And that's how you do Molière.

ALAN: [laughter] It wasn't even Molière. But the idea that I would second guess a director is way not true. I really rely on the director to give me direction, to tell me when I don't understand what the scene is about.

HRISHI: Has anyone approached you about running for actual political office?

ALAN: This is weird. When I was doing *M*A*S*H**, and once it became a really big hit, twice people came to me from New Jersey, where I lived, from a political club and said "We want you to run for US Senator." And I said, "Why would I do that?" They said, "Well, because you could get elected, you're so well known." And I thought, "Is this how they choose people?" My joke for years was, "I don't wanna be a politician, I'd rather do good in the world."

[laughter]

JOSH: Here, here.

ALAN: It's a cruel joke because I do know that it's a noble profession if its practiced with honor and dignity. It's getting more and more difficult to do that because both sides are so at odds with each other unnecessarily. They could work together and get something done.

JOSH: Indeed. Well, I was gonna say among your many accolades over the course of your career was the Screen Actors Guild Lifetime Achievement Award in 2018 and you gave a beautiful speech to which we will link, in which you made a plea to reach across the aisle, so to speak.

ALAN: Yeah, and I mentioned what we talked about a few minutes ago that that's what actors have... one of the things we have to contribute is this empathy for the other person. And it's one

of the reasons I'm proud to be an actor. You know, we have a reputation of being actors because we're narcissists, or we're still children, and we should be still children in the best sense of that word, and we might have entered the profession to show off, but if you really get serious about your work and if you get enough experience at it, I think you realize it's more of a gift you're able to make, a service you're able to perform. I know that sounds highfalutin, but all of us have had the experience of seeing a performance that really grabbed us and turned us around and reversed our thinking on something. I've had it many times. And I'm so grateful to the people who have spent a lifetime learning how to get me to relate like that to another person.

JOSH: Well said.

HRISHI: Alan, thank you so much for joining us.

ALAN: This has been fun, thank you very much for having me on.

JOSH: Does that do it for another episode of *The West Wing Weekly*?

HRISHI: It does. It's now hours after we spoke to Alan Alda and I'm still smiling from that conversation. I can't believe it. I took a screenshot of us talking and I've been sending it to my friends and to my family.

JOSH: I'm mad that through some sort of malfunction – and I have the worst technical juju of anybody, I believe in the end there's gonna turn out to be some magnetic field around me, no technology just doesn't work around me – and I was audio only on the conversation, I could see you guys, you guys could see each other, and the worst of all, I didn't make the screenshot.

HRISHI: I know. I know. Well, thanks so much to everyone at the Alda office who helped set this interview up. Thanks to Margaret Miller, Nick Song, and Zach McNees for their work on this podcast. And thanks so much to you for listening to it.

JOSH: Thank you to Radiotopia for allowing us to be part of Radiotopia. If you want to learn more about Radiotopia, go to Radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: If you wanna check out Alan Alda's own podcast, it's called *Clear and Vivid* and you can find Alan Alda on Twitter, @AlanAlda. You can also find us on Twitter. We're @WestWingWeekly or @JoshMalina or @HrishiHirway.

JOSH: We've got like 8 and a half months left, just follow us already. Let's beef up those numbers.

HRISHI: #FinishStrong

JOSH: #FinishStrong

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

ALAN & KATEY: What's next?

[Outro Music]