

The West Wing Weekly
7.03: "Message of the Week"

[Intro Music]

JOSH: You're listening to *The West Wing Weekly*, I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: And I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. And today we're talking about episode 3 from season 7. It's called "Message of the Week."

JOSH: It was written by L.O.D., Lawrence O'Donnell, and it was directed by Christopher Misano. C.M. It first aired on October 9th, 2005.

HRISHI: In this episode, it's three weeks into the post-primary, full on presidential campaign, and this episode focuses more on the Vinick camp. And how they responded to the Santos's move in the last episode, including the "is it a stunt or is it not a stunt?" detour to fulfill his Marine Reserve duty. Vinick decides to go after the Latino vote by focusing on immigration issues, and hopefully throw the Santos campaign off their game. But Vinick finds himself in a bit of a pickle himself, with a religious Right group that's demanding approval over his judicial appointments.

JOSH: I was getting an image as you shared that synopsis. It would have been more visually arresting if Santos had jumped over twenty buses on a motorcycle and then they argued about whether it was just a stunt. It wouldn't have made as much sense, but... [Hrishi laughs]

HRISHI: But he would do it in a... all right, I'm not even going to touch it. [both laugh]

JOSH: It's already at the lowest level of humor – you can't outdo it.

HRISHI: I liked this episode a lot. It was interesting to me, though, because it felt a little bit more cynical in some ways than other *West Wing* episodes.

JOSH: I completely agree!

HRISHI: Yeah, and not in a way that I disliked at all! It felt like there was a lot more to grind in this episode, a lot more, just sort of, political machinations and kind of going back and forth, just a little bit of one-ups-man-ship happening here and there, in a way that to me feels probably very realistic.

JOSH: Yeah, I agree. The exigencies of a Presidential campaign and how they just grind... First of all, it just seems super reactive, the moment by moment – they're reacting to what the other campaign is putting out, or a gaffe that they think they've had, or a quote they've said or a move they've made, and there's flip-flopping, there's semi-scamming, and there's outright lying, and all of it sort of makes sense in the context of the campaign, but I was disappointed even in Vinick.

HRISHI: Right! Yes!

JOSH: You know, it's like oh... although also refreshed when – it was refreshing - his honesty about his lack of honesty – when they're questioning him.

[West Wing Episode 7.03 excerpt]

SHEILA: Well, he somehow got the idea that you promised him approval of judges -

VINICK: *That's because I did.*

BRUNO: *You promised them judges?*

VINICK: *Yeah. I lied!*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: One of the things that helps keep this episode feeling distant from our usual *West Wing* episode is that, just on the surface, we never go to the actual West Wing! There's no White House in this episode whatsoever, and so I think it's easy to kinda get away from the lofty ideals of the Bartlet administration and the kind of opportunities that maybe you get to have in governing – we're away from the actual White House and I think as a result we're away from the actual loftier parts of the Bartlet administration, and we really are just in the dog fight of it.

JOSH: Yeah, exactly, and particularly the contrast between a lame duck president finishing out, who can kind of afford to do and say what he wants, and the other end of the spectrum with two candidates trying to win the presidency, is stark. Even though we don't see the Bartlet White House, we have such a buildup of what that means that the contrast is still there in your mind as you watch.

HRISHI: Yeah. You know, when you said "two candidates," it made me think of the phrase – in *Froot Loops*, who was gonna get to actually be the mascot on the front of the box? But came down to two toucan candidates.

JOSH: Nice – very nice, worth it! [both laugh]

HRISHI: Ah, good. Okay, back to our discussion – the other interesting thing about not going to the White House...

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: At a practical level for this episode, means that we never see many of our main characters. There is no President Bartlet, no C.J., no Toby, no Charlie, no Kate in this episode, none of the White House denizens, and for that matter we don't see Leo, or Annabeth, or Donna, or Will.

JOSH: I was wondering how many more names you were gonna say before Will. [both laugh]

HRISHI: Saving the...

JOSH: The worst for last. Yes.

HRISHI: I was going to say, saving the last for last.

JOSH: Mrs. Landingham, also not in this episode.

HRISHI: What if for the rest of this episode we just list characters from *The West Wing* who did not appear in this episode?

JOSH: (laughs) Yeah! And then again, I think I know where they spent all the money on that savings on all that whatever it was – C19, was it, the giant plane that Santos walks out of?

HRISHI: Uh-huh.

JOSH: It's a lot of hardware, up on the screen.

HRISHI: And so instead, we get to spend a lot of time with the Vinick campaign, and we get Patricia Richardson back, who plays Sheila, the campaign manager, and we get Bruno back, who if you may remember has become an advisor – campaign strategist for the Vinick campaign.

JOSH: Nicely mirroring Ron Silver's move to the Right, himself.

HRISHI: We get a confrontation between Bruno and Josh, at one point, in the White House, when they have a meeting, and Josh is just in disbelief that Bruno has gone over to the other side.

[West Wing Episode 7.03 excerpt]

JOSH: Come on, he's a Republican!

BRUNO: I noticed that.

JOSH: So you switched parties?

BRUNO: Just this once.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Apparently, that is a mirror, not only of Ron Silver's change in politics, but also of the dynamic between those two actors.

JOSH: Hmm! Is that right?

HRISHI: I asked Lawrence O'Donnell if his storyline of Bruno's decision to support Vinick was influenced by Ron Silver's own change of views in politics, since he, after 9/11, did veer towards the Right, and this is what Lawrence wrote. "My main reason for writing Ron back into the show is that he is a great actor, and I really wanted to see him working in the show again. My secondary motivation was that Ron was a dear friend of mine for many years before *West Wing*, and I wanted to work with him and hang out on set. Because I was writing the Vinick side of the show, I was going to have to convert Bruno to keep him busy in my episodes."

JOSH: Ha!

HRISHI: (continuing) "I modeled his character development on real political players like former Clinton campaign consultant Dick Morris, who switched sides from Democrat to Republican. Ron's personal political conversion, which was a direct and virtual immediate reaction to 9/11 was on my mind, but only because it might be fun for the audience members who knew about Ron's party switch, and because I knew Ron would completely understand Bruno's move, without me saying a word of explanation, which is exactly what happened." And then he added, "Ron's new personal politics made for some intense but still friendly disagreements with Brad on set. I marveled how they found the energy for long and spirited arguments between shots, and then instantly switched into character when they heard 'Action!' and never missed a line."

JOSH: Ha! That's interesting.

HRISHI: Ron Silver passed away a few years after this, in 2009, of cancer. He had been diagnosed in 2007, and Lawrence added a couple of lines about that, too. He said, "Ron was

astonishingly upbeat when he knew he was facing death. Even as he became progressively weaker, he lived every day and hour to the fullest that his body would allow. He would never stop thinking big thoughts, and never stopped wanting to laugh. I loved Ron, and I miss him.”

JOSH: Hmm. Very sweet.

HRISHI: Yeah. So maybe it was more friendly than actually what I supposed, but I had read some clips from Ron Silver saying that the general vibe – here’s a line from him. “Often when I walked onto the set of *The West Wing*, some of my colleagues would greet me with the chanting of ‘Ron, Ron, the Neo-Con.’ It was all done in fun, but it had an edge,” he wrote, in a Nov. 15, 2007 entry of his blog.

JOSH: Wow, how about that? I was never present for any of that, nor did I participate. Had I, I would have come up with something more clever.

HRISHI: [laughs] I don’t doubt it.

JOSH: Thank you.

HRISHI: Bruno, in this episode, is quite stressed out. He’s snapping at everybody. And I think that helps with the feeling of ‘is there in fact maybe a fox in the henhouse?’ feeling.

JOSH: How do you mean?

HRISHI: Well, I think that there are people on the Vinick side that don’t fully trust Bruno. Right? Did you get that feeling?

JOSH: Yes, I guess I misunderstood, cause I thought that you were saying Bruno suspected that there was – you’re saying they suspected HIM of being the [cross talk] fox in the henhouse

HRISHI: [cross talk] that HE was the fox in the henhouse.

JOSH: I misunderstood what you were originally saying. I do get that.

HRISHI: Yeah. But Bruno is just snapping at everybody. And it seems like everybody is kinda having a good time except for him, like they’re all kind of rolling with it, and it seems like he feels like he’s the only one who grasps the concept of consequences, or grasps the ...

JOSH: the import of the numbers beginning to slip, perhaps?

HRISHI: Yes. The RNC wants to go negative with an attack ad, and Bruno says no, and so Vinick says no for now, but Bruno is so against it, I mean like really launches, he really goes in after poor Leon who’s not even the person who created the ad or responsible for it at all, he’s really just the guy who said “Hey, look at this thing.”

JOSH: Right. He’s the messenger.

HRISHI: Yeah. And Bruno almost takes his head off.

[West Wing Episode 7.03 excerpt]

BRUNO: Is this all you guys know how to do? Attack ads?

LEON: Hey...

BRUNO: Have you seen any of the ads I've written for this campaign? Anyone with half a brain...

VINICK: Leon's not with the RNC, he's one of us. He ran my California operation for years.

LEON: And, I don't write TV ads. I leave that for the people with half a brain.

VINICK: Have Sheila go...

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Leon is played by Julian Acosta, and he holds his own, and I think for a character who I believe we only see once, he's great and makes a memorable impression.

JOSH: Yes, and I thought he's particularly good in his resignation scene later in the episode with Vinick.

HRISHI: Yeah, resigning from both the campaign and the series [laughs]

JOSH: Right. [laughs] Wait, I didn't mean last episode, let me be clear here [Hrishi laughs], I meant simply to resign from the campaign. But like Will Bailey, to somehow still hang around and get an occasional paycheck.

HRISHI: [laughs] Speaking of guest stars on this episode, Peter Mackenzie, who you may know from any number of things, maybe for playing the boss in *Black-ish*, he is the aforementioned George Rohr, the rural juror of this episode.

JOSH: Yes. He's also a friend of mine, and I know him from playing poker at my house.

HRISHI: Look at that!

JOSH: Yeah, and a great guy.

HRISHI: Here are some fun facts about George Rohr. He plays a political operative who's representing the interests of a religious coalition of reverends, the American Christian Assembly. And George Rohr himself played a reverend in the show *Hart of Dixie*, a TV show that also featured our favorite VP duo, Tim Matheson and Gary Cole. In fact, Tim Matheson got Gary Cole on that show.

JOSH: How on earth did you uncover that?

HRISHI: Not only that -

JOSH: Ooh! There's more!

HRISHI: *Hart of Dixie* was created by Leila Gerstein, who is married to Nate DiMeo, creator of *The Memory Palace* who has been on our podcast and is also a Radiotopian.

JOSH: Wow! Deep dive!

HRISHI: Now you have stuff to talk about at your next poker game.

JOSH: Yeah. A lot. Maybe too much.

HRISHI: Let's talk about George Rohr a little bit.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: He comes in to talk to Vinick and says that the judiciary is what the reverends are most concerned over. And he accuses Vinick of wanting to kill babies.

JOSH: Yeah. The wording is rough.

[West Wing Episode 7.03 excerpt]

VINICK: Look. Santos voted for partial birth abortion. At least I'm with you on that!

ROHR: Reverend Butler and the others think that just means that Santos wants to kill a few hundred more babies a year than you do.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah. It's pretty stark.

HRISHI: Yeah, and Vinick looks like he's about to bite the guy's head off, but then you can almost see Alan Alda performing Vinick remembering Sheila's orders to be nice to this guy, that he has to be nice to him, and Rohr himself tells him that he needs the Christian Right's votes in order to win, and so he kinda like pulls it back, I think.

JOSH: Mm-hmm.

HRISHI: And Vinick asks to speak confidentially - although the next thing we know about that meeting, is that the Drudge Report has a headline - Vinick Promises Pro-Life Judges.

JOSH: Yeah. It's sort of cleverly teased out, I think, because we're left to wonder "Hmm. What did he say?"

HRISHI: Mm-hmm.

JOSH: And has George Rohr, well he's clearly misbehaved on some level, because you know Vinick says "Can we tell you something confidentially," so we know that Rohr has leaked some information, but is he lying as well? Or did Vinick really say that? We're not so sure, that's why I kind of love the moment when it's finally time to discuss it with Bruno and Sheila, and he says, "Yeah, I said that. I lied."

HRISHI: Yeah. It's great. Watching it, I thought, "Josh enjoyed how they dramatized this."

JOSH: Yeah, I absolutely did, especially because it allowed me to kind of wonder and think through, and I found myself kind of taken aback by the brashness of Vinick and his candor later when he just said "Yeah, I lied." Oh, I wasn't so sure that was the answer to how that played out.

HRISHI: Right!

JOSH: And then I also - that just works to feed the greater theme of the whole episode, which is that these super high-stakes campaigns bring out the worst in everybody.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: George Rohr's pushing for a litmus test for judicial nominations that what a candidate's promising them, but he's lying, then the other guy leaks, and then it's just sort of fascinating how it affects everybody.

HRISHI: Yeah. So one of the things is just how it's motivating a lot of decisions by the Vinick camp is the fact that Santos's Reserve duty moment has played really well. At one point they were down nine in the Gallup poll and the Santos campaign felt very good about it; turns out they're now within five. And Josh thinks that that means momentum,

[West Wing Episode 7.03 excerpt]

JOSH: We got momentum, baby! We got the big mo!

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Which – by the way – ew.

JOSH: Yes, some unbearable moments of Josh enthusiasm in this episode.

HRISHI: "The big mo" is a real term, and it has actually been used in politics in this way – it's a term that comes from sports.

JOSH: Oh. Is it a curling reference? [laughs] Just guessing...

HRISHI: [laughs] It was originally introduced in the 60s, but in George H. W. Bush's campaign for the Republican nomination in 1980, he said it. After he won the Iowa caucuses, he said, "Now they will be after me, howling and yowling at my heels. What we will have is momentum. We will look forward to Big Mo being on our side, as they say in athletics."

JOSH: [laughs] "As they say in athletics?"

HRISHI: I mean, he really is as close to a human version of Mr. Burns as there is.

JOSH: [laughs] Yes, that's my favorite phrase in the whole thing. "As they say in athletics." I'm gonna start using that.

HRISHI: I also like "howling and yowling at my heels."

JOSH: Yeah. Well, that's beautiful. I had an Uncle Moe, he should rest in peace, he made a big Lazy Susan that he gave to my family, and we called it the Moe Platform. Just throw that out there.

HRISHI: Big Moe's Big Sue.

JOSH: There you go.

HRISHI: So the two campaigns are following their tracking polls, and kind of adjusting the projection in real time, and one thing I like in this is just the difference in the two boards that they have. Did you see that like on the Santos campaign, they have a dry erase one, and when they get a new state they've got to fill it in with dry erase marker, but on the Vinick board they have like a nice, professional magnetic board [cross talk]

JOSH: [cross talk] I know, like a puzzle. I like that a lot.

HRISHI: I thought that was a subtle detail to just underscore the scrappier quality to the Santos campaign compared to the ‘frontrunneriness’ of the Vinick campaign.

JOSH: Absolutely. Good work to the props department, or set decoration design. Yeah, I agree. Speaking of polling, I like this moment that also peek behind having no qualms about lying to the press, and there’s that moment where Janeane Garafalo, where Lou is sharing with Josh that they just got some of their tracking numbers, and it had them down by twelve, and then the reporter comes in and says I hear that Santos is down by ten, and Josh just says “That’s not what we have.”

HRISHI: Yeah. [laughs] He’s not lying.

JOSH: No, it’s not a lie, you’re right, technically.

HRISHI: He did not go as far as Vinick did.

JOSH: Verbal sleight of hand, as they say in athletics. [Hrishi laughs]

HRISHI: I like the grudging admiration that each side has for the other, too. Maybe it’s going too far to say grudging admiration, but Vinick says -

[West Wing Episode 7.03 excerpt]

VINICK: Matt Santos is a lot smarter and tougher than you think.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And Bruno says –

[West Wing Episode 7.03 excerpt]

BRUNO: Santos is gonna have some good days; you can’t let it get to you.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: But it does seem to be getting to Bruno. But still, there’s some nice moments there, and there’s [cross talk]

JOSH: [cross talk] But don’t they say to Santos that Vinick’s going to have good days?

HRISHI: That’s the nice thing...

JOSH: Oh, both those moments are in there? I don’t remember that.

HRISHI: Yes. Yeah, Bruno says Santos is gonna have some good days, can’t let it get to you, and then:

[West Wing Episode 7.03 excerpt]

LOU: Vinick is gonna have some good days.

SANTOS: We’re giving him too many good days.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: But I loved that mirror image. So the Vinick campaign has to contend with this Santos' momentum; whether it's the Big Mo or just a Little Mo. So in order to try and take a bite out of Santos' momentum, they consider going after the Latino vote.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: I loved this scene where they almost can't believe that they're considering it.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: But they do feel like the Reserve duty was a stunt, although Sheila considers it to be a successful one. She was like, it was pretty good.

JOSH: Yeah, the numbers are coming out already.

HRISHI: Yeah, but Dan, who is another member of the Vinick staff, who most of the time in this episode sort of nods approvingly after Vinick says or does something, I like his role in this episode. You know, Vinick will say something, then they'll cut to him and he goes, "Um-hmm." [Laughs] But Dan is the one who suggests going after the Latino vote. And Bruno and Leon kind of laugh it off a little bit, but then you see Vinick and Sheila thinking about it, and Bruno says:

[West Wing Episode 7.03 excerpt]

BRUNO: Do I actually have to say how insane that is?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: But Vinick makes the argument for it, and in fact, that's what they decide to do.

JOSH: And part of it has to do with the lack of a Santos campaign having taken on or addressed issues that would affect the Latino community, because he's trying to distance himself [cross talk]

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

JOSH: [cross talk] from being pegged as just one thing.

HRISHI: Yeah, as we saw in "La Palabra" last season, he actively was trying to be sort of post-racial. He said, "I don't want to be the brown candidate. I want to be the American candidate." And as a result, he's given Vinick this opening. It seems like it doesn't make sense, it doesn't seem entirely right, but at the same time, Vinick has this justification of 'these are important issues that ought to be discussed, and no one is discussing them.'

JOSH: Right, right. Although we're privy to the fact – we know he's playing politics.

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: It's not just a burgeoning interest in these issues, it's politics.

HRISHI: Yeah. I think that is why I love that moment when Leon resigns so much. This is the very end of the episode, but this is the one moment where I feel like idealism actually does win out, just the brief glint of principle shining through all of the sort of political gamesmanship that's happening otherwise.

[West Wing Episode 7.03 excerpt]

LEON: Twins are two and a half now. My mother-in-law just taught them how to say the word 'Santos.' Someday they're going to ask me what I did on this campaign; I can't tell them I did this.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, because I mean, there's a moment there where Vinick isn't entirely candid with Leon, and Leon says, "I was in that meeting."

HRISHI: Yeah, exactly.

HRISHI: 'I know what we're doing, I know what I'm part of. You can't pull the wool over my eyes; I was there!'

[West Wing Episode 7.03 excerpt]

LEON: I can't be working all day and night to beat the first Latino nominee for President, and now that we're using his heritage against him...

VINICK: That's not what I'm doing, I'm talking policy. That's fair.

LEON: Please, Senator – I was in the meeting.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: If your own campaign staffer's calling bull[expletive deleted] on the justification, then you know you've been caught out.

JOSH: Exactly. But it's almost like everyone tries to bull[expletive deleted] everyone until you can't, in this episode.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: It really is, it is a strong turn away from the ethics that usually bubbles under what everyone says and does in the show.

HRISHI: I think with Leon – I was happy that Sheila pointed it out that he's made a good living trying to help Republicans capture the Latino vote. Because it wasn't just the matter of Vinick trying to go after that demographic, it was the way that he was doing it. It was the fact that they were specifically targeting Santos's heritage in order to [cross talk]

JOSH: [cross talk] They were leveraging it against him, absolutely.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: As he says so beautifully, at the other end of this, "I don't want to look back and feel that I was part of *that*."

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Of trying to use it against him.

HRISHI: Yeah, and so I do think that it is a matter of execution. I think the idea of Vinick wanting to win the Latino vote, in and of itself, he wouldn't have a problem with, I'm sure in fact, he would be all for.

JOSH: Mm-hmm.

HRISHI: But this was one where the ends didn't justify the means. Another early moment of this cynicism, is just a little thing that Vinick says, he gets out of the car after meeting with Bruno and Leon about the RNC attack ad, and he says,

[West Wing Episode 7.03 excerpt]

VINICK: But if Santos says one word about my voting record, just one word, tell the RNC to carpet-bomb the swing states with that ad. I gotta go kiss some babies.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And just the way he says that, "I gotta go kiss some babies," it really feels jaded.

JOSH: Yeah, completely. Yeah, cause this is a different Vinick from what we've seen, and I like it, because it strains credulity for these people to always be just these completely admirable – it's fun to see the other side of things, and the grueling nature of the campaign, for the façade – for the mask to fall off a little bit.

HRISHI: And he's a very successful politician, who's been a politician for decades, and so to some extent he is just going through the motions.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: And Vinick is able to build some momentum of his own with this strategy. He does a few smart things – he goes after the Latino vote in a very proactive way by introducing this bill in the Senate for guest worker visas. But then he also does this sort of more complicated move where he threads the needle – he goes down to the border and announces that he believes that border patrol should be doubled – a statement that plays well with conservatives, but while he's there, there's an armed militia [cross talk]

JOSH: [cross talk] the Minute Men [cross talk]

HRISHI: [cross talk] and he calls them vigilantes. Even though they're right there, it supports his underlying message that border patrol should be doubled; that this is a situation that is untenable and really shouldn't exist in the first place. He manages not to disrespect these people, while still sort of saying that they shouldn't be there in the first place. And by calling them vigilantes, he actually wins some points on the Democratic side as well.

JOSH: Yeah. There's some major political finesse being displayed in that scene. I'm not even sure if it's really possible to have accomplished what he did. [laughs] He shows up and the first thing that he does is he says to Harley Parker, or whatever that guy's name is, you know, "You catch anyone yet?" So he's kinda sorta buddy-buddying them, and turns around and makes a public statement saying, "This is not what America's about." They are vigilantes, and somehow they're still standing there not going, "[Expletive deleted] you." [laughter] [cross talk]

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah. Exactly.

JOSH: It probably would have turned more ugly than it actually did, but somehow he gets a win on the right and the left, which was fun to watch whether or not it's really likely to have played out that way.

HRISHI: Yeah, sure, that was a superhero moment.

JOSH: Mm-hmm.

HRISHI: And then Santos fumbles his response. He agrees with Vinick that the militia should be called vigilantes, but then when asked about the border patrol doubling, he does the thing that Lou told him not to do. He makes the issue a funding question; a tax question. And he immediately gets called out. The reporter's, "So it's a good idea but we just can't afford it?"

JOSH: Yeah, the money for it, right.

HRISHI: Then as a result, he keeps driving the story back towards Vinick and making him look better. And Vinick gains polling points as a result. It feels a little bit silly that they're looking at the polls in such short increments, and trying to make decisions based on that, but I get it – I would do the same thing.

JOSH: Yeah, I wondered as I watched; I sort of felt like they had condensed a lot of stuff to give us in a short amount of time a sort of energized sense of how things ping-pong and pendulum swing back and forth during a campaign. I wonder if it's really so likely, it's almost like 'cut to Vinick, Vinick sneezes. Let's look at the new numbers!' 'The sneeze is playing well!' 'Cut to Santos – you better burp! What? I don't know, what time is it. 3:30?' The whole thing is like – calm down. Is it really like this every time? It's almost an exaggerated to make a greater point, which I thought was fine.

HRISHI: Yes. [Laughs] But I liked the idea of them frantically trying to hit "refresh" on real clear politics, over and over again.

HRISHI: Yeah.

[Ad break]

JOSH: You speak of Santos gaffes, there's also another great one which I think obviously is a callback to a John Kerry gaffe-

HRISHI: Yes!

JOSH: When Santos is having one of his one-on-one interviews and he says:

[West Wing Episode 7.03 excerpt]

SANTOS: Look, I voted for CAFTA before I voted against it. I voted for it in committee, when it was a good bill.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Which is an echo of, or almost a quote, a paraphrase, of a famous John Kerry line:

[John Kerry interview excerpt]

KERRY: I actually did vote for the eighty-seven billion dollars. Before I voted against it.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Which was eighty-seven billion dollars that was to go to military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan – he was just filleted by the Bush team for having said something that sounds just

so idiotic. Of course there's more nuance to it, and then if I remember it also became a whole thing where Kerry said, "I have a greater point, I didn't say it very well, it was late in the day and I was tired" and then the Bush administration was like, "Late in the day? You said it at one o'clock!" A whole thing about whether he had lied. That kind of back and forth actually is sort of what you see in this episode, immediately paying the price for something that just slipped out of your mouth.

HRISHI: Right. But then by continuing to talk about it, and potentially giving it, by feeding it more misinformation, you stretch the news cycle around it, which only makes you look worse for longer.

JOSH: Right. So I guess, in reality, they do – campaigns do have to deal with the sort of minute by minute things that get said and done and how they're taken – it's interesting. It sounds horrible when I watch a real campaign and when I watch this episode I think you have to, which I think this is also another problem with American politics is that the type of person that is drawn to running for elected office in our country, given what it takes, has to have such a massive ego, there almost has to be something wrong with you to be willing to put yourself through this kind of treatment and through what it all entails. You gotta really want that power.

HRISHI: Yeah. I think that there are so many moments that could end up defining you, like with John Kerry, there was this defining image of 'oh, he's a flip-flopper.' You know, and they really hammered him with that, and I think that it ended up working – I didn't even remember what the specifics were but as soon as I heard Santos say, "Look, I voted for CAFTA before I voted against it," I was like 'Oh, that's a callback' and I just Googled "I voted for it before I voted against it" because it had become a refrain in my head, and I was like, "what was that from?" and it was John Kerry, and I was like "right, of course". But, because of that, there are two terrible outcomes. One, some seemingly minor mistake can end up defining you.

JOSH: And you're right, long after anyone's forgotten what the content was about, or what he was even addressing, it's just that phrase and how stupid it sounds, and how that's the definition of flip-flopping...

HRISHI: Yeah. And the other negative part of it is that you get people who are trying to create those moments, in a positive way for themselves, I feel like you hear it in the debates a lot, where someone will trot out a phrase and they're like, "If I say this, I'll be like a – it will be a real zinger," trying to artificially have one of those moments that's going to define you, or have like a meme-able moment. Those are also awful to watch.

JOSH: Yeah, you get those in debates a lot. Where you know [cross talk]

HRISHI: Yes [cross talk]

JOSH: they've written a line that they think is a zinger and are just waiting to say it.

[2016 Republican Presidential Debate excerpt]

RUBIO: Let's dispel with this fiction that Barack Obama doesn't know what he's doing. He knows exactly what he's doing. He is trying to change this country. He wants America to become more like the rest of the world. We don't want to be like the rest of the world. We want to be the United States of America, and when I'm elected President, this will become, once

again, the single greatest nation in the history of the world, not the disaster Barack Obama has imposed upon us.

CHRISTY: You see everybody, I want the people at home to think about this. That's what Washington DC does. The drive-by shot at the beginning, with incorrect and incomplete information, and then the memorized 25 second speech, that is exactly what his advisors gave him... (cheers drown out the rest).

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: What was Hilary's, do you remember? "Trickle-down travesties?" Was that one?

JOSH: I know she said "basket of deplorables."

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: My guess is somebody thought that was going to play well.

HRISHI: Oh, "Trumped-up trickle-down," that was what it was.

JOSH: Hmm.

HRISHI: We don't remember it because it didn't work.

JOSH: Speaking of CAFTA, it was also interesting, in terms of another Trump ay-yi-yi moment, to hear Vinick touting the virtues of CAFTA. What is CAFTA? Central American Free Trade? Or Fair Trade?

HRISHI: I thought it was Free Trade.

JOSH: Central America Free Trade Agreement, and saying that money to Central America countries will help prevent things like hunger, and crime, and reduce some of the problems surrounding immigration and the number of people seeking asylum, and we know that Trump cut off hundreds of millions of dollars to El Salvador, Guatemala, and the Honduras in response to the number of people seeking asylum. Vinick is taking sort of a policy approach, where Trump took more of a punishment approach.

HRISHI: Right. I also want to give a shout out to the Central American Free Trade Agreement network's signature article of clothing, the caftan.

JOSH: [laughs] Very nice. That makes me think of the Froot Loops, I'm not sure why.

HRISHI: [laughs] Makes me think of – just imagining a baby cow, sunning himself.

JOSH: Calf-tan! [laughs]

HRISHI: So we've introduced real-world politics here, and how they are echoed in this episode, I want to talk about this other moment, when the real world actually shows up in this episode. Arnie Vinick goes on *Hardball*.

JOSH: Yes, with Chris Matthews as Chris Matthews.

HRISHI: So I guess no more *Capital Beat*.

JOSH: Right! Yeah, I wonder what happened there? Where's Jay Mohr? Maybe Jay Mohr was busy.

HRISHI: It's an interesting move to bring the real world into the show so directly, and not just a mention – obviously there are things that get mentioned at an institutional level, people working for the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*, and *MSNBC* is a thing that exists, but it's another thing to be like here's someone from this fictional show on a real show with a real person. Like a real, contemporaneous person. I have to say that I don't like it.

JOSH: Well, you know, I don't like it from the other point of view. I'm not even sure what I think from my viewpoint as a viewer of *The West Wing*. I find it disturbing when news people – I guess he's an opinion guy, but – when people that are even tangentially in the world of news, or reporters, or even opinion people, show up as themselves in works of fiction. Because then I feel that it undermines our trust of them. There's something weird about it that I don't – it just seems like an odd decision to me.

HRISHI: There is something weird about it. It means that they can recognize the elements of who they are that starts to veer towards caricature? And if they can be caricatured and they're aware of the caricature, it feels too self-conscious.

JOSH: Maybe it's more honest, because I think what you're saying is exactly right – it's almost like an acknowledgement, "Look, I'm playing a character when you see me on *CNN* too." Or *MSNBC* or *Fox News* or whatever, so I'm just doing it here.

HRISHI: Right. Yeah.

JOSH: It's just kinda like – oh, yeah.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: He's playing the Chris Matthews guy.

HRISHI: Right. I think that this move changes the timbre of *The West Wing*, compared to earlier *Capital Beat* years. I like the idea that there's a fictional TV show and we have enough of our own real-world context to understand what that show is, what it means, and what purpose it plays in the world of the *West Wing*. Having a real one here feels a little like a bid to raise the stakes of the show, to get closer to this like ripped-from-the-headlines feeling, but to me it's like a little bit less fun.

JOSH: You know, I agree with you. Now that I'm thinking about it just as a viewer, I think you're right, and this fictional alternate world loses a little bit of its luster or its own distinctiveness when you see Chris Matthews as Chris Matthews. And it makes me wonder, how come nobody said to Santos, "Hey, John Kerry said that." [both laugh]

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: We have to accept that this is a world where that John Kerry moment didn't happen.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: You're right. It's a crossover that I don't like. No, we're in our own *West Wing* world.

HRISHI: Right. Yet there are many things that mark the separation of that world from this one, and I don't want the fabrics of these two space-times to be overlapped.

JOSH: Exactly. Well said.

HRISHI: Hopefully, this will answer people's questions about whether or not we're going to do a Newsroom podcast after this [both laugh].

JOSH: Yeah, I guess so. That's a wrap on that.

HRISHI: Yep. So Chris Matthews presses Vinick about the pro-life judges thing at the end, and Vinick doesn't confirm that he is gonna go with pro-life judges, and we cut back to George Rohr and you can see that he's unhappy about it, and so then they bring in Ray Sullivan.

JOSH: How about the Sullivan scene? A scene that I liked because, again, I have to place my general reaction to the episode about how we kinda see everyone at their worst – maybe not at their worst, but kinda the seamier side of politics, and Sullivan has a different take. We've had Vinick just outright lie to Rohr, Rohr then leaks it, having presumably given his word that he would keep what they discussed confidential, then Vinick pawns it all off on Sullivan, which is what his initial attempt was anyway. If you listen to Sullivan, he's a pro-life guy and he's gonna advise me on judicial nominations, and then Sullivan comes in and he doesn't play the game at all, or he plays the power game.

[West Wing Episode 7.03 excerpt]

SULLIVAN: You want to be my friend, George, believe me. Being my friend's a lot better than being my enemy.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And it works!

HRISHI: Yeah! And it's funny because all he says is the same thing that Vinick said; which is that Ray Sullivan is gonna be in the room, and he's gonna have your back, because we all know where he stands on things, and I'm putting a lot of faith in Sullivan's advice – he's gonna be my guy.

JOSH: Right, then there's an extra layer of "Don't [expletive deleted] with me."

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And it works, and I like that they're both great – I love Peter Mackenzie's response. You can just see in his face that "and that's that."

HRISHI: Right. One thing I wanted to bring up – something happens in this episode that actually we talked about in a previous episode – that thing about C.J. saying "you people" and I was like you lose the audience if you do that. One thing I wanted to bring up that you talked to with Nick was this interesting moment when Vinick says:

[West Wing Episode 7.03 excerpt]

VINICK: Let Ray Sullivan talk to him. He knows how to talk to those people.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And Nick said it was interesting to use that language, talking about the religious right – this language of “othering” in an episode where they’re also trying to court the Latino vote, explicitly a demographic that he does not belong to, and they’re talking about a lot – he doesn’t use language like that there, but he does use it here.

JOSH: Yeah, it is interesting. Very good catch. He’s good, that Nick Song.

HRISHI: Mm-hmm. I like Santos’s own moment of reckoning with the fact that he’s left this vacuum on immigration issues and things that Latino voters are going to care about.

[West Wing Episode 7.03 excerpt]

SANTOS: Well, I shouldn’t have been hiding on these issues, I didn’t want to be the “brown candidate,” I didn’t want to be stereotyped. Josh is right, I should have gotten out in front of all this stuff during the primaries.

LOU: You were great in the primaries. You won the nomination.

SANTOS: Lou, I shut up on Latino issues and gave Vinick this opening!

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, he regrets it in that moment politically, like he was outplayed.

HRISHI: Yeah. Because his was a political calculation, too. I mean, we know that his Latino heritage is important to him; he talks about it in that same episode in season 6. He was trying to walk a fine line, and he got caught out. We should also mention it’s not just *Hardball* that makes a real-world appearance, the *Drudge Report* [cross talk]

JOSH: [cross talk] Yes! And I get the feeling it’s supposed to be early *Drudge Report*, because they’re saying “some people in the press are taking this seriously,” like ‘we gotta be careful.’

HRISHI: [laughs] One thing that I like about the *Drudge Report* – it looks exactly the same as it did when it launched in ‘95. You look at that and go “whoa, look at that dated website”, and then – no, that’s what it looks like – that’s still what it looks like.

JOSH: [laughs]

HRISHI: That’s one of the things I like about *Craig’s List* as well.

JOSH: It is what it is, no frills.

HRISHI: Yep. Both sites are great for picking up other people’s trash.

JOSH: Nice! How about that! Another one in the can.

HRISHI: Thanks so much for listening – next week we’ll have a bonus episode. Leave us a comment on our website, or on our Facebook page, or Twitter, or Instagram. And thanks to Nick Song, Margaret Miller and Zack McNees for helping us make this episode.

JOSH: And thanks to Radiotopia and PRX for including us in their exclusive collection of forward-thinking podcasts about which you can find out more at Radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

BOTH: What's next?

[Outro Music]