

The West Wing Weekly
7.14: "Two Weeks Out"

[Intro Music]

JOSH: Hello. 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 14 from season seven. It's called "Two Weeks Out."

JOSH: That's right. It was directed by "happy face or sad face" Laura Innes and it was written by Lawrence O'Donnell. It first aired on March 19th, 2006.

HRISHI: In this episode the election looms closer and the two candidates keep crossing the country and each other's paths.

JOSH: Zeugma!

HRISHI: Hey.

JOSH: [laughing] It's been a long time.

HRISHI: It has been.

JOSH: Oh God. I've been waiting for this moment. [Hrishi laughs] Maybe we'll come full circle and we'll start doing more zeugma and we'll talk about octopuses again as the show [Hrishi laughs] as the podcast winds up.

HRISHI: An octopus flent! [Josh laughs]. The Santos campaign is trying to capitalize on its momentum by making a big bet on California. But unbeknownst to them, Senator Vinick has his own California strategy, one his own team disagrees with. We're getting down to the wire here and it's still anyone's ball game.

JOSH: Yeah, that's the show.

HRISHI: I wanted to just note that Alan Alda won the Emmy for Best Supporting Actor for the season based in part on his performance in this episode.

JOSH: How about that. He's good as always.

HRISHI: He is.

JOSH: Did you like how, as always, they flash the title of the episode and then I think they flash Chicago Convention Center and then they flash 14 days before election [Hrishi laughs] just in case you didn't know how two weeks broke down into days.

HRISHI: Then they flashed a map of the country [Josh laughs] with a star on Chicago.

JOSH: Yeah, I felt a little offended [both laugh]. I felt my intelligence had been questioned with their choice of chyrons.

HRISHI: Plus, they already picked this as episode 14.

JOSH: Ha! Just to really emphasize, 14 days before election, the presidential election.

HRISHI: [laughs] of America [both laugh]. Okay, so this episode begins with Senator Vinick kind of going through the wringer. The hand wringer.

JOSH: Oooh

HRISHI: Hmm?

JOSH: Yeah, no. I'm just, I'm just responding to the...there's some shots, I a little bit felt like the beginning of a medical thriller [Hrishi laughs] because there's some very graphic, his hand is taking a pounding. It really looks bad. It was like the beginning of *Outbreak* or something [Hrishi laughs] and the way it was shot in tight and close, I like what Laura Innes did with the overhead shots of his glad-handing the crowd, and...

HRISHI: Or sad handing, in this case

JOSH: Indeed, and it looked to me like it could be about how he was spreading some sort of lethal bacterium. [both laugh] It felt like *Outbreak* to me.

HRISHI: I have a newfound appreciation for this part of the episode because of our own event in Washington DC, for two reasons: one, that was a big show for us. We had over 2,000 people there and we stayed and tried to talk to as many of them as possible and I have never shaken that many hands in one night and sure enough, by the end of the night, my hand hurt a lot.

JOSH: It's real.

HRISHI: Not only that, while we were there in DC, I got a pamphlet on the dangers of grip and grin from a fellow named Abraham Saffer from the American Occupational Therapy Association.

JOSH: I forgot about that. I remember...

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: he was handing it over.

HRISHI: He gave it to us in preparation for this episode. We were still at the end of season six though, we had a little ways to go but it's been great and I'm going to put a link to a PDF of the pamphlet that he gave me. The title is "Grip and Grin", the subtitle is "Tips from occupational therapists about surviving handshaking on the campaign trail". This is from the American Occupational Therapy Association and here are some excerpts from this pamphlet, which you can read in its entirety when you go to our website. It says, "The announcement speech is made, and the petitions are filed. The campaign rally and the county fair event are scheduled. In the months ahead, you will be shaking hands with countless future constituents. At the close of a long day, you may find yourself with pain and stiffness in your hands, arms, neck, and back." My hands, my arms, my neck...[Josh laughs] I'm sorry just went into a Khia there, "My neck, My back..." Okay. Well, we'll save that one for HBO Max.

JOSH: I sing that actually after I go to Ikea and I've sampled a particularly difficult chest of drawers. [Hrishi laughs]

HRISHI: That's pretty good. Okay. Let me, back to the pamphlet here. Let's see, "stiffness in your hands, arms, neck, back, dreading that crushing...I mean they're really setting up this episode because they say "...dreading that crushing grip from an over-enthusiastic well-wisher."

JOSH: Hmm.

HRISHI: Really, as good of an evocation of the football player who destroys Vinick's hand at the end of the cold open as what you could hope for.

JOSH: Yes. I was hoping though, since Santos appears so soon after Vinick leaves, as Santos appears on the same stage, I was hoping they'd have the same exact moment where they shook hands and I was like, "Ahh, Ow" [Hrishi laughs] Either that or Santos would crush the other guy.

HRISHI: That's what I was thinking in just a, you know, a sign of his youth and vitality, the football player would start screaming.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: Anyway, there are lots of great tips in this pamphlet about exercising not just your hands but really your whole body because your back and your neck are, as they say in this pamphlet, "important allies...and you need to make sure you protect and save them for the heavy burdens of office." It's a great pamphlet. I mean, it's just, it's informational and delightful at the same time.

JOSH: Fantastic. I don't know if, I mean not to insult our listeners and our live event audiences, but every time we do meet and greet afterwards I go back to my hotel and I fill a bathtub with Purell [Hrishi laughs] and I immerse my entire body, up to the neck.

HRISHI: Not me. Give me them germs.

JOSH: [laughs] Well, that's probably why your immune system is better than mine. I can't go outside anymore.

HRISHI: [laughs] It's true. We want to give a shout out to Josh's new recording studio: the bubble.

JOSH: It's in a bubble, yeah, that's right.

HRISHI: So thanks again to Abraham for giving us that pamphlet. Really looks like something that Vinick could have used, although some of the tips I have to just have to say, would not work for the very reasons that are addressed in this episode, you know, one of the final tips they say is "If necessary, wear a splint or brace from a drug store on your hand or wrist to warn off aggressive glad-handers."

[West Wing Episode 7.14 excerpt]

VINICK: No cast.

DOCTOR: *Senator, you have to...*

VINICK: *I can't look like an old man falling apart on the campaign trail.*

BRUNO: *And he's got a crowd waiting...*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Actually, my favorite tip in this whole thing is this one, "Hold something that cannot be put down easily," [both laugh] in order to keep people from shaking your bad hand.

JOSH: Right. That's very clever.

HRISHI: What is that? A baby?

JOSH: I like that.

HRISHI: [laughs] A really good book.

JOSH: [laughs] I literally can't put it down.

HRISHI: [laughs] All right. I have some other high-level thoughts about this episode before we get into the minutiae. There's some interesting guest stars who appear in this episode. I wanted to know if you caught at the very beginning of the episode..

JOSH: Santos aide number two.

HRISHI: Yeah, Danny Pudi from *Community*.

JOSH: Danny Pudi, yeah, as I had that wait a minute was that?

HRISHI: Yeah!

JOSH: and I went, I hit my go back 10 seconds button, or maybe it's 30 seconds on Netflix and I was like, yeah, I was right.

HRISHI: He's the guy who says to Josh

[West Wing Episode 7.14 excerpt]

AIDE: *Guest list for the Cleveland event*

JOSH: *Yeah, right there.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yep and you could see in that moment the potential of his comic future.

HRISHI: Mm-hmm

JOSH: No, it's really, it's always funny, I love to see a kind of a little just bit part and you go, okay, so he wasn't who he is now then

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: He was just starting out

HRISHI: Mm-hmm. The Vinick staffer, Annie, who's maybe Vinick's body person, like Vinick's Charlie?

JOSH: Yes. Yes.

HRISHI: It turns out she played Liza in the movie *Love Liza*. I don't know if you saw that but it stars Philip Seymour Hoffman. It was written by his brother Gordy Hoffman.

JOSH: Oh wow.

HRISHI: And it holds a special place in my heart because I saw it early when I first moved to LA way back in 2002. I went to a Q and A. For the movie at the ArcLight and it was great. Gordy Hoffman was there as was the director Todd Louiso who was in *High Fidelity*. It felt...it was a very exciting way to start my time in LA.

JOSH: Sure. That's cool.

HRISHI: And she was the title character, she was Liza in *Love Liza*. Okay, and then the third character I wanted to note is the reporter who we find out by the end is named Ellen.

JOSH: Hmm.

HRISHI: Did you clock that character?

JOSH: No.

HRISHI: Ellen is the one who we see her a bit at the beginning and then she's one of the people covering Vinick.

[West Wing Episode 7.14 excerpt]

ELLEN: So, you no longer think regulation and nuclear power plants is burdensome?

VINICK: No.

ELLEN: Do you regret saying it was?

VINICK: I wouldn't write that letter today

ELLEN: Do you regret it?

VINICK: That was 25 years ago...

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And when he eventually does his press conference, you know, wears everybody down, Ellen's one of the last few and even she doesn't have...she kind of is grilling him, but even by the end she doesn't have any more questions for him, and Ellen is played by Colette O'Connell, who it turns out, had already been in *The West Wing* playing the same character. Playing this reporter Ellen from *Boston Globe*, she was in another Lawrence O'Donnell episode *Message of the Week*, and I thought, "oh, that's interesting". You know Lawrence has this specific character who he's included in two of these episodes and I thought, "oh, maybe he maybe he wrote this role for this actor," and then I checked and it turns out that she was also in an episode of Lawrence's show *Mister Sterling*.

JOSH: Huh. This is what you're like up there, like the Ashley Feinberg of *West Wing*, you're getting to the bottom of...much as she reverse-engineered and figured out that Pierre Delecto was Senator Romney's alias, you've done some research. Did anywhere in your research did you discover why Lawrence O'Donnell didn't point out to her that it's pronounced "new-clee-ar". [Hrishi laughs] Because I felt that as a journalist, she ought to have known that.

HRISHI: Yeah, I didn't discover that, I do think that there is some kind of name-based nepotism here going on. A conspiracy...

JOSH: It's pronounced "nep-you-tism" [Hrishi laughs] I think

HRISHI: Where Lawrence is just, you know, looking out for other 'O-blank-onnells' in the world.

JOSH: I see.

HRISHI: Colette O'Connell here and then, you know famously, Lawrence always casting Michael O'Monell. Jerry O'Jonnell. [laughs]

JOSH: Yeah. It also does a lot of his scripts there's Patty O'Furniture. [Hrishi laughs] I've noticed.

HRISHI: You're ignoring my joke and just going for your own jokes.

JOSH: Oh, sorry. Did I steamroll over your jokes? [cross talk] I was excited. I had one loaded up [laughs]

HRISHI: [cross talk] No, it's fine, it's fine [laughs]

JOSH: I go into real tunnel vision when I've got a real zinger like that ready to go.

HRISHI: [laughs] Okay, let's talk about the actual episode. It turns out there's a lot of crossover at events in these last couple of weeks. We see them not only in Chicago here at the beginning both doing the same event, but then later they're both at the same venue in Philadelphia.

JOSH: Right. Right. But we gotta get them into the same room for the suitcase gag.

HRISHI: What did you think about the suitcase gag?

JOSH: Well, I thought it was interesting. I like ethical dilemmas. I thought there was also interesting to this idea of plausible deniability. I've been watching, I've been on a weird binge of the TV series *Succession*.

HRISHI: Hmm.

JOSH: There is I thought a sort of kind of similar storyline the first season where one of the characters who works for this giant organization. I guess the whole thing is kind of a take on the Murdoch family, right and Vox media conglomerate. Yeah Fox News and the whole media company and he finds out some very unsavory things about one section of their empire, the cruise lines and there's just a lot of maneuvering about who knows what and maybe don't tell me and once you do know you're infected and you're part of the problem and if you don't act on it, you're implicated, but I just thought it was interesting because Vinick very early in these sort of conversation about the suitcase mentions plausible deniability, and I thought one way this really might have gone in a political and a real political presidential campaign is for Bruno to have acted without even bringing it up to the candidate. Yeah, and then maybe that's the most plausible way would have happened. So. And knowing Bruno I think he might have done that because he's smart enough to know that if he brings it up that maybe they're not going to go with this what he feels is a slam-dunk win, you know, I can win the presidential election here with what I've got or so he believes and I think maybe the most plausible response from Bruno would have been to go ahead and leaked it or do whatever he was going to do with it without even mentioning it to Vinick once he has we now have, you know Vinick's sense of propriety and what's right and as it plays out eventually does, you know return the case to Santos. I just I just thought it was interesting and I wonder what it whether it would have realistically played out this way. They would have insulated the candidate from the whole situation.

HRISHI: Right. I like the plausible deniability linchpin of the whole thing a lot because for me, that's what's critical about Bruno's sense of urgency about this. I think that if Bruno felt like this was sort of a dirty move, if he thought that this was actually a cheap shot, then he would not have brought it to Vinick. He might not have used it at all or he might have done like he said, he would have thought about the plausible deniability needed for the candidate and just done it in secret, maybe, right? It would be his own ethical dilemma to ponder.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: The fact that he brings it to his candidate and basically endangers the guy, knowingly, because Vinick even says

[West Wing Episode 7.14 excerpt]

VINICK: That briefcase can kill us.

BRUNO: Got a sort of a journal in there.

VINICK: I said don't tell me.

BRUNO: It's a day planner.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: and Bruno keeps pressing him on it. As I was watching. I was like, why would Bruno do this? Why would he be like openly defying this desire for plausible deniability, this very like understandable one and I think it's because he really believes what he's saying.

[West Wing Episode 7.14 excerpt]

BRUNO: Santos never got the vetting a front runner gets. He wasn't supposed to get the nomination, the press gave him a free ride in the primaries. Until now, he's been running away behind you. So the press still hasn't done their digging on him, but they will now so really doesn't matter what you do with that briefcase. It's going to come out. It comes out when Santos is in the White House? I don't know what happens, all hell's gonna break loose.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I really think that Bruno thinks that he's doing the right thing and this is not in any kind of way of political hit job in his mind.

JOSH: I'm not sure I agree with you. I think one of the great aspects of this story line is that I'm not sure.

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: Is that I sort of kind of you know, I think I do think it's possible that he sincerely feels that way and I also think it's possible. He's kind of full of [expletive deleted] and it's trying to convince the candidate maybe even himself that really what is looking out for is the electorate and you know, we can't let this guy get into office and God, if this happens, comes out later what's going to happen and I'm not quite sure and that's I think one of the nice things about the writing, directing and the performance from Ron Silver, I'm not quite sure whether he means it or not. I'm not even sure *he* knows.

HRISHI: Yeah and that might be what we're supposed to take from it. But my feeling was because he's endangering his own candidates plausible deniability, which is something that an operative wouldn't normally do, I don't think, it must only be because he thinks that this is right

JOSH: Except that there's maybe a little bit of CYA and he's covering, himself by you know, you know spiraling, in spinning the problem upward higher than his pay grade. So now if things fall apart and looks bad and there's trouble or maybe even legal issues like well, he knew yeah, I just passed on the information and he took it from there. So there may be an aspect of that. It's one of the things I like about the situation in *Succession* where the guy finds out this bad information, starts kind of deciding who's expendable to whom he'll try unto whom he'll try to shunt the issue.

HRISHI: I think one of the things that complicates it too is the history and dynamic between these two characters, you know, Bruno came on having historically done Democratic races and is in as an outsider, you know, this is completely different situation than say if it were Josh and President Bartlet or something like that, where you absolutely know Josh would have just done it and protected the president from it, like protection of the president would have been paramount.

JOSH: Yeah, I suspect you're right. Although one of the interesting aspects of this whole thing to also is the initial sweep of the bag that Bruno did, I mean to the point of opening up his checkbook and looking through it. I mean, it's like, you know that that's where it's really dicey. It's not like this information didn't hit him over the head. He opened up a briefcase. He realized what it was and then he forensically examined everything in that briefcase.

HRISHI: Yeah, he looked for dirt.

JOSH: Yeah, absolutely

HRISHI: Specifically looking for dirt

JOSH: For sure. Yeah, with a trained eye and he found it which also I have to say made me wonder once you've seen the whole episode, did you take Matt Santos' original concern about the briefcase to be in part because of the checkbook that was in there? I couldn't tell whether it was just normal concerned about . . .

Hey, you lost my stuff. I mean, there's private stuff. Okay, it's got a campaign going out or we or did you believe he had the checkbook in mind? Like, ugh!

HRISHI: I didn't take it that he was thinking of the checkbook specifically, it was more just that's all my personal stuff.

JOSH: Okay, because I thought maybe there was an aspect of that. I kept thinking like maybe he shouldn't have written down, maybe he shouldn't have logged the checks so accurately and maybe he should have pretended that money was going for gum or something.

HRISHI: Yeah, I think there's probably a level of naiveté to Matt Santos that didn't ever imagine that this kind of information would be something you have to worry about some, you know, some political opponent getting their hands on and he's just thinking all my stuff is in there.

JOSH: Right? Well, I guess with the thought was this, if he has a dedicated separate checking and he knows there's something to hide,

HRISHI: Right? Yeah

JOSH: And given that, maybe he shouldn't have logged the information so accurately, right? Why write the woman's name in and who can then be Googled and found and by the way, I also think it's interesting that in the ultimate conversation between Vinick and Santos, there is at least a germ of a doubt as to whether he's telling the truth that it's his brother's.

HRISHI: Absolutely there is!

JOSH: Yeah. I thought that was kind of brilliant because I I guess I think maybe I had read a description of the episode. I don't usually do this, but I think I'd come across a description of the episode before synopsis or I don't know. I read something that kind of gave away like, oh that's this storyline, which I had forgotten about and whoever wrote this synopsis was completely convinced by him. So I thought there was it was going to play out that way and then when I-

HRISHI: I see what you're saying, you're saying there's a doubt even for you.

JOSH: Oh yeah.

HRISHI: That there's doubt in the world about this that's interesting.

JOSH: Clearly Vinick wonders.

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: And I also wondered and maybe it's 1% to 99% belief and 1% question, but it left me enough of a doubt the fact that Vinick says look it doesn't matter what I believe, I found interesting as a viewer, I thought well, yeah, I mean again, I also don't like when, you know, you're a hero or you're not a hero and if you're a hero, you gotta believe everything the heroes say because they're *West Wing* heroes so, you know, although I'm it still has its effect on me. I'm inclined to believe Santos when he says something like that, but I liked that I walked away from that scene also thinking or maybe he does have a love child.

HRISHI: Yeah. Well one of the things that I think is so brilliant about this is that it actually doesn't matter. Like the actual facts of it don't matter and Vinick's doubt in that moment underscores that, like, that's what's telling us that these are two guys, sure they're not friends. But I think they have some sense of the others integrity and even in a moment like that when one tells the other this is what the truth is, he still doesn't necessarily believe him and it made me think of the an exchange from way back in episode 3 of *The West Wing* when Sam says, to CJ about Laurie

[*West Wing* Episode 1.03 excerpt]

SAM: C.J.

C.J.: I see

SAM: This is ridiculous

C.J.: You're there to help her see the error of her ways.

SAM: I'm there because I like her. I'm there because it's there that I'd be if this were alcohol or drugs, I'm not sleeping with her. This isn't tawdry.

C.J.: I don't care what it is. I care what it looks like.

SAM: And I care what it is, and I think it's high time we all spent a little less time looking good...

C.J.: And a little more time being good?

SAM: Yes.

C.J.: Yeah, I've heard that...

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: She's not impressed by the moral high ground that he's trying to take and that just echoed through here because it really doesn't matter what the truth is in terms of the ramifications for the election.

JOSH: Well, unless you accept the argument that you did accept from Bruno if you believe that he thinks the public has a right to know. It's kind of up to me it then then does matter whether he's just doing his something of deep integrity and covering for the needs of a child that his brother fathered out of wedlock and has abandoned or if he's doing something that maybe is compromising for a president to have as a secret. I mean, I think it does matter in that sense. If you accept the argument, like the public has a right to know about this kind of thing.

HRISHI: Well, I mean, it doesn't matter in that, it's always going to be bad for Santos regardless of what the truth is.

JOSH: Oh, I see you just thinking a negative point of view.

HRISHI: I'm saying. Yeah, if this gets out it's going to hurt him. Regardless of what the truth is because they're going to be some people even if they know what the even if he says hey, this is the truth, blah blah blah, take a DNA test all that stuff, whatever definitive truthiness that you could try and pull from this situation. It's still going to hurt him. Either it's going to hurt him a ton or it's going to hurt him some

JOSH: Yes. I suspect you're right because this also takes place in another time and in the fictional Universe where the president's behavior...

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: matters at all.

HRISHI: Exactly. Right, right.

JOSH: Because I of course had my Trump-ai-yi-yi" moments during this war as soon as somebody found a checkbook and the president had paid off porn stars with whom he was having adulterous affairs secretly and perhaps illegally and the populace doesn't care

HRISHI: Yeah, but so I have a feeling about this suitcase plot, while it is interesting, everything, it is in some ways, I almost didn't need it in this episode. There was a lot already going on and I found the whole storyline about you know the strategy and like whether it's a chess match or football game just the sort of trying to read the other side's plays and go where they're not going to go and make the most use out of your resources, whether it's money or airtime or the story. I found all that stuff so fascinating that in some ways this plot line, which is a little bit more, maybe seedy of maybe a little bit more *Succession-y*, you know . . .

JOSH: Contrived.

HRISHI: I almost didn't need it. Like I was like this feels like it could be from a different show and while I think they dealt with it well and took it into a place, you know of moral quandary that's interesting, in some ways it felt like I was getting a 125% percent of an episode within one.

JOSH: That's a fair take

HRISHI: There was enough tension in the plot about just chasing each other around the country

JOSH: True. That's another interesting aspect of the episode where Josh there's something like a *Cyrano de Bergerac* thing going on with Toby and Josh. It's like a Cyrano and I think Christian is a person in whose mouth he puts words and Cyrano where suddenly Josh is just taking Toby's phone calls and putting his ideas into play without crediting him and maybe you don't want to mention that you're talking to Toby Ziegler at this moment in American politics, but it's interesting. It's almost like Toby's calling the shots from wherever it is. He's sitting next to the phone.

HRISHI: I think it's great that Toby has a code name Bob

JOSH: [laughs] Bob

HRISHI: And then later, yeah Josh refers to him just as

[West Wing Episode 7.14 excerpt]

JOSH: Usual suspects, party people, experienced campaign types and. . .

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I love the Toby has a voice in this. I mean, I think it's what Josh has always wanted and has never gotten until this moment, you know, like actually having you know, we see the fruits of the labor of him going back to Toby's apartment that time that Toby has come around, you know, even from within his house arrest and is giving him pointers the way that I think Josh probably felt like it should have been, you know, the two of them working on this together.

JOSH: Right. He's finally got a genuine phone a friend option.

HRISHI: Yeah, it's one person who he spent so much time with you know, everybody else. There is either a newcomer or somebody who worked below him. Toby is the first person who was you know, really his equal. I mean, he's got Leo there but we don't see Leo in this episode but, you know just the fights that they had, the resentment that they expressed to one another Toby, you know to Josh for leaving the Bartlet White House and Josh to Toby for not being a better friend and cheerleader for his candidate. It's really nice to see the two of them coming together.

JOSH: I agree, speaking of Santos and Leo, I did find it titillating that Bruno had found in the journal that Santos sort of griped about how badly Leo was at campaigning.

HRISHI: Yeah. He also apparently had some not nice things to say about Russell which isn't that surprising.

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: I don't know how damaging that would really be. You know, what was not titillating. What's that the absolute lack of follow-up on Josh and Donna's kiss in this episode

JOSH: Indeed. That's right.

HRISHI: What happened?

JOSH: Nothing?

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Hmm, Donna is not in this episode is she? Not at all.

HRISHI: Nope.

HRISHI: So, you know, just press pause on that, I guess

JOSH: What say we take a quick break and come back later

[Ad break]

JOSH: And now back to the show.

HRISHI: You know what made me laugh? The mentions of the worst case scenario with the briefcase

[West Wing Episode 7.14 excerpt]

BRAM: Worst case, it got slipped into checked baggage and we'll have it to you by the time you get back to your room

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And then Bram repeats it to the candidate

HRISHI: And Bram says it to Santos and I was thinking, man, you guys do not have my kind of imagination when it comes to worst-case scenarios. I mean what actually happens is certainly a far worse scenario.

JOSH: Indeed.

HRISHI: I have a special gift when it comes to imagining worst-case scenarios and these guys don't have it.

JOSH: There's a whole book dedicated. I think it's called *The Worst-Case Scenario Handbook* and I enjoy it. It's about, you know, being prepared for falling into a shark tank, things like that. And I've read it in its entirety in my parent's bathroom.

HRISHI: I mean, I think that's that pretty much sums it up for me. I'm like at any point one might end up falling into a shark tank, any scenario. I will connect the dots to how it leads to death.

JOSH: Interesting. We're built similarly in this and in that sense, although I will say having that sort of tilt to your personality and to your thought process also leads to being grateful like things seem much better when you are so cognizant of how incredibly horrible they could be.

HRISHI: Yeah. Yeah. There's a great book called *Kiss and Tell*. Did you ever read that book?

JOSH: That sounds familiar? What is that book?

HRISHI: It's a book by Alain de Botton if I'm saying his name correctly. He's talking about this woman's ex and how he was the kind of person who you'd want to have around in case of plane crashed on an island or something like that, you know, but then later he qualifies that by saying which is to say a person with absolutely no imagination [Josh laughs]. Okay. So Bram is not thinking about all of the possible scenarios, but I was thinking you know who Bram has encountered before is. Santos's brother Jorge Santos. We've actually met him before.

JOSH: Yes. I feel like he came to an event or showed up later. There's something about the car being in the way or-

HRISHI: He wanted to invite some like business contacts that he had.

JOSH: Right

HRISHI: I think it's actually a great setup for this. We see his brother as kind of seems like kind of a skeezy guy.

JOSH: Yes.

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

JORGE: Listen, I've invited over a couple business associates for drinks and a photo. Do you think we can get past your stormtroopers?

MATT: Sure.

BRAM: I'll see what I can do

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And then Bram has to figure out like clearing those guys and getting them into the house when they're in Texas.

JOSH: Yeah, that's right. I did remember the impression that his brother had made.

HRISHI: Yeah in just a few lines. I wanted to say one thing about the Vinick hand injury, one more thing rather, when he has the cast on after he gets it from the doctor. I really liked how much trouble he has opening the *USA Today* copy that he has

JOSH: That he he opens. It kind of Johnny Carson style when he used to do Carnac and he used to used to open the envelope and blowing.

HRISHI: Yeah. Yeah, he can't fully do it with his hands. He has to blow the pages open. That's great.

JOSH: I love that. He also has a bad interaction with a packet of sugar, trying to open it with one hand.

HRISHI: So outside of the briefcase, I think really the central question in this episode is this one that Vinick poses

[West Wing Episode 7.14 excerpt]

VINICK: I just don't know who's going to be old news.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: In terms of the nuclear power plant disaster at San Andreo. He is just getting dogged by the quote that he said in the debate where he said nuclear power is completely safe. And he thinks that with Kazakhstan all the other things that are going on the press should move on but it's like unwanted ballast dragging down his campaign, keeping them from getting any kind of forward momentum again. Meanwhile, they see Santos is, you know, tied and many of the polls and some states that should have never been in play are suddenly in play and the two sides kind of come to the same conclusion through different routes, which is that California is going to be key to the election and for different reasons because if Santos can win California where suddenly Vinick is vulnerable because the nuclear power plant was in California, then there's going to be headline after headline about how Santos is going to steal Vinick's own home state and that kind of press and that kind of story will do more for the campaign than any kind of ad buy that they might make, you know, when they're trying to they're trying to figure out how to win California and rather than spend the money if they can go there and campaign and really win it, really put a concerted effort in it, then that could really tip the whole election. Yes, and on the other side the Vinick campaign realizes that they've got a similar kind of one state focus on California because they're reading the same tea leaves if they let Santos take the state, then that's really going to be it

[West Wing Episode 7.14 excerpt]

JANE: A Republican can win the presidency without California

VINICK: And a Democrat can't. This isn't some sentimental home state thing. This is about winning.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Really, he's saying if I can hold it, Santos just can't win. There's no path to victory

JOSH: But it's not going to happen for him, there's mentioned in one of these conversations about potentially adopting a southern strategy, but it said sort of unironically without sort of acknowledging the history of the southern strategy and Nixon's pivot to sort of courting racists. [cross talk] It was weird. It kind of blew by me and I had to go back and listen to it again. I thought it was kind of a weird moment where they I mean, I understand what the heck is what they're just talked about going

and you know concentrating on southern states and trying to campaign there and put more of the focus there, but it's sort of kind of runs by and the import and the resonance of saying the southern strategy is kind of not really acknowledged.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Racists. Yeah.

HRISHI: Yeah, exactly southern strategy those two words together really odd to be italicized or capitalized or somehow, you know rendered in a way that it's specific as it historically as it ought to be. You can't just toss them around and saying like well, that's our strategy for the South.

JOSH: Yeah. No, I think yeah exactly. Whoa. Hang on a second, a little historical context.

HRISHI: Yeah, it's like saying, finally, I think this could be the solution. I think this is the final solution, right?

JOSH: Yes, exactly. Which phrase by the way our dear president nearly tweeted recently because he said something about something I think was vis-à-vis Ukraine a no, vis-a-vis Syria saying that something about an ultimate solution and I thought, no. You can't say stuff like that.

HRISHI: But that's not what they mean.

JOSH: No, no

HRISHI: They don't mean courting racist whites against the interests of African Americans.

JOSH: Wink, wink

HRISHI: They just mean courting homophobes.

JOSH: Yeah, well, there you go actually, indeed, because that's an interesting. It's also I thought, I kind of liked what a just flat-out mercenary Jane appears to be because when she finally decides they're just going to lose, she literally heads for the door and she's like, I quit.

[West Wing Episode 7.14 excerpt]

VINICK: I don't want you to quit

JANE: I have a reputation to protect

VINICK: Quitter?

JANE: Better than loser.

[end excerpt]

Josh: This is kind of any artifice about caring about what she's doing or fighting for something. She's just like, oh, we're gonna do this and lose? See ya. I got a reputation to protect just I was just interesting character reveal.

HRISHI: I really liked that character. I mean as much as she is painted to be a villain for us, I think Lawrence O'Donnell does such a great job with that character because she's not villainous and stupid.

JOSH: For sure.

HRISHI: She's very smart about calling some of the angles and some of her harshness. I mean, this is the most painful voice to put some of these criticisms in because she's right about the 50-state strategy that that's not something they can pursue now, but she's also speaking with a little level of like 20/20 hindsight.

JOSH: Yeah, which at Bruno says at some point. We haven't talked about the 50 state solution in weeks, like give me a break.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: She's just hammering him on something where she knows she's won.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: He's conceded that already

HRISHI: She gets to take this thing as an I-told-you-so moment, even though there is no way for them obviously to have foreseen what could have happened in San Andreo and so Bruno, who has this wonderful grand plan getting foiled by like an act of God essentially, opens the door for Jane to be like "you're stupid."

JOSH: Well, it's one of the things also in terms of Bruno's route through this episode that I kind of like about the briefcase subplot, is that much as this thing fell in the lap of a campaign and absolutely pushed it off track, something else falls into their lap that maybe can just make it all okay again.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And it's sort of, you know, the one came whether they were prepared for in there was nothing they could do about and the other thing they have a moral decision to make and there's a lot of Bruno in silence.

HRISHI: Yeah,

JOSH: And just seeing his face and his expression and I like that he's sort of grappling with something coming his way as out of the blue, as out of nowhere as the nuclear incident. I also I actually got goosebumps when he just said,

[West Wing Episode 7.14 excerpt]

BRUNO: I can make you president.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: The import of that moment really hit me.

HRISHI: Yeah. I also don't want to go too far without talking about Vinick's victory in San Andreo. I mean we're talking right now about how they got derailed by this act of God, but he manages single-handedly to get it back on track.

JOSH: It's good to see Vinick get his groove back.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: That said there's an element of that scene that made me laugh. There's an element of what do they call it, until they drop press conference?

HRISHI: Yeah. I mean, I don't know if that's actually what they call it or if that term comes from this episode, but I've seen it referenced other times.

JOSH: I have too actually.

HRISHI: But after this episode aired and in reference to this, so I don't know, it's funny, there's a little line that Toby gives Josh where he says

[West Wing Episode 7.14 excerpt]

JOSH: *If this works...*

TOBY: *It worked for Andrews in the Senate race. It got the tax thing behind him.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Like it's a well-known strategy that you could use every now and then like the equivalent of like a campaign filibuster.

JOSH: Well, that's what made me laugh. There's something I guess this is, it's like criticism of the direction. There's something about the way Laura Innes has staged the scene that I think was unintentionally comical, which it plays out like a filibuster like the guy's been talking for 58 hours and there's shots of people like kind of like the journalist, the press corps is drooping, the cameraman wants to fall over, they're sweating. But I mean, I think what he was doing is taking as many questions as they had. I mean I didn't get the feeling he was like, God, he's giving hour long answers to every question. So there's something about it, like it was almost like a scene out of an "Airplane" movie for me for the talking about like "it's so hot, you could fry an egg on the sidewalk" and then the background you see two men frying an egg on the sidewalk. There's something so literal about it. Like wow, they're literally dropping. Why didn't they just, you know four questions earlier say "we don't have any more questions".

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Something about the physicality of it seems a little bit silly.

HRISHI: The other thing that's felt a little bit silly to me was the way that they pitted this press conference against Santos's own potential free media from his events in California because at a certain point they're going to cut away. They're not going to show all three hours of his till they drop press conference.

JOSH: No, it'll be unlike some C-SPAN channel that nobody's watching if anything or not C-SPAN, it's not Congress, but you know, I mean, yeah, right. Exactly, there's no way.

HRISHI: And yet you've got like Toby glued to the TV watching every, you know every minute until, until he gets to the final solution, until it gets to the final question. And you know, he gets- we get a little bit of the thing of being told how to feel about the situation, you know by getting Toby saying, "Damn, he's good" and Bruno saying "son of a bitch" and so it's not quite as much as like, hey, the episodes called "Two Weeks Out." It's 14 days till the election but it is basically that. So in case you missed it, he just turned this thing around but it's nice that the briefcase comes in at this moment, you know suddenly now, they don't have to be quite so desperate. I think at the beginning of the episode, before they've dealt with San Andreo that briefcase has a different kind of potential impact, but now I think everyone's talking about how great Vinick is done. You know, he gets the applause from his own campaign when he walks in and Toby says he's starting to sound like straight-talking Arnie the way that he you know, the one that we have known, the one who, you know, Leo had described as being the kind of guy who is going to blow everybody away when he goes to campaign.

JOSH: Yeah, well Vinick fights for it earlier in the episode. He basically says I'm not even myself out there anymore. They are in this sort of panic desperation mode and he's just doing anything to try to stay afloat and I liked seeing him back in this Vinick mode where he can even admit fault and he can say in 26 years, you should've improved and I've had a new take and I'm not blaming the president just you get the best of Vinick. There's something appealing about a candidate who's able to speak genuinely like that and actually admit to some fault and it's you could kind of see why taking on the issue really was a good idea for Vinick for a guy like Vinick.

HRISHI: Yeah, and I love that we get to see Vinick at his best both in public by the way, he's handling the press conference and in private by the way, he handles the dissent from Jane. I think that conversation between the two of them is so fantastic and you get the sense of like what a great executive, what a great negotiator Vinick can be, you know when she is ready to leave and he says

[West Wing Episode 7.14 excerpt]

VINICK: If I win the election, you're gonna get all the credit, you came onto a sinking ship, and you saved the day.

JANE: If you lose?

VINICK: Then you came onto a sinking ship and it sank. It's not your fault. How about we go with my strategy tomorrow and then we go with your strategy for the rest of the campaign.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It gives her all the reasons why she would be right not to quit that go above and beyond it would be bad for us.

JOSH: Right? This is just brief little moment where Bruno is watching on TV, and he says Saint Santos and that kind of made me laugh because I think Santos, doesn't it

probably does mean saint, sir. I know Santa was a little wooden carved depiction of a saint. So just those sort of maybe probably unintentional wordplay, saint saint.

HRISHI: That's pretty good.

JOSH: The only other thing I had was Lou has some very hip tattoos. We see them for the first time, it just but it even though it's just, you know a visual moment to me, it kind of opened up a whole other feeling about her character like, okay, she's that person and not a hip tattoo, but rather hip shoulder tattoos, I didn't get it and . . .

HRISHI: It's confusing that she has a tattoo of somebody's hip on her arm

JOSH: Right, that's weird, your choice but in a way, hip.

HRISHI: I really appreciated the way like Santos's plan got foiled. They were doing these kind of nimble maneuvers trying to outflank Vinick and you know, they have this strategic idea from Toby and the explanation of it, you know makes sense and having to turn things around and not spend as much money where it's going to be more expensive in California only to have the thing fall out from under them. Because Vinick wants to deal with what's happened in San Andreo, like for a completely different reason, like, Josh even says well if we do this and then they come after us it's going to say, oh Santos is being chased by Vinick, you know, it's going to make Vinick look bad.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: And Jane says has the same insight that this is gonna look bad. I thought it was really clever and artfully done.

JOSH: Agree. Subtle.

HRISHI: The reason why I ended my synopsis with a sports metaphor just because it felt that way to me. I felt like I was watching a great football game or something like that. I felt like I was watching some great game. Whatever's the sport was where it's just really close and you never know what's gonna happen and you start to feel like one team is going to pull ahead only to have a sudden run by the other team bringing it back.

JOSH: Yeah. I agree the whole arc of this final season is exciting that way.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Intense and fun to watch.

JOSH: That wraps it up for another episode of *The West Wing Weekly*.

HRISHI: Thanks so much for listening. Thanks so much to Margaret Miller and Zach McNees for helping us put together this episode and thanks as well to Radiotopia from PRX radio. Radiotopia is the podcast network to which we belong, it is a collection of independent podcasts and you should check out all the other shows if you haven't yet at Radiotopia.fm

JOSH: That's right. You can follow us on Instagram, on Twitter on Facebook, to the gates of hell just follow us. Blindly, please.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

BOTH: What's next?

[Outro Music]