

The West Wing Weekly  
7.20: "The Last Hurrah"  
Guests: Mary-Louise Parker and Teri Polo

[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 season 7, episode 20, "The Last Hurrah."

JOSH: This episode was written by Lawrence O'Donnell, it was directed by Tim Matheson, and it first aired on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2006. Am I wrong or this is our, at least in terms of recording this way, our penultimate hurrah?

HRISHI: We have three more episodes, but yes, in terms of the way that we normally do things, second to last.

JOSH: Right, this is it! The house to house, Hrishi to Josh recording, we've got this and one more.

HRISHI: Yeah we have reached the half-way mark [laughs] This is the half... [laughs]

JOSH: Wow, it went quickly, I can't believe it, yeah very good point.

HRISHI: Here's a synopsis. After the election, the lives of the Santos family and Senator Vinick are in stark contrast as the Santoses gear up for life in the White House and Senator Vinick winds down his own political life. Or at least that's what everyone expects him to do. But he has other plans for himself, and it turns out he's not the only one.

JOSH: That's right. I like this episode. It was, I guess it shouldn't have felt super unexpected to me as I assume I've seen it before, but I was surprised how Vinick-centric this episode was. We're getting late in the game, and the election obviously has been resolved, and I was sort of delighted. I thought it was, for one of the final episodes, it was surprising.

HRISHI: I love this episode, it may be no surprise I love all of Lawrence O'Donnell's Vinick episodes - they've all been really delightful. And this episode contributed to Alan Alda's win for an Emmy for Best Supporting Actor for this season.

JOSH: Well deserved, he's great in it. And I was... maybe I'm looking, you know as evidenced by my bringing up the penultimate nature of this discussion, I maybe be focusing on the end, because this struck home for me the Vinick in his pjs, with little to do [Hrishi laughs], unshaven, with an envious eye watching others who were busier...

HRISHI: Uh huh.

JOSH: It all really struck home.

[laughter]

HRISHI: I really feel that we can't call this the penultimate - this is our ante-penultimate.

JOSH: Mmm. Because of the live event.

HRISHI: Because of the live event, yeah.

JOSH: I guess so, for me those are another breed. And I as I sat down today to have this discussion with you, I'd miscalculated. We'd done things a little bit out of order because of the live event in London. I thought this was going to be our final one, and it just struck me [Hrishi laughs], I said to my wife and daughter I said, "I think this is going to be the last time I sit down and have this kind of conversation with Hrishi."

HRISHI: No no no.

JOSH: Then of course you explained to me I have to do it one more time. And then I went immediately from "oh this thing I'm savoring" to like [expletive deleted] "I have to do this again?" [laughs]

HRISHI: No. I'm - it seems I'm not done with the Baileys yet.

JOSH: Boom! Very nice, I recognize that from *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: [laughs] This episode was directed by Tim Matheson as you mentioned.

JOSH: Yeah, how about that? I put an exclamation point in my notes.

HRISHI: As did I. He's actually directed a bunch of TV, starting with *St. Elsewhere* back in the 80s and then after this he's done a lot more including a few episodes of Dulé Hill's show *Psych*, and the pilot of Bradley Whitford's show *The Good Guys*. Two shows that you've also appeared in.

JOSH: That I've managed to glom onto. That's true. Wow, I must have known that about *The Good Guys*, but I forgot.

HRISHI: Yeah. And I love that this is the episode that Tim Matheson comes back to direct, because of the plot that's actually playing out.

JOSH: Santos' search for VP among other things.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Yeah. A little extra resonance there.

HRISHI: Yeah. I really love this episode for how this sense of displacement and transition really is driven home by who's in the episode. Did this hit you? You know, except for C.J., we have no one else from the main cast in this episode. We've got Vinick and Santos - Jimmy Smits and Alan Alda are in the episode of course, but except for the two of them and Allison Janney, no one who has ever appeared in the opening credits is in this episode.

JOSH: Yes, I absolutely did notice, that had its impact on me as I watched, perhaps most in the indication that the show really could have continued.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Because we're not seeing our core cast of regulars, and it's still just a great episode of *The West Wing*, and there's new life in it with this cast. It certainly could have carried on.

HRISHI: Yeah, I'd like to put this one down in the books as episode 7.20, but also season 8, episode 1.

JOSH: Right? Exactly.

HRISHI: It could have been a great episode 1 for season 8.

JOSH: Yeah, I completely agree.

HRISHI: So we really just have Vinick and his staff, Sheila, Bob and Annie, and then on the Santos side there's Ronna, Lou, and Amy Gardner. And later in this episode, we're gonna be joined by Mary-Louise Parker.

JOSH: At long last. We see Michael O'Neill for the first time in a couple of seasons I think.

HRISHI: Is that right, we haven't seen Ron in that long?

JOSH: We haven't seen him since "No Exit."

HRISHI: Hmm. Normally, you know, we've tried to get guest stars on our podcast for episodes when they first appeared, but here we got Mary-Louise Parker to join us for the episode in which she appears for the last time.

JOSH: Mmm-hmm, I skipped over, but there was one other parallel [laughs] between Vinick and myself, his sitting at home, in his bathrobe, unshaven, next to his Vinick for President coffee mug [Hrishi laughs]. I do similar things with my *West Wing Weekly* coffee mug and sit around skulking around. Which also leads me to another concern, I like to bring up my medical concerns as often as possible on this podcast, and we have a moment in this episode where the not particularly busy Vinick finds an opening, and he's gonna have his physical today.

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: The doctor would like to move it up, and he's like "that's no problem," and I was immediately concerned that he hadn't fasted for his physical. In fact we don't see him drinking but there's a suggestion that he had coffee in this mug and I was worried that his cholesterol, his blood numbers would be thrown off.

HRISHI: Interesting.

JOSH: Don't you generally fast before a physical?

HRISHI: No, and in fact my week was similar to Senator Vinick's in that I had both a haircut and a physical this week.

JOSH: Huh.

HRISHI: And I didn't fast before either of them.

JOSH: Really? Well, I did then follow up, because I'm nothing if not thorough, and it turns out there's a recent shift in thinking about how whether or not it is important to go without food and water. Usually, my doctor tells me midnight the night before, don't eat or drink.

HRISHI: I've never done that.

JOSH: Really? Well your cholesterol may be worse, or better than you think [laughs]. I don't know how it skews the numbers.

HRISHI: It's definitely worse than it ought to be. This episode reminds me a little bit of the end of "The Red Mass" from season 4, do you remember that, with Senator Stackhouse who, in that episode he is considering a bid to run as a third party candidate.

JOSH: Mmm.

HRISHI: Because he wants to bring up some important issues that he feels aren't being addressed. By the way he's being advised by Amy Gardner at that point.

JOSH: In that episode, right.

HRISHI: Yep. But then he's convinced by Josh to drop the campaign, but it does work in that, you know, needle exchange is one of his issues, and the president decides he will take questions on it, and as he gets surrounded by press at the end of the episode and they start an impromptu press conference, Stackhouse himself slips into the street, you know, in a state of relative anonymity.

JOSH: Right, I do remember that.

HRISHI: It's a beautiful little moment in that episode, and then in this episode it feels like it takes that seed of an idea and expands it in all directions.

JOSH: Well said.

HRISHI: The effect for Vinick is much more potent than for Senator Stackhouse, after having spent all these months in front of so many people shaking so many hands and you know having just narrowly lost the general election. And I think we see the quietude of his life, he seems alienated and disoriented in this episode.

JOSH: Yeah well I also like the sort of, as the series wraps up, I expect things to be sort of big and on a grand scale, looking at what Santos and his administration might do, and I like that this episode brought it down to the personal level of like, it sucks to lose.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: There's also just a sort of human, competitive aspect to a presidential race like this, and you know you're playing for incredibly high stakes, and this is what it looks like to be the winner and this is what it looks like to be the loser.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And it's painful. There are moments of this episode that you, you feel I think heartbroken for Vinick.

HRISHI: Yeah, it's a moment of a presidential career that we haven't seen yet. Whether it was in flashbacks or whatever, this transitional moment is sort of politically interesting in the same way that, you know, all the little minutiae, day to day episodes of real-life governing were interesting for me, but it also gets to be completely new to us.

JOSH: Yeah that's right.

HRISHI: And to jump way ahead, once this episode gets into the actual, you know towards the end, the actual offer that Santos makes to Vinick which is to become his Secretary of State, I loved everything about it!

JOSH: Yeah. I really dug it too. It was fun to also watch the slow realization that it is a genuine offer.

HRISHI: Yeah. But that kind of strategizing, both on the part of the person making the offer and the person considering it, that all felt like new stuff, it felt very *West Wingy* while also being something completely different from what we'd seen before.

JOSH: New territory.

HRISHI: Yeah. But ok, so back to the beginning. So in Vinick's scene at home with his coffee mug and his bathrobe, he's got a copy of the newspaper, he's got a copy of the *Washington Post*, that says "Santos Still Undecided On Vice President."

JOSH: Mmm-hmm.

HRISHI: And I think the immediate leap that you know a *West Wing* viewer might make, especially someone who loves an episode like "The Supremes," is that this is setting up the idea that Santos is going to ask Vinick to be the Vice President.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: You know. Is there anything more noble than that that, that we could have these two people that were both great, governing side by side, but I kind of winced the first time I saw that, and even, you know, like to me it not only stretched credulity it also just seemed a little cheesy.

JOSH: Well, it put me immediately in mind of Joe Biden's recent comment that he would consider a Republican as a Vice-Presidential running mate, which was not particularly well received.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: [laughs] Largely, I think.

HRISHI: But it did feel like, "Well who are going to get for VP? Here's this guy who has nothing to do. He's just sort of whiling away his time," and then they add this idea of the Republican Senate has to confirm whichever Vice Presidential choice we make.

JOSH: Well potentially they do, I guess 'cause that's a plot line as well, because they've got some legal memo suggesting to the Democrats that they need not throw the nomination to the Senate, that Santos can just choose someone at the delegates' vote.

HRISHI: Right. Right. But if Santos gets his way and does things by the book, it's going to have to go up against Senate Republicans, and so who could possibly get a quick confirmation. All signs point to Vinick being a great idea.

JOSH: Indeed, yes.

HRISHI: But yeah, Amy comes in to our episode with this idea that they can skirt around things by using the electoral college, to get their Vice-Presidential candidate, you know sort of elected kind of retroactively.

JOSH: Mmm-hmm.

HRISHI: But that doesn't sit well with Santos. One of the things that's great in this episode is how many times - maybe it's only twice - but there are multiple times where Vinick will say a whole thing and Santos just says, "I agree."

JOSH: Hmm. Like I've done for years now with you.

HRISHI: [Laughs] Does that mean you'll choose me to be your Secretary of State.

JOSH: Well that doesn't work.

HRISHI: [Laughs] Ok, so we're back at the beginning of the episode, while Vinick is kind of idling at home, Santos is meeting a room full of high-ranking military officials, and then Santos is in this meeting with Ron Butterfield as you mentioned,

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: And his children are getting briefed on what it will be like for them to have a Secret Service detail.

[West Wing Episode 7.20 excerpt]

*RON: Now, because a lot of people know who your dad is...*

*MIRANDA: Everyone knows who my dad is!*

*RON: Yeah, I guess you're right. Some of them might try to talk to him or get a message to him through you guys. You think that's a good idea?*

*PETER: Um... no?*

*RON: That's right Peter.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yes, and it is a bit creepy, and intimidating, and daunting, and uncomfortable, and when Santos leaves the meeting and Helen runs after him to sort of chide him for doing so, I'm with her!

HRISHI: Oh, absolutely! Amy comes in, she's the one who has this information, and that's the time when she decides to tell Santos, "Hey, we have this memo, and this is what you can do," and before she can really get too far with it, yeah Helen comes out and shuts the whole thing down, and absolutely she is in the right, but I love the way she serves Amy a nice warm glass of shut the hell up.

JOSH: Right, I liked it too.

HRISHI: I like that Amy is the person who makes this faux pas. To me it feels appropriate, like she's the person who's newest to the team, and I think we've always gotten the sense that you know traditional family life isn't necessarily of interest to her.

JOSH: Mmm.

HRISHI: That she's a political operative first and foremost, like so many of our characters, and doesn't necessarily know how to operate within a normal quote unquote normal sort of family dynamic or something like that.

JOSH: Right, I could see her not taking in the situation or having it occur to her that this isn't an opportune meeting to disrupt.

HRISHI: Yeah, exactly. But I think a good staffer who understood the whole lay of the land and had a little bit of common sense in these kinds of matters, you know would have gotten it.

JOSH: Mmm-hmm.

HRISHI: I love that moment, and you know she's always been portrayed as kind of an outsider, and I feel that she still gets to be herself even as an insider in the administration.

JOSH: True.

HRISHI: And speaking of Amy Gardner, let's turn now to our conversation with Mary-Louise Parker.

JOSH: Mary-Louise, thanks for joining us.

HRISHI: Let's start at the beginning.

JOSH: Yeah, we've heard versions of how you came to be part of the *West Wing* cast.

MARY-LOUISE: I know! I've heard versions too.

JOSH: We're interested in getting the real version from you, yourself.

MARY-LOUISE: Yeah, I just remember that I had never wanted really specifically to do a TV show before, but that seemed to me like the best version of doing regional theatre on film?

JOSH: Hmm.

MARY-LOUISE: Yeah, I just thought it was incredible. And I guess I'd finished *Proof* and then I heard that someone said that I called Aaron, I only remember calling Aaron after I had the job, and telling him, there was some discussion about a pair of boots that I was gonna wear. That they thought were maybe too saucy or something, and...

JOSH: Ha ha!

MARY-LOUISE: You know the show could use a little bit of sex, and I'm happy to provide it. But I don't really remember so much how it happened when I got the job? Just that I really was very anxious to be on it, was happy to be asked to be on it.

JOSH: So you were already watching the show.

MARY-LOUISE: I was, yeah.

HRISHI: Did you have a strong initial impression of who Amy Gardner was gonna be?

MARY-LOUISE: Yeah. I did. I liked the contrast of, I felt it was possible for you know, two things to coexist in the same person, that she was, you know, incredibly precise with her views and her passions, and you know her political leanings, everything that was very clear to her and at the same time she could wear like a really short skirt and high boots and just expect you to have a conversation with her about what she was talking about. And that didn't

seem like an impossible thing to achieve. But at the time they were a little bit like, “Oh you can’t wear the... we need to lower your skirt... and the boots are a little high.” I was like, “How about these boots? [laughs] How about this hem.” So I was just trying to push it a little bit.

HRISHI: Was that a continuing source of tension, trying to figure that [cross talk] lever...

MARY-LOUISE: [cross talk] No.... It was just the beginning, I think there hadn’t been a whole lot of that on the show, you know? It was just really that first fitting, and then for me to understand how I could fit into that show, you know, how I could do what I wanted to do, and find a version of that that worked for this show that was established and working so well.

JOSH: Mmm-hmm.

MARY-LOUISE: So I couldn’t really show up in pasties and a tutu, you know? [Josh laughs] As much as I wanted to...

HRISHI: The character of Amy Gardner, you know from your first appearance until when Aaron left, was really as this kind of outsider for the most part, pushing against the White House policies, until there’s this moment where she becomes the First Lady’s chief of staff.

MARY-LOUISE: Mmm-hmm.

HRISHI: But somehow she still managed to retain this outsider-ness, and still feel like this foil for the sort of core group of heroes, but now we’re in season 7 and Amy Gardner has just become the Director of Legislative Affairs for the incoming president.

MARY-LOUISE: Mmm-hmm, don’t ask me what that is.

[laughter]

HRISHI: I was wondering if you could tell us about coming back to *The West Wing*, Amy Gardner came back in “Freedonia,” one of Eli Attie’s episodes.

MARY-LOUISE: One of my besties, Mr. Attie.

JOSH: you became friends with him on *West Wing*.

MARY-LOUISE: Yeah for a long time he was in my address book as that cute *West Wing* writer who doesn’t like Wilco...

[laughter]

MARY-LOUISE: Um, and then he just because one of my best friends. I married him in fact, to someone else, not to me.

JOSH: Right. Very cool. So have you officiated other weddings, or is this something you did online?

MARY-LOUISE: No, I only became official as an officiant for Eli and Ally.

JOSH: Nice.



HRISHI: Did it feel significant to you to be coming back for these last few episodes? Again, there was a big break after "Freedonia," but then Amy comes back in "Requiem," and then this episode, "The Last Hurrah."

MARY-LOUISE: That was nice, yeah. I just loved seeing John Spencer in the credits, and the whole thing seemed to have... I don't know there was something about it that to me felt aspirational in the best way, you know, which is I think part of what people derive so much comfort from the show now? Like, nothing was dumbed down, nothing was really to please. I think it was like, it's ok to imagine the world like this. You know?

HRISHI: Yeah.

MARY-LOUISE: Which is kind of defining itself in opposition to most all other television at that time. I mean I'm sure maybe there were other shows like it, but I can't really think of any. You know I was just happy that I was allowed to be let in once in a while and always welcomed so nicely, you know, I was kind of like the stepchild, like scratching at the door.

HRISHI: Hmm.

JOSH: Did you ever have input into the character, did you discuss things with Aaron, or just accept the scripts as presented?

MARY-LOUISE: I have to say, there was some sort of little rush of a true thrill every time I was handed a script, or opened an envelope with a *West Wing* script in it. You know, now when you get scripts, it's just like, "Oh God, how many pages will I make it?"

[laughter]

MARY-LOUISE: You know, and it was just a true thrill, even if I was barely in it. It was just so exciting to read and to have any remote part of it. I remember my first episode when I went to shoot it, and it was in Washington. The whole thing was kind of incredible, and there were so many people in that episode, and we all met in the bar at the hotel that night, and somehow everyone planned to wake up at I think 2:45 in the morning, or 3:15, something like that to go see some meteor shower, and we were all going to meet in the lobby of the hotel, and for some reason I did not set my alarm, but I woke up at the exact like, three minutes till 2:15, or 2:45 or whatever it was, like three minutes till.

[laughter]

MARY-LOUISE: And I rushed and put my clothes on and I ran downstairs and it was only Richard. [Hrishi laughs] And Richard and I, Richard had like a handful of clementines or something, his baseball cap on, and he's just so like devastatingly charming and mysterious, and wonderful, and he was like, "Oh this is great, it's just the two of us we've got the car to ourselves," we rented this car and we went out into the middle of nowhere and we didn't know each other, and we lay on the hood of this car, just watching stars plummet and talking about everything that two people who don't know each other probably shouldn't or wouldn't ever talk about.

JOSH: Wow. That's a fantastic memory.

MARY-LOUISE: One of the greatest nights of my life, really.

HRISHI: That's amazing.

MARY-LOUISE: Yeah, it was an incredible evening. So that was my start to *West Wing*, that night with the meteor shower.

HRISHI: And this was your last episode, do you remember coming onto the set, knowing that this was going to be the last one?

MARY-LOUISE: I remember Janeane Garofalo was really funny, making me laugh, talking to me about, we were talking about how weird it was to be in LA and how people respond to you if they see you walking in LA, because you're not really supposed to do that, I'm a New Yorker so I walk everywhere.

HRISHI: Mmm-hmm.

MARY-LOUISE: Janeane said people would stop her on the street and go, "I saw you walking..." [Josh laughs] So I remember talking with Janeane and her being incredibly funny, and I love Jimmy Smits, he's just such an amazing actor and great guy, but I do not remember anything about it. You know? I don't have a great mind for politics and I worked really hard with this character to try to understand what I was saying before I said it, you know? The first step is I would be huddled in the corner on the phone, being like, "Daddy, what's a caucus?"

[laughter]

MARY-LOUISE: I just couldn't, so many things that would not sink in. So I had to kind of work at it, 'cause I wanted to be able to understand what I was saying before I said it. And then Allison of course, was like, "I don't know what I'm saying," you know, Allison who's like the most superb actress alive, and just you know who has command of everything, she was like, "Aaah you don't need it."

JOSH: [laughs] Yeah that sounds like Allison. I want to see if you have memories of either of these two scenes. I didn't get to work with you often, although I always wanted to, and I savored it when I did. Allison, you and I had a scene in *Privateers*, where she's trying to keep it together and keeps laughing. This is a classic *West Wing* scene that you were a very big part of, do you remember shooting that scene?

MARY-LOUISE: I don't remember anything.

HRISHI: There's a woman named Marion Coatsworth-Haye, and you end up giving her an award, the Francis Scott Key Key.

MARY-LOUISE: [laughs] That's so funny, I don't remember that at all. Wait, he's showing me right now.

[West Wing Episode 4.18 excerpt]

AMY: *Is this a hazing?*

C.J.: *I swear it's not a hazing. It's real. It's real.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: [laughs] Can't believe we just got to watch you watch that scene.

MARY-LOUISE: My God that is some good flag work, Mr. Malina.

JOSH: You're kind.

MARY-LOUISE: That was funny.

JOSH: Do you have any standout scenes that you remember or episodes that you remember working on, or is it all just an impressionistic mess at this point, a general sense of having worked on this show?

MARY-LOUISE: It's kind of a little collage. I do remember the scene that Eli wrote with the ice cream cone, that my dad really liked that scene a lot. He used to quote it.

[*West Wing* Episode 6.15 excerpt]

AMY: *I embrace the cold.*

JOSH: *Ok.*

AMY: *I luxuriate in the cold.*

JOSH: *Can I ask you...*

AMY: *I fight cold with more cold.*

[end excerpt]

MARY-LOUISE: I'm very fond of that scene and I kept that fur hat that I was wearing, and I think it was my own hat. I think I wore that hat to the rehearsal, and they said, "Can you wear that hat for the scene?" And I was like, "All right." And I also remotely remember tying Brad Whitford, or taping him to a chair? Is that correct?

HRISHI: Yeah. Those are both things in *Freedonia*.

MARY-LOUISE: I did, I taped him to a chair, that's correct.

HRISHI: Both of those are in that Eli episode.

MARY-LOUISE: Yeah, I sound I'm sure just like a total geek, but I was so excited to go to work, and I was so, I mean having that many people in a room that you admire so much, it's really, really unusual. But I also remember shopping for Amy at the flea market in Los Angeles 'cause I wanted some of the props in her office to be really specific, and then the prop department being a little confused as to why I was showing up with my own props [laughs]. But they were nice about it.

HRISHI: Did the props make it into the shot?

MARY-LOUISE: They did.

HRISHI: There's a quote of yours that I read that I wanted to ask you about. You said, "I don't often see the movies I'm in, I'm usually disappointed in myself, and it only serves to make me self-conscious."

MARY-LOUISE: Yeah.

HRISHI: I was wondering if that meant that once you joined *The West Wing*, you stopped watching it.

MARY-LOUISE: *The West Wing* I watched. I think I would have a little bit of a, "God there's that woman again" when I would come on screen, but I was just so, again, happy to be part of it, and I had some sort of detached appreciation of the character that I did love her outsider-ness and her sort of emotionally monotonic, you know I liked her, that she could stay in one gear for a long time, even if it was not the gear that everyone else was driving at, the same speed, I just liked that she kind of surprising, you know? But I do in general not enjoy seeing myself. But *The West Wing* - I just had to get over it.

HRISHI: There was one thing that you did as Amy that feels very iconic to me, I think about it all the time, and it's the way that you would say "Hello" over the phone. There were often scenes where Josh would call Amy, and you would say "Hello," and there was a way that you would say "Hello," funny that you describe the character as monotonic, it's like this almost flat, emotionless, "Hello."

[*West Wing* Episode 4.05 excerpt]

AMY: Hello?

JOSH: Hey.

AMY: Hello.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I love it and I find myself sometimes doing it unintentionally and I realize and I'm like oh, I'm doing the Amy Gardner hello.

MARY-LOUISE: Oh that's funny. It's probably some sort of parenthetical, "How long do I have to talk to you" happening there, within her greeting.

HRISHI: Right.

MARY-LOUISE: You know what I mean?

HRISHI: Yeah.

MARY-LOUISE: That's probably what's going on.

HRISHI: Were you a fan of Amy, as a character?

MARY-LOUISE: Yeah. I don't think she was overburdened with a need to make everyone like her, you know, which a lot of women feel, myself included. I don't think she had that, at all. I don't think she could care. She could really give a [expletive deleted]. She wants to get things done. And it doesn't mean she isn't fun, doesn't mean she isn't sometimes funny, usually she is the foil. But I also like that she kind of angered people, that sometimes people would be like, "Oh my God, I couldn't stand her," the same way that young girls would tell me they liked her. She doesn't need you to like her, she doesn't need to be likeable, she doesn't have to apologize for the fact that she can be very strong, just very assured in her job, and what her job is, and at the same time, she can wear whatever she wants, she can be as sexy as she wants to be. I like that.

JOSH: Hmm.

MARY-LOUISE: And she's kind of annoying, in a way that is kind of enjoyable to watch.

HRISHI: Yeah, I think not only is she not, as you said so well, overburdened by a need for people to like her, I think she actually is motivated by looking for a fight.

JOSH: It fires her up.

HRISHI: She wants to get under people's skin.

MARY-LOUISE: Yeah. I like that. I mean it's fun to watch.

HRISHI: We're so happy to finally get you on the podcast and get to talk about Amy Gardner with you.

MARY-LOUISE: My brother Jay is going to be so excited. Hi, Jay! He's in love with *The West Wing* podcast, so...

HRISHI: Amazing [laughs]. That's awesome. Thank you so much Mary-Louise.

JOSH: We're glad we finally got you. It's nice to see you.

MARY-LOUISE: Thank you so much. Thanks for asking me.

[transition music]

HRISHI: I like Ron's bedside manner with the kids.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: I like seeing him trying to be sweet, and he is a sweet person, you know we've seen him be sweet in the past as well, but it's nice here. Although his bedside manner is a little bit more gruff when he's talking to the Santoses later, about how their house is going to be turned into like a fort, basically. A secure compound.

JOSH: Well, I think it's possible that he's just bent out of shape - that they built the model before they had the real conversation.

HRISHI: [laughs] That's what I was thinking too.

JOSH: I mean that was the one thing, I was just like, "Wow, this...", again, maybe my TV watching has been ruined by my...

HRISHI: Uh huh.

JOSH: ...co-hosting a podcast. But now that's the kind of thing I think of. Like, "Well, [expletive] we built this whole thing! We really should have had this conversation prior to..."

HRISHI: Maybe?

JOSH: "...building the scale model of the house and neighborhood."

HRISHI: Because as soon as he's, he just moves the guard house [laughter] from where it is in front of the house to the side of the street, he's like "this is what will happen," and they suddenly say, "Well then I guess we're moving our children to DC."

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Ok, didn't need the model for that.

[laughter]

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: It's funny because the reason they wanna keep their kids in school in Houston I guess, is for some sense of continuity and maybe normalcy, but there is no normalcy that's gonna exist in their lives, as we get reminded of, over and over again in this episode. That's just the first domino to fall, I think, that you know, from their really unrealistic sense of, "How are we gonna keep our kids just having the life that they've always had?"

JOSH: Yeah, that's one of the things I also enjoyed about this episode, is that we've seen sort of new people come into the up-and-running Bartlet administration, and we've seen things through their eyes as they're introduced to the wonder of the Oval Office and the high powered nature of affairs in the West Wing, and it was interesting to have an episode dedicated to the main players getting comfortable with their new roles, and what they're surrounded by and we see most of it through Helen's eyes as she's given a staff of what looks to be 30 people, and given a budget, beyond apparently what she had imagined for redecorating, and having to deal with school, and uprooting kids, and all the things that being the First Lady and the President are going to entail.

HRISHI: Yeah, she has this great moment where she has to meet the entire White House domestic staff and C.J. is the one to bring her in there. This was probably a budgetary concern, but in terms of the plot, it works really well that Dr. Bartlet isn't there as incumbent First Lady to show her around, because it means Helen has even less sure footing as she's walking in there for the first time.

JOSH: Yeah that's right.

HRISHI: She meets the Chief Usher who runs that staff, and if you want to know more about the Chief Usher and the history of ushers and stewards, we'll put a link up on the website to [whitehousehistory.org](http://whitehousehistory.org) there's an article about it there. And there's also a book if you wanted to learn more about this, you could read the book by J. B. West, former Chief Usher, called "Upstairs at the White House: My Life with the First Ladies."

JOSH: Nice. The Firsts Lady.

HRISHI: He served from 1957 to 1969, and one of the things he wrote was, "During all my years of managing the White House, my loyalty was not to any one president but rather to the presidency and to the institution that is the White House." There's also I found a review of the book from 1973 in the *New York Times* written by none other than Erma Bombeck, we'll put a link up to that as well.

JOSH: I had a similar thought watching this episode, to the thoughts I've been having as I re-watch *The Crown*. My daughter and her boyfriend are in town, they haven't seen it, so my wife and I are re-watching it with them, so one of the things that we keep commenting on is how bent out of shape Prince Philip always seems to be with his lack of a defined role, not enough to do, and I keep saying, "I don't know, looks pretty good to me."

[laughter]

JOSH: I had a similar reaction at times during this episode, as Helen seems less than enchanted with some of the accoutrements of being the First Lady, and, I don't know, staff of 30, looks pretty good to me! [laughter]

HRISHI: There's this moment where she says to C.J. -

[West Wing Episode 7.20 excerpt]

*HELEN: This is too much, we don't need all these people.*

*C.J.: Ok, which ones do you wanna fire?*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I like that moment a lot,

HRISHI: I do too, but it also feels like a great little encapsulation of government inefficiency at its worst.

JOSH: Absolutely, oh for sure. Yeah, no, it cuts both ways to be sure. But just, putting myself in Helen's shoes [laughter], which is an image right there...

HRISHI: Sure, sure and each one of those shoes brought to you by a different maid.

JOSH: [laughs] That's right. You know, I could come up with what desserts and flowers I like best.

HRISHI: Absolutely, I mean that's basically what I do every day anyway, I just don't have anybody to tell it to.

[laughter]

JOSH: That's it. Same.

HRISHI: Meanwhile, Senator Vinick goes to his office, soon to be no longer his office because we see his staffer Annie packing up boxes, and Sheila's not there because she's being courted by all kinds of people to try and lure her in as one of their staffers now that Vinick's career is ostensibly over. And even when she shows up, she's surprised to see him, she says, "To what do we owe the honor?" With him being in his own office.

JOSH: Yeah

HRISHI: Poor guy.

JOSH: Rough.

HRISHI: And then he's got a whole plan for today. He wants to make calls, he wants to thank the Republican leadership, he wants to look at exit polls. And Annie kind of sums it up as they watch him walk away, Annie sums it up and she says...

[West Wing Episode 7.20 excerpt]

*ANNIE: Who's gonna tell him?*

*SHEILA: What?*

*ANNIE: That the campaign is over.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And did you get the sense here as I did, perhaps because I was part of the show originally, that he was having thoughts at this point of running again?

HRISHI: He was like, season 12 here I come!

JOSH: [laughs] Exactly, No but did you get the sense that that's what Vinick was holding on to, like the people surrounding him seem to get it, it takes them a little bit longer to understand what we, I think, as viewers are aware of more quickly, that's he's considering running again, or hoping to.

HRISHI: Yes, but I didn't get it yet at that point, by the opening credits it felt like, I thought he was just trying to -

JOSH: Do something.

HRISHI: Do something and keep busy, but then when he has the physical, that's really when it's like, ok this guy's trying to shore up the argument for why he can still be President, because he keeps pushing his doctor for better answers to the state of his health.

[West Wing Episode 7.20 excerpt]

*VINICK: So?*

*DOCTOR: So, you're fine.*

*VINICK: Fine.*

*DOCTOR: You're in great shape.*

*VINICK: For a man my age?*

*DOCTOR: For a man half your age. You're kind of a medical miracle actually, you know?*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And then he smiles and he gets ready and he keeps going and that's when I think it really dawns on us, that he's really on day 1 of his election plan.

JOSH: Mmm-hmm. Yeah. This is back in the heady days when the concept of too old or too out of shape for the presidency still existed.

HRISHI: Not so much my friend, not so much anymore.

JOSH: No.

HRISHI: Alan Alda says -

[West Wing Episode 7.20 excerpt]



*VINICK: Go on, say it. You think I'm too old. Don't worry about that, I feel great! I'm telling you, 70 is the new 60.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: So if Vinick were to run and win, he would be 74, and to be fair that would be the oldest president ever inaugurated at this time. Trump was 70 at inauguration, but Bernie Sanders, if he were to win, he would be 79 at inauguration. Joe Biden would be 78, and Elizabeth Warren would also be the oldest president inaugurated at 71. I'm assuming that people who listen to this podcast probably saw or read or heard her great answer in the December 2019 debate about this?

[December 2019 Democratic Debate excerpt]

*REPORTER: Senator Warren, you would be the oldest president ever inaugurated. I'd like you to weigh in as well.*

*WARREN: I'd also be the youngest \*woman\* ever inaugurated, as well.*

[crowd cheers]

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Good answer. She had that one ready!

HRISHI: She had that one ready, but I feel like it's a zinger that *West Wing* fans would appreciate, regardless of their own political inclinations. Something interesting in this episode – if you remember, in *Election Day, Part 2*, Bob and Sheila are telling Vinick that he can challenge the election results – in a court battle, potentially. And he says, “No, no, no, no, no, I don't want to do that. I'll either be a winner or a loser, but I won't be a sore loser.” And it feels like that has kind of flipped here, because – maybe his age \*is\* just the answer, and I'm being conditioned by current circumstances to kind of write that off. Other than his age, I don't know that there isn't a great reason for him not to seek the nomination again. They all seem convinced that he's wrong, but it doesn't feel \*crazy\* in any case; Sheila eventually gives him this idea that -

[West Wing Episode 7.20 excerpt]

*SHEILA: You can enter the history books as maybe the last honorable Senator and a great Secretary of State. Or, you could be the guy who just didn't know when to quit.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Even though just a few weeks ago, a week ago? I don't know, however long ago it was...

JOSH: Right, he was awfully close.

HRISHI: She was telling him, “Fight for it.” Yeah, I was surprised by that. Do you think that he clearly should not run again?

JOSH: Well, I feel like this episode is so effective at – while he does, eventually, get energized, even though he's the only one, with just what's in his head about the possibility of running again, there's something about what's presented to us feels like somebody who's done.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It felt palpably like – what they showed us was a guy who's really run his last race. I don't know, I'm trying to think of it on the merits of it all...

HRISHI: Yeah. He brings up Adlai Stevenson, who was the Democratic party's nominee twice, and Sheila points out that he lost both times, in fact he lost by a lot. But Vinick could have pointed to Thomas Dewey, who was the Republican party's nominee twice in a row. He lost to FDR, but he did have 45% of the popular vote, FDR still won by a pretty large margin, but it was the closest election that FDR ever had, and so with 45% of the popular vote against an enormously popular president going for his fourth term, it made sense to me that Thomas Dewey might go again – you know, he would run and then lose to Truman. But still, it doesn't seem... you know, like it was such a close election.

JOSH: Yeah, the novelty headline framed in his office to show for it.

HRISHI: Yeah, maybe there was. Maybe someone printed a "Vinick Beats Santos" newspaper.

[laughter]

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: But uh, I'm open to arguments that Vinick should run again, even though it messes with the rest of this episode.

[laughter]

JOSH: Well, I like also that Vinick himself is so confident, or so believes in the viability of the idea that he thinks Santos is reaching out to him in order to neutralize him as a future opponent.

HRISHI: Yeah, yeah. When he's thinking about who else might be a potential nominee, he says –

[West Wing Episode 7.20 excerpt]

*VINICK: Tell me who the front runner for the Republican nomination's gonna be. Huh? One of the seven dwarves that I just beat?*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And it was funny, because he's invoking a term that we had seen – Amy Gardner had come up with to describe the Democratic primary candidates.

[West Wing Episode 7.20 excerpt]

*AMY: The field's pathetic. Not one of them can take the Republicans in the fall. I call them the seven dwarves for a reason.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: So that was a funny call back that applied to the other party.

JOSH: Just dw- words altogether are a funny call back.

HRISHI: [laughs] That's right!

JOSH: I'm hoping there still will be a mention of "dweomer" before we get to the finale.

HRISHI: Ah, but those chances are dwindling.

JOSH: Boom!

[laughter]

HRISHI: Oh, one of the things I wanted to mention was about this idea that the President and the First Lady aren't there – again, great plot setup for Helen's story, but the reason why they aren't there is because they're going to a G8 meeting to discuss the situation in Kazakhstan. One thing that I thought was funny was that Russia's part of the G8, and so you've got the three major players in Kazakhstan: you've got China, Russia, and then the US, sort of standing in between the two of them. And they're going to have this forum with the G8 where Russia and the US are there, but – sorry, China, they're just not invited.

JOSH: Huh.

HRISHI: That seems like a potentially inflammatory situation to be like, "Oh, we're going to discuss this thing" - but one of the three major players is not invited. It was just something that I was thinking about.

JOSH: I see your point.

HRISHI: They could have been going to Brussels on vacation. To enjoy the sprouts. Meanwhile, back in the Santos transition office, he announces to his staff, very casually, that his VP choice is Baker.

JOSH: Yes! He has a weird way of sharing information with those around him.

[West Wing Episode 7.20 excerpt]

*LOU: If we could leak a couple of the cabinet names, it might pull some of the press heat off the VP selection.*

*SANTOS: I've decided on the VP. Do we have Nancy McNally's financial disclosure statement?*

*BARRY: Who is your choice for Vice President?*

*SANTOS: Oh! Baker.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah. He really does. Baker, who is of course played by Ed O'Neill.

JOSH: Right – not seen in this episode.

HRISHI: And Amy – you can see – looks displeased.

JOSH: Right. While this is a huge decision, the thing that essentially all other cabinet posts and appointments are waiting on, it's weird the way he just casually shares the information and they don't even know that he's arrived at a decision yet, until he just kind of tosses it out.

HRISHI: Yeah! The whole thing's just a little weird. Amy, as we know, was backing another horse; she was backing Carol Gelsey, as we saw in "Requiem," because she thought this was an incredible opportunity to nominate a woman, and show that a woman could serve at such a high level, and we talked about that a little that episode, but I didn't realize this until this time around, looking at this stuff, she was the congresswoman from Florida, and she ran for Governor, and she lost, which means that she was defeated by Rob Ritchie!

JOSH: Oh, wow. Boy, you're good. That's interesting.

HRISHI: Isn't that neat? It was a nice little tie-in. So now you have this problem with Baker as the potential VP.

JOSH: It's going to be problematic if they go the Senate route, because the Republicans are going to be hesitant about approving him, because he'll be such a formidable presidential candidate down the line, likely.

HRISHI: Exactly, yeah. Which is a scenario that we've kind of seen before, because it's how we ended up with Bob Russell as Vice President, because in that moment, the Republican leadership basically forced the Bartlet administration to pick a weak VP choice. A situation that was caused by the exit of John Hoynes, played by Tim Matheson, who directed this episode!

JOSH: Oh. [sings] "The circle of life."

HRISHI: [laughs] But yeah, Baker's too strong of a candidate, so – what are they gonna do? But Santos doesn't want to take the politically expedient way out.

JOSH: You mean in his desire to send it to the Senate?

HRISHI: Yeah. He wants to do the right thing, in a frustratingly West Wingian manner.

[West Wing Episode 7.20 excerpt]

*SANTOS: If he has to take over the Presidency, then people should know how he got there. If he goes through a Congressional confirmation – hearings of the House, the Senate, the works – then the country will know everything about him before he takes the oath of office.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And it's a fair position, and later it's the exact same thing that Vinick says. That you cannot let these 272 Electoral College voters decide who this person is, and essentially deprive the voters of having any kind of say. Even by proxy through their representatives. But what do you think? Louise says that people don't care about the Vice President, they're voting for the top of the ticket.

JOSH: Oh, well that is certainly the case, but I think the point that's then made is the classic "heartbeat away from the Presidency" is a valid concern that does resonate with people.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And I think that it is a legitimate concern.

HRISHI: Mmm-hmm. And while they're thinking about that, they're trying to figure out, "Ok, so if we're going to do this, how do we pressure the Senate Republicans to actually confirm this person?" Meanwhile, they've got three of the four big cabinet positions set – they're still missing Secretary of State. And Barry Goodwin says, "Hey, it would be great if we could announce all of them, all together." And they're having this thought in the same conversation of how do we pressure the Senate Republicans, and they might as well have put a lightbulb over Santos's head in that moment, because he's like, "I need to talk to Arnold Vinick." Santos doesn't want Nancy McNally to be Secretary of State.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: And I love that there's a little bit of tension about that later, between Amy and C.J. –

[West Wing Episode 7.20 excerpt]

*CJ: He's having a little trouble picking a Secretary?*

*AMY: He's still staring at the short list.*

*C.J.: Nancy McNally?*

*AMY: I have no idea, I'm just the messenger. (pause) She's on the short list.*

*CJ: Good!*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I like that C.J.'s looking out for Nancy McNally.

JOSH: Yeah, I like that too.

HRISHI: And I also like that despite that, like, she's not going to get it, we know she's not – by the end of this that she's not gonna get it. She's gonna be UN Ambassador instead, if she accepts it. I wasn't sure if she would. The UN Ambassador reports to the Secretary of State.

JOSH: Yeah, I was mulling over that too, what kind of move that is, for her.

HRISHI: Yeah. Versus a National Security Advisor, who reports directly to the President.

JOSH: Mmm-hmm.

HRISHI: Like would it seem like a demotion?

JOSH: Ah, that I don't know – I wondered, was that a lateral move, is that going a step backwards?

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Or is that just sort of a different arena that might be appealing to...

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: ...somebody like Nancy McNally.

HRISHI: Yeah, maybe she would like it. But what's really interesting about it too, is that UN Ambassador is the post that President Bartlet offered to Arnold Vinick!

JOSH: To Vinick, yep.

HRISHI: Back in another Lawrence O'Donnell episode, "In the Room," which he turns down, in season six. Because he announces that he's running for President. And that's when Leo says, "We've got no one who can beat him."

JOSH: Mmm-hmm.

HRISHI: It's funny that now Nancy McNally is going to be offered the job that he didn't take, and he's going to be offered the job that they were considering her for.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: I think the thinking behind it makes a lot of sense.

[*West Wing* Episode 7.20 excerpt]

*SANTOS: I want a fresh take on Kazakhstan. Someone who was never part of the team that got us in there.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: He wants a completely new take.

JOSH: Right, new sleigh.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It made sense to me when he said it – I get it.

HRISHI: Absolutely.

JOSH: That's a thoughtful approach.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I thought it was interesting; the scene between Santos – the big meeting between Santos and Vinick – I liked it a lot, it was interesting...

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: ... on a lot of levels. But he starts by – in I think an unsophisticated way, trying to gull Vinick into answering whether he'd be ok with being considered for the Vice Presidency...

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: ... And Vinick just immediately calls it out for what it is.

[*West Wing* Episode 7.20 excerpt]

*VINICK: Nice try. I know your game! You get me to say I'd consider it, then you have your people leak it to the press. That gives you a couple of days of stories about how bipartisan Matt Santos is – "He's even got a Republican on the short list for Vice President!"*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: You can't tell whether that was supposed to be some sort of little test, or did Santos really think he might pave the way for Baker with this sort of stratagem with Vinick, and then it ends with his being offered Secretary of State.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Which seems, in a way, reckless, and sort of spur of the moment, and surprising for all [cross talk]

HRISHI: [cross talk] and he surprises his staff as well with it.

JOSH: Yeah, completely. Again, he's told them nothing.

HRISHI: Yeah. But I suspect that this was actually Santos's plan the entire time, that he would do this thing with the Vice Presidency, and see if it might work, he'd run it as a gambit, and it's not really surprising that Vinick called him on it. But he calls him on it so precisely, he lays out every single move and what the feint is, and what the results are – it's great. And later Santos tells him he's brilliant, he figured it out immediately.

JOSH: Well that's what I was wondering, it almost plays out like it was a brain teaser – put it out there, like "If he could figure this out, I'll offer him Secretary of State."

HRISHI: Exactly!

JOSH: But it also, I think, inadvertently, fuels Vinick's concern that the offer for Secretary of State isn't straight up. That there's something more behind it. Because he's just attempted to kind of trip him up on the one hand, then he offers this job on the other. And I think naturally, Vinick's like, "Well, what's going on here?"

HRISHI: Yeah!

JOSH: "Is it cause he's scared of me and doesn't want me to run against him down the line? How am I going to be used – is there going to be an end run around State if I'm in charge?"

HRISHI: You know Vinick says, "You know, he's just using me – he appoints a Republican, so that the Republicans will let him have Baker as Vice President. He doesn't really want me." And Bob says, "Do you really think that they would horse-trade with a job like State?" And I think that they are both right. Santos later says, "I really want you to do it. This is not about Baker, I want you to do it." And I think that's a little bit of – I think that Santos sees a way to basically take down a 7-10 split.

JOSH: Hmm. Well said.

HRISHI: He needs a great Secretary of State. He can do that with Vinick. He also needs a way to pressure the Senate Republicans to confirm Baker, that's still a thing.

JOSH: Absolutely.

HRISHI: So Vinick is true, yeah. [cross talk]

JOSH: [cross talk] It's a win-win.

HRISHI: Yeah, exactly. It's a win-win for everyone. And that's why of course it's like a great strategy on Santos's part. But I think it's a little bit disingenuous for Santos to say it's not about Baker.

JOSH: No, I agree, I agree. It's also interesting the way Jimmy Smits plays the scene. He's got a sly smile on his face the whole time...

HRISHI: Yeah!

JOSH: He doesn't say that much, he's not super-hard selling that he's being genuine, the whole thing is – it's interesting and kind of artful.

HRISHI: It's very artful, that's the perfect word for it. Especially at the very end. They're still arguing about the mechanics of how it might work, or Vinick is, he's saying, "I won't do any kind of fundraising, or anything like that." By the way, I love, I *love* this part of the episode where Vinick says,

[West Wing Episode 7.20 excerpt]

*VINICK: I'd have to have my own Deputy Secretary.*

*SANTOS: Pick any Democrat you want.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: That's so good!

JOSH: Yeah. Great interchange.

HRISHI: But then the way that Santos really hooks him into the job is to skip past all this stuff, and then jump into the actual work. And again, in true *West Wing* fashion, the thing that these guys really care about is the actual work. And so he hands him a briefing and Vinick just falls for it, essentially.

JOSH: Right. He gets pulled in.

HRISHI: Yeah. And I think Santos is playing him a little bit.

JOSH: Mmm-hmm.

HRISHI: Again, in a way that is gonna give them both what they really want. Vinick doesn't want to be irrelevant.

JOSH: Yeah, absolutely. The whole episode is suffused with exactly that feeling, that he's looking for a role beyond sitting on a board and collecting money for doing little, and you also get these heart-breaking moments of reduced significance for him - the coffee guy doesn't even know his name, hears him incorrectly.

HRISHI: Right.



JOSH: And the other really heart-breaking moment for Vinick is when he's waiting for Santos, who's actually still school-shopping with Helen, and he's in the hubbub of the Santos office.

[West Wing Episode 7.20 excerpt]

VINICK: *What do I have tomorrow?*

SHEILA: *You have a haircut at ten.*

VINICK: *Ok, then what?*

SHEILA: *That looks like it.*

VINICK: *For the rest of the day?*

SHEILA: *For the rest of the year.*

(then when Barry Goodwin walks in)

VINICK: *Ok, well, let's confirm all that and make sure I have the updated schedules today.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That's such a human moment with which I can identify, and it's sad to see [cross talk] Arnold Vinick living it.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah.

HRISHI: No [laughs], she is not sensitive about it. He's like, "What's on my calendar?" [laughter] And she says a haircut is all he's got for the rest of the year.

JOSH: Year! [laughter] Oof! Thanks for that. So you can see why he might spark to the idea of playing a substantive and real role in the new administration.

HRISHI: Yeah, and this feels almost like the bottom of the top tier that he will accept.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: Because even just being an eminence grise for the Republican party is not good enough for him.

[West Wing Episode 7.20 excerpt]

SHEILA: *You could be a king-maker.*

VINICK: *But not the king?*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And so here, clearly he's not the king, as well, Santos is saying, "I expect you to sell – you'll have as much time to convince me of whatever your thinking is, but in the end I expect you to sell whatever decision I make." And so there is still some element of pride-swallowing that Vinick will have to do.

JOSH: Right, yeah, because the two – Sheila and Bob – have to sort of psych him up to accept Secretary of State.

HRISHI: Yeah. Secretary of State, by the way, is number 4 in the line of succession, after the Vice President, after Speaker of the House, and after the Senate President Pro Tem, and so I like that it's just enough for him to be tempted by it. You know right in the moment that Santos says "Secretary of State," Alan Alda does a bit of a doubletake. He thinks about it - "Secretary of State?" - like he realizes that if the vice presidential offer – he knew that it wasn't real, he knew that kind of stunk, but that one is just real enough that he's like – "Whoa."

JOSH: I know, and I was like basically shouting, "Dude, take it! Take it!"

[laughter]

HRISHI: His staff – really, I was a little bit surprised by how slow they were on the pick-up about what his plans were earlier. You know when he's like, "I want to take guest lecturer positions in Ohio, Pennsylvania and Florida."

JOSH: Exactly. People, come on!

HRISHI: They had to have the conversation a couple times, like what are those three states? When are you ever going to talk about those three states together?

JOSH: Yeah. They're a little slow on the uptake.

HRISHI: Yeah. You know who gets burned real bad in this episode?

JOSH: Who's that?

HRISHI: St. Albans. An actual school in DC [cross talk] that the Santoses declare to be "stuffy." And absolutely not the right fit for their kids.

JOSH: [cross talk] Oh! Yeah.

JOSH: I know, I'm surprised it wasn't something made up. Say, Kumar.

HRISHI: [laughter] Right, yeah, exactly.

JOSH: So maybe somebody had an ax to grind there.

HRISHI: Maybe. That being said, in terms of elite boarding schools, St. Albans is THE most expensive, and even for their younger kids who'd be going as day students, for the 2019-2020 academic year, \$47,768.

JOSH: [dramatic exhale] Holy moly. They must have some uniform! [Hrishi laughs]

HRISHI: Bancroft, by the way, currently charges \$29,000 for tuition.

JOSH: Oof!

HRISHI: So it leads us to this thing where they look at these three different schools – there's a third school that isn't named, that gets burned I guess even more but it's not actually named, where Santos says no children were smiling or anything.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: And so he wants to look at a public school as an option. By the way, the dynamic between the two of them – that husband-wife dynamic, felt so real to me. Everything about this discussion – from her getting in his face about walking out of the room while the Secret Service were talking to the kids, and then later when he’s like, “I didn’t know we were going to look at a third school; I’ve got Arnold Vinick waiting for me,” and she just gives him a look. And having already been chastened by the previous conversation I think he’s just kind of like – yeah, ok yeah.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: And he just makes the call.

JOSH: Yeah [laughs] makes the call.

HRISHI: But then it flipped around here – I really love when he wants to look at a public school, and he’s talking about it, and she kind of starts to make some arguments against him, but then she’s like -

[West Wing Episode 7.20 excerpt]

*HELEN: You want to look at a public school? We’ll look at a public school, ok?*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: [laughs] There’s something about the tone and the delivery and the writing of that, that just felt so real.

JOSH: I agree with you. You know, we haven’t had tons and tons and tons of episodes and scenes with the two of them, but the writing and the performances from Jimmy Smits and Teri Polo, they’ve created a very real, a palpably real relationship, and marriage.

HRISHI: Yeah. A way, again, that Santos is incredibly differentiated from the Bartlet campaign and the Bartlet staff.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: He has this line, when they’re driving in the car, when they’re talking about the cost of Bancroft, Santos says, “What would public school will be like if we spent \$25,000 per pupil?” And there was a part of me that flashed back to the Bartlet administration in its heyday, imagining what Sam Seaborn would say. He would say,

[West Wing Episode 1.18 excerpt]

*SAM: Education is the silver bullet; education is everything. We don’t need little changes, we need gigantic, monumental changes. Schools should be palaces. The competition for the best teachers should be fierce. They should be making six-figure salaries. School should be incredibly expensive for government, and absolutely free of charge to its citizens, just like national defence. That’s my position.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Hmmm.

HRISHI: He's like, "What if we spent \$25,000 per pupil in public school," and I thought, "That means you'd be doing it right!"

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Then again, this is also from the same government that says, "Ok, not all these people are useful, but we aren't going to fire all of them."

JOSH: That's true.

HRISHI: Santos's education plan had a lot of resistance from the teachers' unions, because he wanted to have greater accountability for the standards of teachers. So to me, it makes a lot of sense that he would have that opinion, that he would have that view. But it felt like a big difference from the Bartlet years. Another bit of contrast that I really liked was just this moment when Helen comes to meet with the decorator, and she comes into C.J.'s office, and she doesn't know where to go, and Margaret doesn't get up to take her to the meeting – she just looks at her and just points, she's like "Oh, it's over there." It's behavior that's very unlike Margaret, but Margaret's like [laughs], "I'm outta here." She's like a high school senior in the last week of school.

JOSH: That's funny.

HRISHI: She's like, "This is not *my* problem."

JOSH: Yes [laughs]. Yeah, I like that moment too.

HRISHI: Again, it was great because it underpins this thing about Margaret potentially as a character, but it also makes way for Helen to be able to not know where she's going, and open the door from the Chief of Staff's office into what turns out to be the Oval Office, and she gets to have her moment of awe.

JOSH: Right. That made me think of the story I told *long* ago on the podcast of the first time I walked onto that set. I feel like I had the exact moment that we see her have.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Not a very woke – uh whoever it is helping her with decorations, the decorator I guess, not a very woke proposal for her kids' bedrooms [Hrishi laughs]. "I can do a cowboy for the boy, and a princess for the girl."

HRISHI: Oh, but she has a larger theme for the White House, which is hetero-normativity.

JOSH: Well, there you go!

[laughter]

HRISHI: We've seen that decorator before, though.

JOSH: We have?

HRISHI: She was the decorator who was helping C.J. redo Leo's office. Her name is Bonita Friedericy; and she played Gail Addison.

JOSH: Who offers to redecorate Leo's office as a pirate ship.

[laughter]

HRISHI: And she also has some not-superkind words to say about the Bartlets, and their taste.

[West Wing Episode 7.20 excerpt]

GAIL ADDISON: *I've never liked the color of this rug, but the Bartlets – well.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It's like wow. They haven't even moved out yet, but ok. But she also tells her that she only has \$200,000 to do the redecoration, and I think the whole day - Helen is just overwhelmed.

JOSH: Yeah, I think so too. Although, when she said, "We've got 200 grand to do it, you should consider maybe trying to raise multi millions to make it happen," I was thinking, OR they could just shop at Article. [laughs] Just throw an extra plug in there. Go to article.com and fill this Oval Office with Bamba poufs, it's going to look like a brand new place.

HRISHI: There's some good guest appearances in this episode. In addition to the return of Gail Addison, that barista who you mentioned, who Senator Vinick – he gives him his name and says, "Senator" and then he changes it to Arnie and then [cross talk] Ernie.

JOSH: [cross talk] Ernie

HRISHI: That is Parvesh Cheena, who I know from *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, and he's been in [cross talk] lots and lots of things.

JOSH: [cross talk] Actually, I meant to check myself, because I knew I recognized him when I saw that scene.

HRISHI: Yep, he's been in lots of stuff. And then the principal of the public school was played by Maria Broom, who's Marla Daniels in *The Wire*.

JOSH: Oh, I knew I recognized her too.

HRISHI: Yeah, she's Lt. Daniels' wife and a politician in that show.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Another moment that happens in that office that I really like is – when Amy is coming down the hall, and Ronna says – "Direct report has that it's Baker," and she says, "How did they do it?" and she says, "Is it Baker?" And Amy just ices her!

JOSH: Completely.

HRISHI: Just says nothing to her [laughs], and then just walks into the room, and I felt bad because if Ronna had just followed her into the room or even just stood by the door, she'd have heard Santos himself saying that it was Baker.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Literally the first thing that he said [laughter]. Poor Ronna.

JOSH: It was cold.

HRISHI: But there was some internal communication issues...

JOSH: For sure.

HRISHI: ...In that administration that need to be ironed out.

JOSH: Yes. Ok, we're going to take a quick break now, and when we come back, we'll talk to Teri Polo about her role as Helen Santos.

[transition music]

HRISHI: And joining us now is Teri Polo. Teri, thank you so much for joining us!

TERI: My pleasure, I'm so happy to be here to ride on the coattails of *The West Wing*, is what I do best.

[Josh laughs]

HRISHI: I was wondering if we could actually go back before *The West Wing* even, and talk about your role as Rebecca in *Sports Night*.

[Sports Night Episode 1.13 excerpt]

*DAN: I was wondering if you'd like to maybe have a drink later?*

*REBECCA: Oh, that's – that's really sweet of you. But no thanks.*

*DAN: This thing with Elaine isn't that serious.*

*REBECCA: Who's Elaine?*

*DAN: Exactly.*

*REBECCA: Dan, I've really got work to do.*

*DAN: Look do you want to...*

*REBECCA: Dan I'm flattered honestly, but I'm just not interested.*

[end excerpt]

TERI: Oh wow, Josh. You know, that television show made me a better actress. I have never been more challenged in my entire career. I'll never forget the audition, when I was sitting there with Tommy Schlamme and Aaron, and I did the scene [laughs] I'll never forget Aaron saying, "Well, I noticed how you ad-libbed a little bit during that audition." [laughs] And I thought, oh yeah, well I'm so brilliant at ad-libbing, I'm sure that impressed him ... And he was like, "no."

[laughter]

JOSH: Let me discourage that in the future!

TERI: And that was the beginning of working for Aaron, and my fondest memory of that was a scene that I did with Josh (Charles). It was Friday night, at about 11pm, and we had about an eight page scene, that took us all the way from Dan's office all the way through out into the hallway in the foyer where the elevators were for the actual building, not for the television show, but for the actual building – to the elevators. And again with Aaron, you don't substitute a "the" for a "this" or stick in an "uh," or hum, – you said it word for word. Now we were there until 2am shooting this scene because it was one shot, with the steady-camera. It was mind-blowing. And not only did you have to get every word right, did the camera have to get everything right, the blocking had to get everything right, but then you had to act, also, and you had to make it good [laughs], so – like I said, that television show made me a better actor. I have never in my life been so challenged.

JOSH: I completely agree with everything you're saying, I feel the same way.

TERI: Insane!

JOSH: It was high stakes, which was fun.

TERI: Definitely!

HRISHI: So even though Aaron was not on *The West Wing* when you joined the cast, you had this nice connection to his writing – the show of course, had a connection to his writing – but you had a connection having been on another show with him. And I was wondering, if you felt that, in the DNA of the scenes that you would be doing, the episodes you would be doing as Helen Santos, even though they weren't actually written by Aaron, because they were in this world that he had created.

TERI: Yeah. Oh, absolutely. Without a doubt, and of course Tommy Schlamme was a partner in crime on *Sports Night*, and there he was on *The West Wing*, and I remember coming on and thinking, "This is the most well-oiled machine I have ever encountered." I, on a daily basis - feel like I was so in over my head, I just was so in over my head because these actors that I came into – it was extraordinary how well they knew these characters, and how well they knew where they were going and what they were doing, and that to me was Aaron. Like I'm so in over my head, I have no clue – I look back at some of the episodes like what was I thinking? Who? Like, [sings] "Which one of these is not like the other?" [Hrishi laughs] That's what I thought like.

JOSH: What are you talking about? [laughs] I can understand when you jump into something that's already running at first feeling that way. You're saying you actually look back at this stuff? I mean, you're wonderful on the show, and we're always talking about what a real and grounded and convincing relationship the Santoses have.

HRISHI: And especially in this episode. I mean, in every episode, but this episode we talked about, earlier in our discussion, Josh and I talked about every how beat, every little microbeat, just felt so real between the two of you.

TERI: Jimmy Smits is a gentleman and a scholar, and God or whoever it is broke the mold when he was made, because he was a gentleman. He was – is – he would be so hard on himself, if he forgot a line, if he forgot a word – if it just wasn't right. It was so professional, he was so invested, and there was - there was this lovely chemistry with him that was like dancing, it was like music, it was sexy, it was sweet, it was funny, it was – again, just such an honor to work with him. As far as being real, like that episode "The Last Hurrah," was because I felt like I was completely in over my head [laughs], so I think that translated really well on the screen, to be perfectly honest. I think that that in a way kind of works for Helen,

because she was – she was in over her head and a fish out of water. It was interesting seeing her put her foot down though about the school...

HRISHI: Yeah.

TERI: ... was really very cool to see.

JOSH: What you described was very similar to what I felt when I first joined the show, and I was able to use that same feeling because Will Bailey's story was also the fish out of water, getting wowed, meeting the President, there were very similar beats to what you were going through as the First Lady in the White House in this episode.

TERI: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

JOSH: Did you have any time – you talk about your chemistry with Jimmy, which is fantastic, did you have any time to develop it, or did you meet him the first day on the set, or at a read through, or was there any rehearsal, or how'd that work?

TERI: I think we just met that day, if memory serves. I do remember being told by Chris Misiano [laughs] that my hair was wrong, that we were going to have to do something about the hair, and the tattoos just were not going to work...

JOSH: [laughs] Although they eventually would write it in.

TERI: [laughs] I know right! As a red thong would have been... [Josh laughs loudly] not that I ever wore those, I don't know where they got that either.

JOSH: [laughs] So Chris Misiano wanted all sorts of changes [laughs] for how you would appear as Helen.

TERI: Yeah, you know I think they liked – which was lovely - they liked my acting, which was great, but they needed to pull me together, shall we say – I think I was a little too crazy for them, not quite as subdued as they would like Helen to be. So my hair was a little crazy, I had tattoos and piercings and stuff like that, so that all kinda went away, which was great! Because it made me feel more like Helen.

JOSH: So was there makeup covering tattoos involved, that kind of thing? Or just dressing you to...

TERI: Kind of both, there was makeup covering up, and wardrobe covering up. But you know, Helen didn't show much skin anyway, except for that one scene. [laughs]

JOSH: Fair enough.

HRISHI: Do you remember – Josh has talked about the first time that he walked into the set of the Oval Office, that the set – despite being fully aware that he was on a set, that it still had an effect on him and I was wondering if you felt the same way?

TERI: Oh, absolutely. Mostly because of it being the set on *The West Wing*, because at that point *The West Wing* was so incredibly iconic. But also because it was so very similar, it was so spot-on that there was this reverence that you felt when you walked in, I felt like I had to be really quiet, and not touch anything.

[laughter]



HRISHI: One of my favorite parts about this episode is the sort of formal – not chilly – but you know there isn't like a real camaraderie between Helen and the current White House inhabitants. You know, C.J. and Margaret are both kind of – you know C.J.'s certainly polite and does everything that she needs, Margaret's kind of like, "Alright yeah, there's the door." And it was an interesting reminder to me because that at that point – here we are at the end of the series – Helen has become such a fixture in my mind as part of *The West Wing*, but all of your scenes – your entire world has been in this Santos campaign world and not in the White House, and interacting with those characters. Did you feel your own sense of separation from sort of the old-school cast compared to the integrated way that Helen lived with the season six and seven cast?

TERI: Absolutely. It was kind of difficult, because – again, because you watched this show, and you just loved these characters so much, and you loved these people, and again – all of the actors had such an amazing camaraderie much less the characters, such amazing chemistry that they just fed off of each other and could [snapping fingers] finish sentences like that. That you know, as a human being you're kind of jealous as an actor that they have this camaraderie. And again, you know, I didn't know politics to save my life, at that point in time, so half the stuff I said I'm like, "I have no idea what I'm saying, good thing I'm a good actor!"

JOSH: [laughs] We've had a lot of people feel that way and articulate that sentiment.

TERI: I wasn't really involved in politics, unlike today, which is an unfortunate time to be involved in politics.

JOSH: Did working on *The West Wing* inspire you to become more politically aware and active, or did that come later?

TERI: No, that came later. It really came to fruition with the last election, when I was absolutely mortified. Anyway, moving on!

[laughter]

HRISHI: There's one scene that I wanted to ask you about. That scene that we talked about, where Helen puts her foot down about the schools. There's a great, just very quick interaction between Helen and Amy Gardner.

[West Wing Episode 7.20 excerpt]

*HELEN: How would you feel if you were five years old and some people with guns were telling you that they were going to take over your life?*

*AMY: Sorry, I guess this is my fault ...*

*HELEN: This has nothing to do with you. What you are talking about out here can wait. What we're talking about in there is keeping your children alive.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I feel like there is so much subtext in that interaction between Helen and Amy, and it just makes me think about, "What does Helen think about this?" This is somebody who has not been a part of the campaign, really, and now she's Director of Legislative Affairs, and she's coming in and taking her husband away from the Secret Service briefing of their children. It's a really fantastic amount of information that you deliver in that one line. And I just was wondering how you got there.

TERI: I remember being concerned that Helen was coming across as a bitch, and I went, wait a minute, is she? Are we seeing a part that we haven't seen before? Is this like all of a sudden the bitch in her is going to come out? But it's just no, you are a certain way until it comes to your husband. You know, you allow so much and then at one point, it's like - you shut it down, period. And there's been so much of an intrusion upon your life with him, your life with your family, that at some point she just has had enough and she draws the line. And it was that one line that you went, "Whoa." It was just do not mess with Helen. She's very sweet, and very kind, and is very even – which was great, it was such a lovely turn to be able to take for her. Just to see that for a minute and then, you know – it was a nice, rich moment.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It was a great moment. And in fairness, she is the First Lady now.

TERI: Yeah.

JOSH: I mean, whether or not that's the direct link, but she's also – she is the First Lady.

HRISHI: Yeah. She's got some room to flex.

JOSH: Absolutely.

TERI: Yeah, I'm really bummed that I didn't get to be the First Lady for longer. That would have been so much fun. I would have wreaked havoc, I think.

[laughter]

JOSH: We've talked before, including with John Wells recently about the fact that he and others had hoped that the show might in fact carry on into an eighth season, in which of course you obviously would have been heavily featured. Do you remember at the time talking about that, or looking forward to that, or the disappointment of it not happening?

TERI: No, I felt like I was a guest on that show. I was not a regular, I was not. And so it was, "Oh, your show isn't coming back." And I felt like there were so many different factors in it not coming back. And one thing that comes to mind is the loss of John Spencer. I will never forget that day on set. 'Cause we were on set, and he was late. And when they came in and said this – I'll never, ever, ever, because the love that everyone had for him, and the way everyone had to work around that, not only as actors, as writers, as friends – I've never experienced anything like it. And so the way they worked around that, I think, was brilliant, and yet absolutely heart-breaking for everyone. The most amazing compliment I think I've ever gotten in my thirty-three years of acting came from John. He goes, "Teri," he goes, "you can just tell that you're a wonderful actress because on set, before they yell action, you are the kookiest, craziest, silliest I've ever seen, and as soon as they yell action, you become this sophisticated, poised Helen Santos. And then as soon as they yell cut, you're doing cartwheels around the set again." And he goes, "That's a testament to what a wonderful actress you are." It literally brought tears to my eyes when he told me that.

JOSH: That's awesome. That's a lovely thing for him to have said, and a great memory. And you're – I think you're absolutely right, as many considerations and factors as went into the decision not to continue the show, I think the overriding one by far was the loss of John and the feeling, just emotionally, that the series is over at this point.

HRISHI: I wanted to ask you about another aspect of the Matt Santos/Helen Santos dynamic. Which is – a Latino candidate, and much is made of his race and whether or not it's a focal issue or not, and a white spouse of the candidate. There's one episode where it comes up where it's a little bit discussed, you know, but for the most part it's kind of left in the background – but I was wondering if it was something that you two were cognizant of, or you – the idea of portraying an interracial couple – at all?

TERI: I don't think it ever really came up, and I think that that was part of the beauty of it, was that it was never even discussed. It was never even an issue, it was never made anything of. Granted, Matt would have had to have dealt with it, simply because he was the politician, but you go back to Helen, I think she would have been, "Do not F with me. Do not mess with me, do not even mention it, because this is a non-issue." I don't think it was ever brought up, to be perfectly honest.

HRISHI: That's great. I really appreciate that it was a non-issue on the show, I really loved the fact of it, the fact that it was just treated kind of matter-of-factly, and it – except in this one specific context of an actual political event, it didn't come up. I always loved that as a viewer. But I was also curious if the non-discussion of it in the show was a matter of discussion behind the scenes or if it was also just treated as a non-issue behind the scenes. So that's great, I'm happy to hear that that was the case.

TERI: Yeah. I do, I believe it was just a non-issue behind the scenes, it was never talked about or brought up. Not to say it should or shouldn't have been, that's just the way it was, in regards to that.

HRISHI: Yeah. I think it shouldn't have been. I'd love to feel like that's the goal.

TERI: Amen.

HRISHI: I'm part of an interracial marriage, and I often forget the fact of that, you know, that it's even a thing to think about, ninety-nine percent of the time. And I really only ever think about it in the rare instances when we travel, and we go someplace where it might be unusual to see or something. But living in LA, it doesn't feel like it's a thing at all, and I'm really grateful for that.

TERI: Yeah. Well, I often say, in so many regards, that Los Angeles and New York are oases in this country, and we are fortunate – the few of us that happen to live in these two oases, we're fortunate. There's a responsibility I think in two different ways, there's a responsibility to make it a non-issue, and then there's a responsibility to make it an issue. And I think on any given day, with any given person or group of people, it can go – but in this case it was what it was at the time, and it was a non-issue both on and off screen.

HRISHI: That's great. To me that feels idealistic in a way that I really appreciate from *The West Wing*, the fact that it allowed us to take it for granted.

TERI: Yeah.

HRISHI: Thank you so much for talking to us.

JOSH: That was a great interview Teri, thank you.

TERI: Thank you. Again, I'm grateful to be a part of it and thank you for allowing me to be a part of it, like I was allowed to be a part of the show, period.

[transition music]

HRISHI: And that does it for another episode of *The West Wing Weekly*.

JOSH: The ante-penultimate episode, as it were. By the by.

HRISHI: Mmm-hmm. Two to go!

JOSH: Two to go. Two to go, people! We remain, as ever, part of Radiotopia, a collection of the finest podcasts in all of the land. You can learn more about the others at Radiotopia.fm, and thanks to everybody who donated to our fundraiser. It's not too late to throw some money, is it? It's never, right?

HRISHI: It's never too late.

JOSH: Yeah. Thanks to Margaret Miller and Zach McNeas.

HRISHI: And our thanks to Teri Polo and Mary-Louise Parker for joining us. Mary-Louise Parker is not on social media, but if you want to follow Teri Polo, she's @teripolo1 on Twitter, and teripolo.official on Instagram.

JOSH: Ok.

HRISHI: Ok.

MARY-LOUISE and TERI: What's next?

[Outro Music]