

The West Wing Weekly Episode
1:05: "The Crackpots and These Women"
Guest: Eli Attie

[West Wing Episode 1.05 excerpt]

TOBY: It's "throw open our office doors to people who want to discuss things that we could care less about" day.

[end excerpt]

[Intro Music]

JOSH: Hi, you're listening to The West Wing Weekly. My name is Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: And I'm Hrishikesh Hirway.

JOSH: We are here to discuss season one, episode five, "The Crackpots and These Women". It originally aired on October 20th, 1999. This episode was written by Aaron Sorkin; it was directed by Anthony Drazan, who among other things directed the 1998 film version of David Rabe's *Hurlyburly*, the play on which it was based having been mentioned in episode one of our podcast. We're coming full circle.

HRISHI: Our guest today is writer and producer Eli Attie. Eli joined the staff of *The West Wing* in its third season, but before his gig in fictional D.C. he worked as a political operative in the real White House, serving as a special assistant to President Bill Clinton, and then as Vice President Al Gore's chief speechwriter. He's also written for *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, *House*, and *Rosewood*. Eli, welcome to The West Wing Weekly.

ELI: It's a great pleasure to be here.

JOSH: I'm a little bit under the weather, but Lady Podcast is a cruel mistress, and she waits for no man's cold, so if I sound congested, it's because I'm congested. And Eli, I'm curious actually, just a little background on you – how did you make the jump from real politics to the world of *The West Wing* and the staff?

ELI: As you mentioned, I was Al Gore's chief speechwriter when the Florida recount happened, which was this crazy, demoralizing grind. The recount ended, Gore didn't become the president; I really needed to leave town and sort of figure out something new to do with my life.

JOSH: Had that whole thing soured you on politics generally?

ELI: Well, it's the old phrase, "I didn't leave politics; politics left me." That was definitely how the recount felt. Some of it was having the election stolen (certainly that's how I viewed it), and some of it was just the grind. I mean the average White House staff person is there for eighteen months, and I was there for close to five years. All of us unemployed, democratic staffers were going out to bars and restaurants every night and kind of drinking away our sorrows, and everyone's saying, "are you gonna move to New York, are you gonna stay here?", and whenever anyone asked me what I wanted to do, I would say "you know, I'm thinking of moving to L.A. and becoming a TV writer". I didn't know what that meant, really, but every single person said "*The West Wing* – you should go work on *The West Wing*". Even though I wasn't watching it, every single person in Washington was starting to watch it and love it and become a little obsessed with it. So, I watched a couple episodes on the air, and I realized, this is actually pretty great. So I just thought to myself, I should just call this guy Aaron Sorkin. And so what I actually did – it's kind of amazing in retrospect – I called from my little apartment in Washington, I called Los Angeles information. I went from the Warner Brothers switchboard to The West Wing offices, Aaron Sorkin's office, and his assistant answered the phone and I

said “I’m calling for Aaron Sorkin; I was Al Gore’s speechwriter until a couple weeks ago.” And she put me on hold, and then Aaron got on the phone. I remember the first thing he said was something like “How are you? Are you sleeping okay? You guys got robbed.” We had like a minute-long phone conversation in which I said, “Look. I actually haven’t watched very much of *The West Wing*. He said “I totally understand. When would you have the time?” I said “I do know that it honors people in politics, which is something I really appreciate, and I’m not asking you for a job, but I’m interested in being a TV writer, and I’d love to have a cup of coffee with you; I’m gonna come to L.A. sometime soon.” He said “great, call my assistant”, hung up the phone, and that’s sort of the beginning of it.

JOSH: Wow, that’s very ballsy of you, and it speaks to a simpler time in Hollywood, that you were able to get through to Aaron.

ELI: But the craziest thing of all is he hired me for the third season, a one-year contract; he had no idea if I could really do this job probably, but I’m sure he just figured I had a lot of stories. Right as I was beginning to move to L.A., I talked to an old friend of mine who I’d gone to elementary school with on the phone, and was telling him “I’m moving to L.A. and taking this job on this show”. He said “well you know who Aaron Sorkin’s mother is, don’t you?” I said “Who’s Aaron Sorkin’s mother?” He said “It’s Mrs. Sorkin!” And it turned out that she was my fourth grade elementary school teacher.

JOSH: [cross talk] Unbelievable.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Amazing.

ELI: Anyway, so that’s how I ended up there, and to this day – best job I ever had.

JOSH: You mentioned the burnout rate of being on the President’s staff, and that maybe speaks to one of the less credible elements of *The West Wing*, is that that core staff stays around for as many years as it does.

ELI: This is one of the things that is beautiful about the show; the staff really are part of the President’s family. At least in my experience, your life didn’t really matter as a staff person. It’s one of the reasons I had to leave politics to some degree. If you were an elected official, you mattered so much more than anybody who worked for you, so that if I had to totally destroy my personal life – you know, make my girlfriend furious at me, miss a family wedding, to slightly inconvenience my boss – it was a no brainer. That was the culture. And I think you see some of that on the show.

HRISHI: Yeah, even just on the last episode we watched Leo’s marriage disintegrating.

ELI: Right.

HRISHI: And him making the choice...

[West Wing Episode 1.04 excerpt]

LEO: This is more important than my marriage right now. These few years while I’m doing this, yes, it’s more important than my marriage.

[end excerpt]

ELI: And that’s realistic. Not that everybody makes that choice, but sometimes you don’t really have that choice to make. I mean, what are you gonna say if you need to go pick bombing targets with the President? You can’t say, “Hey, sorry, dinner reservations at eight.” Everything is so much more important than you. That’s a great thing to be a part of, but at a certain point, you kind of want to go to dinner.

HRISHI: So, I would love to start at the end of the episode actually, drawing on your speechwriting expertise. The president's second-to-last line is, when he is addressing his staff, he says,

[West Wing Episode 1.05 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: As we did in the time when our eyes looked towards the heavens, and with outstretched fingers, we touched the face of God.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: That line, that phrase "we touched the face of God", made me immediately think of Ronald Reagan quoting that poem High Flight when he addressed the nation after the Challenger shuttle disaster.

[President Ronald Reagan's Address on the Challenger excerpt]

PRESIDENT REAGAN: The crew of the space shuttle Challenger honored us for the manner in which they lived their lives. We will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them, this morning, as they prepared for their journey and waved goodbye, and slipped the surly bonds of Earth to touch the face of God.

[end excerpt]

ELI: Well that was what was so interesting about *The West Wing*. We would take story ideas from the Carter administration, then Kennedy and Reagan even, that we'd heard or read, lines and phrases ended up in Martin Sheen's mouth. You know, it was kind of the best of American history that went into that show, and we were nonpartisan in our theft.

HRISHI: One of the central plots in this episode is the conflict between Toby and the President. He's not only writing his speeches; he's also a policy advisor.

ELI: Right.

HRISHI: I was wondering if that was the case with Vice President Gore. Besides writing his speeches, were you also influencing the content of the speeches?

ELI: *The West Wing* depicts speech writing as sexy and noble and kind of glamorous, and it really isn't. Speechwriters are sometimes very important people, but they are also kicked around a lot. The speechwriter is kind of typing away on a laptop, and like nine people are yammering in his ear, and very often he can just be sort of told what to do, and somebody who takes dictation. When I worked for Gore, I think my title was something like "Senior Communications Advisor"; I was like 28 or something so the idea of being called "senior" anything is kind of a joke. But what was important to me, I was not shaping policy, but I was in a lot of the policy meetings. I had a seat at the strategic table. It was more so I always knew what was going on, and to some degree, Gore would use the speechwriting process sometimes to shape his thinking on issues. We're gonna give a huge economics speech in three weeks, so let's set up a series of three-hour meetings with Larry Summers, and Bob Rubin, and bring in CEOs and talk through these issues. I'd be in the room too for those, and at the end of the day Gore would give the speech where he would be really thinking through what he wanted his policies to be as President. So, he wasn't looking to me like "what should we do about the federal reserve?" but sometimes I had a little bit of a role in who got in that room for those meetings. I very, very rarely would whisper in his ear "Hey, I think this about that issue." The times I did it, probably I could count on two hands, in almost four years. But I think when I did it; sometimes he would listen because I did it so rarely. I think you can't be a speechwriter actually and do a good job if you're seen as having any agenda. Because

anything he wants to do, any direction he wants to go in, you have to throw yourself into it and try to do the best job. Anybody you work for as a speechwriter, they have to be really comfortable being candid with you – talking about their family, talking about their kids, personal things that have to go into speeches. So, if he felt I was there to do anything – hector him, lobby him...so the Toby thing is interesting. There were episodes where Toby would pace around because he was writing the State of the Union address, and he had writer's block. But really, Sam was the speechwriter, and Toby was the guy who oversaw the speechwriters. I thought his role made a little more sense when he was more shaping the message and overseeing the speeches than a writer. But I love this storyline in this episode, and I think it's kind of fascinating and evolves in such a beautiful way, and has grains of something really real in it.

HRISHI: Yeah, that's what I was wondering about is the realism, as you describe the power dynamic. Is there anybody on the staff who really gets to say something as brazen as, like...

[West Wing Episode 1.05 excerpt]

TOBY: Let the poets write that, 'He had the tools for greatness, but the voices of his better angels were shouted down by his obsessive need to win.'

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: He is not pulling his punches with the President here, and...

JOSH: He probably would have been fired before the end of this episode, in reality.

HRISHI: Right, that's what I was wondering.

ELI: Yeah. It's a hard thing to say because, broadly speaking, yes, that's unrealistic. But, every president is different, in terms of who they will listen to, who they will take that from. Were there ever moments when David Axelrod went into a room with Barack Obama and shut the door, and called him by his first name, and reminded him of things they talked about when he was helping Obama get elected as a senator for the first time? I mean if you have that kind of history, who knows what those conversations can be. I think it's atypical, but I also think that Presidents who insist on being "sucked up" to, and that happens a lot – they're bad Presidents.

JOSH: And Aaron does use the storyline to tease out Bartlet's character a little bit more, and his willingness to take criticism even if he gets his back up at first, he's thoughtful, he's self-critical, and he has taken in what Toby had to say by the end of the episode.

HRISHI: There is this great split in this episode between how much he is willing to go head to head with Toby and let Toby sort of speak his mind freely with him, but then in a joking way throughout the whole episode he really flouts his power over the rest of the staff.

[West Wing Episode 1.05 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Zoey's down from Hanover; I'm making chili for everyone tonight.

STAFF: Oh, great, chili, great.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: All right, you know what, let's do this. Everybody look down at the big seal in the middle of my carpet. Now, everybody look back up at me. Zoey's coming down from Hanover and I'm making chili for everyone tonight.

STAFF: Great! That's great! Terrific! Love chili!

PRESIDENT BARTLET: There, you see how benevolent I can be when everybody just does what I tell them to do? Now, sit down.

[end excerpt]

ELI: One thing that is so brilliant about Aaron's creation of and depiction of Bartlet that I think is very real to politics and to politicians is how contradictory he is. How he is a sort of man of the people, salt of the earth with a trace of arrogance. And sort of how vain he is, wanting to be right, but in rare moments he'll admit he's wrong. And I think it's kind of what drives people to run for office is a sort of vanity and insecurity. It's like you want people to love you on a mass scale, you want people chanting your name at a rally. That's never a person who is completely grounded psychologically. Something I wanted to point out about it: as I was watching the episode yesterday for the first time, probably since my first year at *The West Wing*, when I borrowed the VHS tapes from the office because they weren't on DVD yet, is that Aaron always used to say about *The West Wing* and his writing that he thought these episodes were best when they were approached as comedy, and discovered to be something more, or something else.

JOSH: I did have the thought watching this episode, that this show is a dramedy. It really is a comedy that finds its serious moments and its issues of substance, but Aaron will write slapstick and he's always looking for the humor in a scene, and the relationships.

[*West Wing* Episode 1.05 excerpt]

CHARLIE: Mr. President, you look a little winded.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I'm fine.

CHARLIE: Maybe you want to sit out for a minute, sir.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Why would I want to do that?

JOSH: Because people are bound to get pretty upset when they find out we killed the President.

TOBY: Sit down, sir.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: All right, game point, let's go.

JOSH: Sir...

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I'm playing.

TOBY: Mr. President, there's no shame in calling it quits, all you have to do is say, "Toby, you're the superior athlete" and slink on off the court.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Take your ball out Toby.

[end excerpt]

ELI: Well you know, he used to also say, as a guy who came from the theater, that he hated the distinctions "drama" and "comedy". He would always say that in the theater, there are no such things as drama and comedy, there's only musical and non-musical. And he would always say *The West Wing* is a non-musical. But this story is a perfect example, because yes, it's a dramedy in that it mixes those two things, but it's also a kind of hat trick, where you're watching that basketball game and Toby says that thing about the demons conquering the angels, whatever it is, and it's just a taunt on the basketball court. It's very revealing that the President will play basketball with his aides, and will have fun in this way, but it's something that if it never was called back in the episode you wouldn't think twice about it – it's just a New York guy, Toby, giving a kind of schoolyard taunt, basically, to the President. But, all the stories turn and become

dramatic. It's like you've been drawn in by the comedy, and by the whimsy of it in ways that I think are true of life, you know a situation just starts and you don't think about it deeply, and something really serious grows out of it. With Toby, the President kind of has to ask him, "Did you mean that thing that you said?"

JOSH: Speaking of that basketball scene, my theory is that Anthony Drazan decided to shoot it in shaky, handheld camera style because the cast is so bad at basketball. [Hrishi and Eli laugh] Your opinions?

ELI: That's...I...

JOSH: Can't speak to that?

ELI: You would know better than me.

JOSH: I will also point out Richard is wearing a CCNY, City College of New York, sweatshirt. That is in fact a school that he attended.

ELI: That's awesome.

JOSH: And I think I read somewhere that he had requested that Toby [cross talk] be a graduate of City College of New York.

ELI: [cross talk] Oh that's so funny.

ELI: You know it's interesting because I think Martin requested that Bartlet be a graduate of Notre Dame, so, you know, everybody gets to choose their alma mater on this show. So much of what is unique about the show, about Aaron's writing, about the storytelling, is how emotion is drawn from the smallest moments. You know, network executives will talk to you about noisy scenes, noisy characters, as a good thing. Amping it up, everything has to be big and grab you by the collar. I think the idea of this card Josh is given as something that actually speaks to a deep psychological issue he has, because of his situation with his sister, these little things that are so relatable and real - real to politics but real to anything - and they are just acted so beautifully, they're written so beautifully, and these small moments that have such a big impact on the characters. There's no need, there's no attempt for it to be an extreme soap opera.

JOSH: You bring up the storyline of Josh and the NSC card, and that one really got me, because I have to admit, I sort of forgot the payoff on that storyline. And so when I watched that first scene – Josh being presented with this card that directs him where to go, to the bunker or onto Air Force One in the case of a nuclear attack or some other kind of cataclysm,

[West Wing Episode 1.05 excerpt]

JOSH: And...my staff goes with me? Or do they have separate...? Oh God, sorry, you know what? I just got it. Sorry.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: At first I thought, I didn't really buy his reaction. I would've been delighted, and I certainly wouldn't have thought, "Oh my gosh, what's gonna happen to my staff?" I might have thought, "Hey, do I get a plus one? Can I bring my wife, my kids, how does this work?" I certainly wouldn't have thought, "what about my assistant?" I thought, this is Aaron just reinforcing these guys and their devotion to their team and this work scenario. Then, later when Josh is at his therapist's and we learn that he had a sister, Joanie, and that she passed away and that he carries some survivor's guilt, it informs the previous scenes and Josh's taking this whole NSC card so to heart.

ELI: I've heard two different versions of where that story came from, and I wasn't on the show yet. One is that George Stephanopoulos was given one of these cards, and he learned that lots of other people who he was good friends with were not given them. But the other version of the story I heard is that Aaron had learned this from George, and then he asked Dee Dee Myers about these cards, because she was a consultant to the show, and she said "Oh, there's no such thing." Because she hadn't been given one. And this leads me to my point, which is that, this is an emotional truth that is completely unique to this situation and this show. This is not a story you could tell on any other TV show, and *The West Wing* did that a lot. It would find real emotion in a situation you were just not going to find in another workplace drama.

HRISHI: Yeah, I think the realization for Josh throughout the episode that he actually outranks some of his friends, there are consequences to those titles beyond just a nominal one, that he outranks Toby, and Sam, and C.J.

JOSH: Which she has no problem with. I also like that moment when he finally lets C.J. know what's been bothering him and she says...

[West Wing Episode 1.05 excerpt]

C.J.: Of course they don't want me, Josh, I'm a press secretary. I don't think they're gonna be issuing a whole lot of releases. Sam and Toby are communications, and my guess is that speechwriting won't be a priority either.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: She lets him off the hook.

ELI: And you learn slowly that it's Josh's own feeling that he abandoned his sister and let her die that kind of gives him an almost irrational, apocalyptic sense of the world.

HRISHI: That's funny, because I actually thought his doomsday scenario sounded frighteningly realistic.

[West Wing Episode 1.05 excerpt]

JOSH: That's how it's gonna be, a little test tube, with a rubber cap that's deteriorating. Guy steps out of Times Square Station...(cracking sound)...smashes it on the sidewalk. There's a world war right there.

[end excerpt]

ELI: Yeah, no I mean, he has a good comeback, but you know I never certainly was anywhere near the level of somebody who would have gotten that card when I worked in the White House, but I just...you know, most people don't go around thinking we're all gonna die. From any scenario, it never bothered me.

JOSH: It still irked me at the end that he gave the card back. I was like, "Oh, dude. Is that non-transferable? I'll take it." [Hrishi and Eli laugh]

ELI: It was great. This is the other thing about *The West Wing*. I would sort of tell Aaron my stories, you know, kind of all from my personal stories to go into the show (sometimes, not all the time), and all you would do is change the ending. [Hrishi and Josh laugh]

ELI: You know because usually, in the real White House – certainly in the Clinton/Gore era – things would end horribly.

JOSH: Right.

ELI: You sort of take it that in reality, probably Stephanopoulos just pocketed the card and said “well that’s a bummer that I can’t have a beer with Dee Dee Myers on the space ship.” So it’s that beautiful resolution that you don’t get in life, which was the wish fulfillment part of it.

JOSH: I remember an early conversation with you when I first joined the cast in season four, and I guess I brought with me a very jaundiced perception of politics, and I remember you saying that in your experience, most of the players involved came to politics out of a genuine desire to make the country a better place to live in and to get positive things done. Do you still feel that way?

ELI: Absolutely. It’s funny because I sort of alluded to that in my first phone conversation with Aaron. Even though I wasn’t watching *The West Wing* really before I became interested in working on it, as it became a hit in Washington, you actually could kind of feel a small difference in the culture in terms of the way people viewed politics. I mean, most TV shows, movies, popular entertainment about politics - and it’s true now; *House of Cards*, *Veep* - they sort of depict political operatives, political staffers, as kind of craven, bloodless tacticians. You know, leeches on the republic who are just out to kind of screw people and embezzle money, and install taping systems and things like that, and that’s not the vast majority of people who work in government. These are a lot of smart, talented people, they’re hard jobs to get, who could be earning much more money and doing things much more selfish, and they’re giving a lot of their time, and for the most part, they may not be doing the right things all the time, but they are trying. And I think *The West Wing* was closer to capturing the reality of what it’s like to work in the White House. Regardless of what party you are, or what your agenda is, more people are like that – good, decent, smart people - than in the darker entertainment we see about politics. It’s hopeful, it’s optimistic, it’s utopian, and I think a lot of that is real.

JOSH: Let’s say we take a quick break, and come back later.

[Advertisements]

HRISHI: I wanted to bring up something to you guys, a passing thought that I had, about the “Big Block of Cheese Day”. Leo introduces it by saying...

[West Wing Episode 1.05 excerpt]

LEO: Andrew Jackson, in the main foyer of his White House, had a big block of cheese. It is in the spirit of Andrew Jackson that I from time to time ask senior staff to have face-to-face meetings with those people representing organizations who have a difficult time getting our attention.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: He says, “In the spirit of Andrew Jackson...” My first thought whenever I think about the spirit of Andrew Jackson is the Trail of Tears. And then later, we find out about the “wolves-only roadway”.

[West Wing Episode 1.05 excerpt]

LOOMIS: 1800 miles from Yellowstone to the Yukon Territory, complete with highway overpasses and no cattle grazing.

C.J.: An 1800-mile wolves-only roadway?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: As sold by a young Nick Offerman.

[West Wing Episode 1.05 excerpt]

JERRY: Our scientists are working on a plan.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: This is in the spirit of Andrew Jackson? It felt really laced with irony for me.

ELI: The Trail of Paws.

JOSH: Ah, well done.

ELI: "Big Block of Cheese Day" is definitely worth addressing here for a number of reasons. To this day, I don't know if it's a real thing. It certainly never happened in the Clinton White House; as you guys probably know the Obama White House has done an online version of it, and actually linked it to the show.

JOSH: Yeah, they appropriated it from Aaron, created virtual Big Block of Cheese Day. I'll put up some links there too, because the cast has been involved in helping the Obama White House get out their Big Block of Cheese Day.

ELI: But those little, weird things that seem crazy (obviously, UFOs seem crazy, and they are crazy, though there's an explanation for it at the end which is cool), but it's something that sounds ridiculous but that when you really think about it, there's something serious behind it.

HRISHI: Right, and C.J., though she doesn't go for the "wolves-only roadway", she does come around and starts advocating for protection of wolves.

ELI: It's funny, I wonder if you guys think there's a theme to this episode. There's so many great moments in it, and the acting is incredible, and the writing is incredible, but it did still feel to me like a rough draft for what the series became at its best. I think one of my favorite episodes of the entire series came before this actually, which is "A Proportional Response", but it still felt a little bit finding itself, to me, relative to some of what came later.

HRISHI: Yeah, this did not have the same power for me as episode three, or episode four really. This one is not an "A+" for me. But the part that is the weirdest though, I have to say is the titular line about "these women..." part.

JOSH: Yep.

ELI: When I saw that scene, it definitely felt a little odd to me, but I think it comes from almost a sense of old-world chivalry. Like, I think if it's a misstep, it's a very benevolent misstep. One of the writers on the show, a long time writer on the show, Paul Redford, always used to joke about a lot of things, probably including this kind of thing, that *The West Wing* was the best TV show of 1953. [all laugh]

HRISHI: Yes. It definitely feels like it's trying to be complimentary, but in this really awkward, backhanded way, and yeah that Leo and the President are from some kind of *Leave it to Beaver*-era perspective when they're talking about it.

[West Wing Episode 1.05 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: These women.

JOSH: Yeah?

LEO: We can't get over these women.

BARLET: I mean C.J., she's like a fifties movie star, so capable and so loving and energetic.

LEO: Look at Mandy over there. Going punch for punch with Toby in a world that tells women to sit down and shut up!

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, the whole piece sort of feels like, “look how great these people are, even though they are women.”

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: So, it’s clearly all meant to be a tribute, but it just smacks of a paternalistic attitude, which almost was more acceptable from Leo and from Bartlet, but then Josh comes in and sort of joins, really in this same mode, and gives his card back and says, you know, one of the reasons he wants to stay is for these women.

HRISHI: [small laugh] One tiny little thing about C.J. laughing at the folks talking about Pluie and the wolves-only highway – she is so great at laughing.

[West Wing Episode 1.05 excerpt]

C.J.: (laughing)...sorry...(laughing)...seriously, how much would it cost?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Her acting laugh is tremendous. Like, not only does it feel real; it makes me laugh. I find it so infectious.

ELI: She’s incredible. So many incredible actors in this show. You’ve got Richard Schiff, you’ve got Martin Sheen, you’ve got Brad Whitford – real Stradivariuses. I’m not saying any of the other cast are lesser actors than Allison - they’re not – but many of the actors on that show would do what any really good actor does, which is they have a sense for how to play a scene, and then over a handful of takes they refine it and you get to that powerful take that’s the one that’s probably the heart of what’s used in the show, although obviously you edit pieces from different takes sometimes. I feel like in my five seasons on the show, I never saw her do a take of a scene ever – you know a first take of anything that she ever did – that you couldn’t have used in the show.

JOSH: Yeah, that’s right.

ELI: She was so crazily consistent, I mean...Josh, how do you feel about that?

JOSH: Oh, I completely agree with you. And more so, able to do that despite being a woman.

HRISHI: Oh jeez. [laughs].

JOSH: I’m sorry.

HRISHI: No, no!

[all laugh]

JOSH: She’s...no, she’s absolutely fantastic, and actually going back to the laugh of it all, it’s funny that you mentioned that Hrishi, because I know, and this is many seasons from now, there’s an episode called “Privateers”...

HRISHI: Oh, I’ve never laughed harder at the show.

JOSH: Yeah, so, without giving too much away, it is a scene in which C.J. just devolves into fits of inappropriate laughter, and I would have died to have to play that scene, because it’s very hard to laugh genuinely on camera, and to cry...I mean, if you’ve seen my work, I have trouble with any emotion on camera. [all laugh]

JOSH: Allison Janney, not so much. And she killed that scene.

ELI: Congestion. You're very good at congestion, I've found.

JOSH: I am good at congestion, and I'm doing a good one now. The truth is, I feel fine, but I'm doing "stuffy". [all laugh]

ELI: I want to sort of tip my hat to a couple of the other actors in this episode. I'm gonna give two small examples. There's the moment when Josh learns that his staff doesn't get the card. There's never a line where he sort of says "you mean these people that work for me, and I care about, might die, and I live?" Aaron's writing is so spare sometimes, but the meaning is always clear. When you have an actor like Brad Whitford, so much emotion and kind of complexity was sort of invested in basically a brief pause between a one-syllable line and another one-syllable line, and I think it's a testament to the writing but really it's a testament to the acting too, because not everybody can bring that much to something that is so spare.

JOSH: I hate to praise Brad, but I agree with you. [all laugh] In addition to an economy of writing, there's an economy to his acting.

ELI: And in that moment, and to some degree also I was thinking about it in the scene where Brad is with a therapist named Stanley (and I'm sure fans of the show know that when Adam Arkin comes later he is also named Stanley)...

JOSH: All therapists are named Stanley.

ELI: But at the end of the scene, when he is sort of sitting with the memory of his sister's death, and him running out of the house as a little kid, he doesn't cry, he doesn't over-act, he doesn't over-emote. It's somebody fighting against showing anything. And it's such a beautiful, emotional moment because you see how it's all deep inside him, but you see it all. And that's something that lesser actors can't do. And the equivalent moment for Richard, I think, is when he is sitting with the President, and the President basically says...

[West Wing Episode 1.05 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: The other night, when we were playing basketball, did you mean what you said? My demons were shouting down to better angels in my brain?
(pause)

TOBY: Yes sir, I did.

[end excerpt]

ELI: So, the line Aaron is giving the actor is "yes". I mean, Aaron knows that it means a hell of a lot more than that. And Richard, he's looking down, he's sort of a combination of being brave, maybe being scared, maybe knowing there's gonna be consequences for this, it's like a one-syllable meal. The quality of acting on this show is unbelievable.

JOSH: Speaking of great actors, we get our first glimpse of Elisabeth Moss as Zoey.

ELI: That's right. That's right. Wonderful actress.

JOSH: We find her at the stove, tending to a chili pot that is clearly not big enough to accommodate all the guests that are going to be at this dinner, but now I'm quibbling. [all laugh]

ELI: Spoiler alert – there were side dishes.

JOSH: Okay. But Elisabeth would go on to six Emmy nominations for Mad Men and Top of the Lake, Golden Globe wins, a much heralded actress, and this is an early role for her [cross talk], and a great intro.

HRISHI: [cross talk] She's only seventeen at this point.

JOSH: Is that right?

HRISHI: Yeah.

ELI: Oh my God.

HRISHI: When you guys are working in the writers' room on a season, would you be plotting arcs for characters or things that were gonna happen on the show many, many, many episodes down the line?

ELI: Sometimes we would propose to Aaron, "Look, here's five scenes of a storyline, and this is gonna happen in the first scene, this is gonna happen in the second scene, this is gonna happen in the third scene, this is gonna happen in the fourth scene". We would think we had this beautiful thing arced out just for one episode, and he would write the first scene and basically use all the material for the first three that we had proposed. And then, come to us and say, "What's next?". So he would force us to dig deeper and push further with the story or whatever, because anything he was writing, it was all about the thing that was right in front of him, making that as good as possible. So on the second, third and fourth seasons of the show, the writers' room was run by Kevin Falls, and we would almost deliberately not tell him what we were thinking as his staff, to pitch him or to propose for the next couple episodes, because he would just use it in this one.

JOSH: Well jumping off on this point of looking ahead, this episode ends with one of Bartlet's sort of quintessentially stirring speeches...

[West Wing Episode 1.05 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I hope that by the time we're done with our four years here, we will have seen to it that every young person who chooses can go to college and beyond, regardless of their economic status.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Two things jumped out at me. One, that he refers, though he's in his first term, he refers to 'our four years here'. Without spoiling anything that suggests to me that Aaron had a little bit of a long ball game plan in terms of the greater story of the show. And also, that some sixteen or seventeen years before our current Presidential race, that President Bartlet was feeling the Bern in his hope for affordable college (or perhaps free). [Hrishi and Eli laugh]

ELI: This is a question only Aaron could answer, or maybe one of the other writers who was there season one. I would tend to doubt he knew about that one-term thing that far ahead. But maybe he did, but I just looked at that as, you know, you might not get re-elected and so you have to look at everything as...but you're right, a typical President would say, you know, 'four, hopefully eight years'. But you're also getting into this issue which will evolve as the series goes on of weird, predictive qualities of the show, which were of course all totally accidental.

HRISHI: For me the most emotional part of the episode is that exchange between the president and Toby at the end; him saying...

[West Wing Episode 1.05 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I couldn't live without you Toby. I mean it, I'd be in the tall grass. I'd be in the weeds. I know I disappoint you sometimes; I mean I can sense your disappointment. And I only get mad because I know you're right a lot of the times.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Which is played without music, and with this sort of party atmosphere around, and you get so much depth out of their relationship. I love that so early on in this show, there's already such an indication that despite the backdrop of practical idealism, a banner like that, that there are all these flaws in their politics. That the gun bill was a crappy bill, and Toby is still trying to get them to admit it, you know, and that Bartlet despite being such a great orator, and theoretically such an idealist, is making these compromises away from his own ideals in order to please people or secure political victories, like diluted political victories.

ELI: Two things about that. First of all, was it in "Five Votes Down" that you see the practical idealism banner?

JOSH: Yes.

ELI: Because that was very briefly, for maybe like three weeks, a slogan of Gore's. And I think it was something Gore and I came up with, and one of the many problems we had in Gore world was that we were constantly coming up with paradigms and slogans and things that didn't really connect and were mocked. And that was one that died quickly and badly and I just remember this huge embarrassment. And when I got to the show, and I think maybe I watched "Five Votes Down" like on a VHS tape that I borrowed from the office or something, I remember saying to Aaron, "I can't believe we were so embarrassed about that!" And he was like "Oh! I thought it was the greatest slogan!" He just loved it.

HRISHI: Huh.

ELI: And I couldn't believe it. Like, it was one of the things I loved about Aaron. He saw real politics in such a fresh, different way. But the other thing is that in that moment, it's a beautiful thing about that scene, and a kind of testament to how spare the writing is, that what is never said in that scene is, well, why did President Bartlet want David Rosen over Toby?" And I was watching the scene yesterday, and thinking he's gonna say he wanted David Rosen because he thought Toby would be in his face all the time, he didn't want the conflict, or Rosen would let Bartlet be right all the time, or something like that, but he never explains it, but it leaves you thinking about it, but the actual thing Toby would want to know – why did you pick this other guy – is the subtext of everything but never said.

HRISHI: I also think that there's this awesome plot idea that when Toby's talking about the demons versus the better angels, that I think that the President wants to keep Toby around because he kind of gives a voice to those better angels.

ELI: And this is, by the way, so realistic to real politics, that one thing a lot of Presidents like and encourage in subtle and not-so-subtle ways is dissension among their own staff. Not like lack of collegiality necessarily, but sort of like 'you guys should be fighting it out so that I get the best results of the debate'.

JOSH: Team of rivals.

ELI: Exactly. Right. You don't necessarily want a harmonious staff. You want people fighting it out from left, right, and center.

HRISHI: Yeah. On a completely different note, I wanted to go back to the initial driving thing for...we're coming off of when Josh gets the card from the NSC guy, which is his exchange at the beginning with Donna.

[West Wing Episode 1.05 excerpt]

DONNA: Donald hasn't called me yet.

JOSH: Who's Donald?

DONNA: Donald!

JOSH: Yes.

DONNA: From the thing?

JOSH: Right. Can we clear up a few things about my level of interest in the revolving door of local gomers that you see in the free time you create by not working very hard at your job?

DONNA: Excuse me?

JOSH: You work hard at your job.

DONNA: How hard?

JOSH: Very hard.

DONNA: And I am...?

JOSH: Not at all controlling.

DONNA: Thank you. You have a staff meeting.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I feel like they are in full flirt mode at this point. His sort of passive aggressive reaction to her going on a date with somebody, and he talks about how he is so not interested in her love life – we are really deep into their...

JOSH: Into their completely inappropriate professional relationship?

HRISHI: Yes.

ELI: Did you guys ever talk in the earlier episodes of the podcast about where the Josh/Donna relationship came from?

JOSH: No, not at all.

HRISHI: No! Can you shed some light into that?

ELI: I can indeed! So, the story that Aaron would tell about that was that when he was spending time in the Clinton White House researching The American President, he had a conversation with George Stephanopoulos' then-assistant – I think it was a woman named Heather Beckel – and he said something to her (I may be slightly getting it wrong), but something to her along the lines of “well, what's it like working for the President?” And this is an office that actually adjoins the back room behind the Oval Office, I mean you couldn't be closer to the President than George's assistant actually. And she said, “I work for George”.

HRISHI: That's really, really awesome. So fascinating.

JOSH: Huh.

ELI: And that kind of loyalty, I think it's great.

HRISHI: Do you guys have any final thoughts, any final favorite moments from the episode that we haven't talked about?

JOSH: Can I point out a solecism? It's one of my linguistic pet peeves. In the conversation about Big Block of Cheese Day, each staff member is kind of mocking it in his or her own way. And I think Toby refers to it as...

[West Wing Episode 1.05 excerpt]

TOBY: "...throw open our office doors to people who want to discuss things that we could care less about" day.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And of course, what he means is, things that we couldn't care less about. [Hrishi laughs] For a speechwriter and the communications director to make such a mistake, you would think the precision of language would be there, when he actually says the opposite of what he intends to say. That bothered me.

HRISHI: That's great.

JOSH: I'll have to take that up with Aaron in a later podcast.

ELI: That's one of those things like when people say 'literally' after something that actually they don't mean literally.

JOSH: Right. When they mean 'figuratively.'

HRISHI: Yes. Something that Rob Lowe will do to great effect as Chris Traeger on *Parks and Rec*.

ELI: Oh yes, for sure.

HRISHI: One thing that I half-liked and also just was kind of confused by was the president's pronunciation of "Pakistan". There are a great number of Americans who pronounce it "PACK-istan", and a lot of people elsewhere in the world who pronounce it "PAH-kistahn", like my family. But the president calls it "PACK-istahn".

[Various West Wing Episode 1.05 excerpts]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: PACK-istahn....PACK-istahn

[end excerpts]

HRISHI: It's sort of like halfway between one and the other, and I kind of [cross talk], I like that he's kind of going for it with the "stahn", but still whiting it up a little bit on the first syllable. [Josh laughs]

JOSH: [cross talk] Splitting the baby.

HRISHI: I'd never heard that take on the word before. During the basketball game, when they bring out Juwan Howard as Rodney Grant, and there's just one moment where Toby is protesting the whole thing, and the President is standing sort of half-hidden behind Juwan Howard, just kind of giving him a baleful eye, he comes up to his elbow. He's giving him a look of half-contained aggression, but he's also hiding, literally hiding behind this giant.

JOSH: It's a great image.

ELI: I remember now seeing that episode for the first time and thinking, a little bit like Jay Leno playing himself later in (I think) season one, it felt to me like something Aaron might not have done later.

HRISHI: Mm-hmm.

ELI: This basketball teaser, I liked it, it was fun, it was well done, and it obviously led somewhere with the story. But it had kind of a looseness and a kind of TV, typical TV fun quality to it that I feel like he wouldn't have done later.

Josh: Hm.

HRISHI: It's also funny, in terms of Jay Leno playing himself, they're invoking Steffi Graf, so we're in the real world of our sports, and here's somebody who's playing a NCAA Final Four player – why couldn't he just have been Juwan Howard? He really is an NCAA basketball player, but he played for Michigan, he didn't play for Duke. So he's slightly fictionalized.

ELI: It's a funny thing, because you know there were no contemporary pop culture references on this show - very rarely. Aaron didn't want them. And his reason was, he always used to say, "You know, the world in which Bill Clinton or George Bush is President, and Oprah does a TV show, and all these other things, is not the world in which Bartlet exists."

HRISHI: Ahhhhhhhh.

ELI: I mean, he didn't want contemporary political references. All kinds of senators used to say, "Can I come on the show?" and he just felt this is a parallel universe.

JOSH: Yeah, I think like that was a good call too, creating this inviolable alternate universe, rather than placing it squarely in real world...

HRISHI: ...America.

JOSH: Yeah.

ELI: In the Aaron era, there were no references to Presidents after Eisenhower for that same reason. But at the same time, we were constantly setting scenes at the Kennedy Center. The joke in the writers' room was that it was actually named after George Kennedy. [Hrishi and Josh laugh]

JOSH: May he rest in peace. That's very funny.

ELI: Meanwhile, we're getting to the really important crux of this episode, David Rosen!

JOSH: Yes!

[West Wing Episode 1.05 excerpt]

MANDY: I'm glad David Rosen passed on the communications job. They couldn't have done better than you. [pause] I'm saying I think you make a better communications director than David Rosen ever would've been.

[end excerpt]

[West Wing Episode 1.05 excerpt]

TOBY: ...David Rosen!

C.J.: I don't...Toby, I don't know anything about David Rosen and I don't know where this is coming from.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: This is a question I'm asked with great frequency. Is he, or is he not the inspiration for the name of my character on *Scandal*? I do not know. I've put the question now twice directly to Shonda Rhimes; I've received a response neither time.

ELI: [laughs] That's hilarious.

JOSH: If I can get her to commit, on some future podcast I will let you know what her answer is, but thus far she will not speak to it.

[music plays in background]

JOSH: As Hrishi and I were close to putting this episode to bed, Shonda Rhimes herself fired off the following email. And I quote: "Yes, it was my tiny *West Wing* homage to name the character David Rosen." So, there you have it, a definitive answer to a burning question.

[music stops]

JOSH: And that's it for this episode.

HRISHI: Thanks so much for listening, and we hope you'll join us next time.

JOSH: What are you up to now Eli?

ELI: I'm recording this from Chicago, where I'm actually working on helping to produce a pilot for Fox.

JOSH: You have a great book out that I've read.

ELI: So my father, who died when I was very young, was a wonderful photographer. I, about a year and a half ago, found some incredible unseen negatives of his that were portraits of Truman Capote taken in the late 1950s, and street photography of Capote's neighborhood in Brooklyn, taken to illustrate an essay Capote wrote about his life in Brooklyn Heights. So it's out as a book now, it's called *Brooklyn: A Personal Memoir, with the Lost Photographs of David Attie*. It's gotten some great press. We had an amazing launch event in Brooklyn with *The West Wing's* own Mary Louise Parker.

JOSH: It is a great book. It's a wonderful essay that Capote wrote, and the real star of this book really of course are your dad's photographs that really evoke that Brooklyn of that time period. They're really something to pour over.

ELI: I appreciate that.

JOSH: Alright, thanks for joining us!

HRISHI: Thanks so much, Eli.

ELI: A great pleasure. It was super fun.

HRISHI: In our next episode, we'll be joined by Janel Moloney, who plays Donna.

[West Wing Weekly Episode 1.06 excerpt]

JANEL: Aaron Sorkin stopped me in the middle of my audition and told me I was doing well; it was like, "well then why are you interrupting me because it's really hard to do well! You crazy person!"

[end excerpt]

JOSH: In the meantime, you can check out Hrishi's other podcast, *Song Exploder*, and you should all get *Brooklyn: A Personal Memoir, with the Lost Photographs of David Attie*.

HRISHI: This episode was edited by Cathy Too.

JOSH: In the spirit of Big Block of Cheese Day, we'd love to hear from you. If you have questions for us, or comments, record a voice memo with your question or comment,

and email us the recording at memos@thewestwingweekly.com and we'll pick our favorites to respond to.

HRISHI: You can also leave us a comment or a question, or discuss the episode with other West Wing Weekly listeners at our website, thewestwingweekly.com, or our Facebook page, facebook.com/thewestwingweekly.

JOSH: You can also find us all on twitter: [@JoshMalina](https://twitter.com/JoshMalina), and [@HrishiHirway](https://twitter.com/HrishiHirway), and [@EliAttie](https://twitter.com/EliAttie).

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

ELI: What's next?

[Outro Music]