

The West Wing Weekly
3.22: Posse Comitatus
Live with Aaron Sorkin, Allison Janney, and Melissa Fitzgerald

JOSH: So before we get started with today's episode...

[Intro Music]

HRISHI: Live from the Castro Theater in San Francisco, you're listening to The West Wing Weekly.

[cheers]

HRISHI: I'm Hrishikesh Hirway.

JOSH: And I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: And today we're talking about the season finale of season 3. It's called "Posse Comitatus."

JOSH: That's right, folks. Tonight we're gonna grab you by the posse.

[laughs and groans]

JOSH: Ain't no bad joke like a dad joke. I'm wearing the socks. Although, that's kind of dirty for a dad joke. This episode was written by Aaron Sorkin. It was directed by Alex Graves and it first aired on May 22nd in the year 2002.

HRISHI: We don't have so much time tonight, so without further ado...I think we should bring out our guest.

JOSH: Yeah, there's a reason...we're very excited to be at the historic Castro theater, completely sold out and of course, we did it on the back of a special, special man. He's an Oscar winner, an Emmy winner, and the reason we're all here to celebrate the show we love. Let's welcome Aaron Sorkin.

[cheers]

JOSH: You know Aaron, they also stood when we came out.

AARON: That was so nice. How you doin', San Francisco?

[whoos]

HRISHI: Before we get into our thoughts and our notes about this, Aaron, could you set up what this process was like for you making this episode? Could you tell us your memories of "Posse Comitatus"?

AARON: Sure. I'll do my best. It was a season finale and those, you really want a season finale to be special, you want to hit a crescendo at the end of the season. I think Alex did a phenomenal job directing it. There was a lot of guest cast in it. I remember a lot of things from this episode, as a matter of fact and a number of them, in fact, relevant today. But here's one

thing I remember that's not that relevant...uh, it's how unhappy people were, people in the audience, and people involved with the show, that I was killing Mark Harmon.

[laughter]

JOSH: Ha! Spoiler alert.

AARON: You see that? Holy cow, are there people here who haven't —

JOSH: No, just kidding. Everybody here has seen this episode.

AARON: And it wasn't that they were unhappy that I was killing Simon Donovan, it was — they were unhappy that I was killing Mark Harmon. And the scene where he gets shot, we shot at a bodega at 96th Street on the west side in Manhattan. And there were two women on the set I believe, a ballistics tech, which you have to have on set anytime you're using a firearm. And the person who sets — if you're doing a scene where I shoot you, the way it works is you insert what are called "squibs" into the actor's costumes. It's actually a very, very tiny little remotely-controlled explosive that, when the gun goes off, a person pushes a button and [makes shooting noises]. And the two women, the ballistics tech and the person who set the squibs make a point of telling me, kind of with hostility in their voice, [laughter from the audience] that they have checked with a doctor and they have set these squibs in places where it would be possible for him to survive these gunshots.

[laughter]

JOSH: We've set the squibs to "flesh wound."

AARON: There's one more memory that I have. Again, in New York. There is a shot of the president's motorcade coming down 7th Avenue toward Times Square because he's taking them to the Booth Theater at 45th Street and Broadway. So we had to shoot this at around 4 o'clock in the morning. That's when you're able to clear Times Square and we had maybe two hours and Alex Graves, the director, had I think maybe six or eight camera positions on top of buildings because again, you can't get this wrong too many times, you have maybe two or three bites of the apple. And I had — we had two units working at once, since we had to cram in a lot of work in New York City while we were there — and I was coming from the bodega on 96th Street in a black hired car. [Laughs] We're coming down to the place where I'm supposed to go, and we see around us, all these other black sedans and motorcycle cops, and red and blue lights flashing, and I went, "We are in the shot right now. We're rolling, is what's going on..."

JOSH: We're on The West Wing!

AARON: And I kind of get on a radio to Alex, "Alex, can you see me down..." "YES!" "Okay, you..." And it was pouring rain...those are two big memories that I have.

JOSH: When I watch that scene, I think two things: one, C.J. can't have nice things. And two, why couldn't the Korean grocer done one of these? [makes a gesture]

AARON: Okay, I can answer both of those questions.

JOSH: I would like you to.

AARON: Okay, part of the heat that I took about killing Simon Donovan, wasn't about Mark Harmon's handsomeness. Okay, it was that there was a feeling that I was saying was that, a

woman can't have it all. She can't have her job and be in love at the same time. I wasn't saying that at all. In fact, Simon Donovan was brought on to the show to be killed.

HRISHI: Welcome to Hollywood.

JOSH: Sacrificial lamb.

AARON: By the way, Harmon landed on his feet, right?

HRISHI: He did alright.

JOSH: Yeah, he did just fine.

AARON: He did just fine. So, two things. I don't know if you've noticed, but somebody dies at the end of all four of the seasons of *The West Wing* that I wrote. And I write random death a lot. You won't see somebody dying in the hospital, it'll happen the way it happened to Mrs. Landingham. Right out of nowhere.

JOSH: Spoiler alert!

AARON: Yeah, sorry about that too.

HRISHI: But the wave of just personal offense. Rippled through the crowd as you brought up...

AARON: I know. I know. And I was thinking about this. Knowing I was coming up here and we were going to talk about this, I was thinking about the random death thing and exactly why do I do that, because it doesn't really seem like me. And here's what I think the reason is: I write very romantically and idealistically. In this episode, Bartlet, of course, makes an excruciating decision. And this is something I would like to talk about more. He's trying hard to do the right thing but he says to Leo in this argument, "It's just wrong. OK? It's just wrong." Leo says, I know but you gotta do it anyway. Bartlet says, "Why?" and Leo says, "Because you won." And Bartlet makes this decision that he feels terrible about but he does it, he kills a guy, that's hubris. Hubris, in dramatic law according to Aristotle, has to be punished. OK? Bartlet couldn't just kill Shareef and have the season end there. He had to pay a price. He had to be punished. Somebody had to die, and that's what Simon Donovan was brought on to do.

JOSH: Interesting. Heavy duty! Well, Hrishi and I talked about the fact that , the multi-layered approach to death. There are anonymous deaths in this episode, you know there's all this back-and-forth about Shareef. But there's also that moment in the Oval when Bartlet says, "Who are those two guys?" and he gets the response "Those are my bodyguards" and you know there's a mental calculus, because they're going to die too.

AARON: They're going to die too. And on network television, an episode has to be 42 minutes and 30 seconds long. You don't have any elbow room. Maybe you can — Jeff Zucker was the president of the network at the time — maybe you can beg him for an extra maybe 15 seconds but that's about it. And it can't be short either, by the way. Because if the episode is short, you're devaluing the ad time. Right? Anyway, as a result of that, a couple of things had to be cut. Probably won't surprise you that much, my scripts are long. They're always long. I don't know if we ever did an episode of *Sports Night*, ever did an episode of *West Wing*, where we did do the table read and someone said 'hey, you know we need a couple more scenes here. I think this is short' or "oh yeah, right on the button." They're always long. Here are two things — there were several things that got cut — but here are two things that got cut: the teaser. The teaser that you see now, which is the C.J. press conference, OK, was the first scene of Act One. The real teaser was the shortest teaser we ever did on the show. Bartlet is shaving in the morning and it was

the first time —I'm not a guy who writes scenes in bathrooms, I'm just never crazy about it but I was okay with this and I kind of wanted to see what does the President get for a bathroom in that master bedroom and I said, "let's build this set" and they told me that in order to amortize that set, in order for that to be affordable that we build it, I would have to use that set another 20 times. And I said, "okay, I'll find things to do in there." Anyway...

[Laughter]

JOSH: I can think of 20 things to do in a bathroom...Maybe it's just me.

AARON: The teaser was simply Bartlet shaving in the mirror and he's singing to himself the song that he will later tell Stanley Keyworth, the therapist, about and the song that we'll later hear onstage, which by the way was written by John Oliver's uncle.

JOSH: Wow.

AARON: The chorus of which is "What's victorious in war shall be made glorious in peace".
sings 'What's victorious in war shall be made glorious in peace.'

[Cheers]

JOSH: Musical theater major.

AARON: So the teaser, the original teaser, is Bartlet shaving in the mirror and singing the song to himself. And he just cuts himself shaving a little bit, picks up a hand towel, does that, puts it down, and the camera just sees his hand towel, which has the Seal of the President on it and some blood, uh, now on it. And that's the stage of the whole thing. So that had to go.

JOSH: Was that shot?

AARON: I have to be honest with you now, I can't remember if we shot it or if we just knew that early...I'll tell you, uh, yes, the answer is we did shoot it. And this is how I know.

JOSH: Make a phone call.

AARON: It was in the promos for the episode. We don't cut the promos for the episode. NBC does that by themselves. They do it off of dailies that we send to them every day. Because I remember, and there are people who think that they've seen that scene in the episode, and it's because they saw the promo.

JOSH: What if he pressed it and it said "Let Bartlet be Bartlet"

JOSH and HRISHI: ...in blood?

AARON: Another scene that was cut, and this was crucial, was Mark Harmon hasn't eaten in about 16 hours. He's starving. He's just missed every chance for a half of sandwich that was there, he had to go someplace else. And he's starving, he's starving, he's starving and that is why he goes into the Bodega to buy the candy bar.

JOSH and HRISHI: OHHHH...

AARON: Okay, now, he just...is randomly going into a bodega and that thing happens. There's a rule. And it's a metaphor. It's also, it's also literal...you could say literally, it's a metaphor which is that if you use a gun in the third act, you have to show it in the first. And if you show a gun in the

first act, you have to use it in the third. Forget the literal nature of the gun, exactly, it was Mark Harmon being hungry that we announced in the first of four acts, and then paid off in the fourth of four acts, but there was no set-up for it before. So it did start to seem like poor storytelling.

JOSH: Hm. But you were going to say about his Big Brother...remember, weather? His Big Brother. I mean, first of all, you decide to kill him, so now it starts to make you really, really regret it. Like, he's got a big brother! He's a...

HRISHI: Little brother. He's a big brother.

JOSH: He's a big brother. Oh, right.

AARON: He's a big brother and he's got a mother, right? We gave him a mother.

JOSH: That is true. You really made it hurt. And the little brother says to him, jokingly, you know, "You're slow-witted."

HRISHI: He says...

[West Wing episode 3.22 excerpt]

Anthony: You're not very bright and the criminals can sense this about you.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Hearing that line, that felt like a little bit of foreshadowing as well. And I was wondering if you had had that sense about that character from the beginning.

JOSH: Or if you even think that this is true. Is Anthony right? Is Simon Donovan really not that bright? Is he getting killed as a consequence of ...?

AARON: No. For me, Simon Donovan is extremely bright. It wouldn't surprise me if there were secret service agent here, a US Marshall, and an FBI agent who said, "Are you out of your mind? There is no way a trained professional would not first look for a second person in the store." But I will say, we had secret service advisors and whatnot in the show and it passed muster with them. I thought as far as the owner of the store, the man behind the counter not going [makes a gesture] goes, again because we had to squeeze the episode a little bit, there were a couple of things we didn't have time in the episode to do right. One, we did them well. It could have been better. One was that scene. It should have happened slower. Okay? We just should've been able to see Simon see the empty cash register, okay? The guy behind the counter? Look, he's scared to death. He's terrified.

JOSH: He's not in the position to, yeah...

AARON: He just wants to get out of the store and these guys to get out of the store because the last thing I want is bullets flying around here, because I'm standing here. He's terrified. Simon susses out what's going on, the empty register, the terrified guy, and I wish I could go back to that bodega and do it all over again. It just should've happened slower with Simon saying, quietly, "it's okay. Why don't you get down behind the counter now?" Have him get down behind the counter and — bam. And then the other thing that we rushed, 'cause you mentioned the two bodyguards in the Oval Office, was the shooting of Shareef. It's nobody's fault but the clock's. But what we should have seen is — I don't mind not being inside the plane to see, and this was all what's called MOS, which means — it actually means — without sound. But reason it's

“MOS” is that the style, which is to say, you know there’s generally music or something and — the scene with C.J. done so beautifully —

JOSH: Incredible, incredible.

AARON: When she’s just heard the news about Simon and we’re hearing Jeff Buckley’s cover of “Hallelujah”. That’s MOS and the style was first invented by a German director who called it “mit out sound.” So it’s called MOS and we’re doing the MOS sequence with the plane cutting back and forth between the Wars of the Roses and this, we should’ve seen Shareef and the guys get off the plane, which we did, then we should have seen a mechanic crew get out you know, in coveralls, when all we saw were just guns start to come out. Going back, I wouldn’t have done the night vision thing. I don’t think that gets you anywhere. You have to look really fast to see one of the guys take the pen out of Shareef’s pocket. I would have made a bigger deal out of that.

JOSH: Interesting. Do you do this with everything you write? Because I actually love that scene and in a way, I like that it just — it was what it was. It wasn’t a bigger deal. It was just like the gritty reality of assassinations—

AARON: Maybe you’re right. But do I do that with everything I write? I haven’t written anything ever — a movie, a play, an episode of television — I haven’t written anything ever that I wouldn’t like to get back and just have one more shot at... I think that’s probably true for every writer. ‘Cause I knew I was coming here, I watched ‘Posse Comitatus’ about five nights ago. It was the first time I’d seen it since it’d been on the air.

JOSH: Wow.

AARON: And I have to say, I thought it was pretty good.

HRISHI: It’s pretty good, right? It’s pretty good.

JOSH: That makes me so happy to hear you say that, because it’s pretty [bleep] ing great!

AARON: Yes, but it’s really thanks to Alex. Thanks to the cast. They helped me along in places where I couldn’t quite get it right. There’s one spot that we had to do just a little medical work on and it’s Leo’s meeting with the Gang of Eight. It’s the leadership of both houses from Congress and both parties. It’s called the Gang of Eight. Leo is meeting with them to tell them, ‘The President’s going to do this thing.’ It’s against the law. Posse Comitatus, by the way, refers to a law that was passed toward the end of Reconstruction, prohibiting the military from getting involved with law enforcement. Which is why Fitzwallace can’t do what the CIA’s gotta do. Anyway, as originally shot, Alex did this beautiful overhead shot and you see in front of each of the people, a sort of packet with the presidential seal on it. It’s got information in it, but those packets haven’t been opened and the scene ends where Leo says something, I can’t remember what, but certainly the implication is that all these people have already read what’s in there but it’s clear that they haven’t been opened. However, thankfully, Leo leaves and they all open the thing. So, we were able — in the editing room — when we established that scene, start with the last few frames of it, have them open the thing, and then cut to Leo coming in.

JOSH: That’s interesting.

AARON: Now you’ll notice that when Leo comes in, when you watch it again, and those packets are all closed. Again.

JOSH: One of my favorite things about this finale is how you seem to be playing longball. I feel you always disavow that and say that, "I don't think of anything until right before I'm writing it" but there's all sorts of strands that pay off beautifully. One of them to me, that I'm most fascinated by, is Leo's preparing Bartlet to get into the headspace he knows he needs to be in. And back, all the way back to "The Black Vera Wang," he says to him, "I want to get you into a mental place where you can order an unidentified plane shot down." and then I think we have a sound clip from this episode.

[West Wing episode 3.22 excerpt]

Leo: I was going to say, putting a voice to the guy. I take my daughter to a seafood place, the first thing she does is name all the lobsters in the tank so I can't eat them.

[end excerpt]

AARON: Right. And then later, at the theatre, Leo mentions that again and says, "Would it be helpful if I gave you the names of the 2,200 people that..." That's the not first time that Leo's played that role with Bartlet. Way back to Proportional Response, right? The third episode of the show in the first season, Fitzwallace says, because this is a guy whose entire military experience is being Commander-in-Chief of New Hampshire National Guard. And it's, when we join...the pilot episode of The West Wing, when we first meet these people, they've been in the office for one year. In their first term. And Bartlet has so far, not to have to engage militarily anywhere. And so in that episode, when he has to kill people for the first time, so it's Fitzwallace who says to Leo, "You're going to have to sit him down. This isn't the last one of these you're gonna have to do." And it's generally Leo's job to get him someplace where he can do that. You talked about the headspace. Bartlet ultimately says 'yes' and the reason why Leo's final argument is 'because he won'. Bartlet personally believes this is wrong. But he also recognizes that this is not a moment where "personally" matters. You have to be the Office of the President, and you have to do this. It's a — I don't want to get us to a whole 'nother place — but it's a scheme of logic that I wish were applied to the abortion debate.

HRISHI: Can we get back to the hubris of President Bartlet?

AARON: Yeah.

HRISHI: The killing of Shareef is happening cut with War of the Roses. There's a line in "War of the Roses" — King Henry V, "too famous to live long". And we hear it. And there's this sense of mortality. Josh mentioned the other—these incidental deaths of the bodyguards and stuff. And the President has this role that's the...the Office is larger than any one life, and there's a discussion that Shareef you know, doesn't count as a civilian. But then you, you contrast that with Simon Donovan, you know, the horror of his murder really gets its own moment. I was just wondering if you'd talk a little bit about what that headspace is like for the President when he's, like why bring the foreground of one man, you know, one agent getting killed, when you're also talking about it in this sort of level of statesmanship too?

AARON: That's a fantastic question.

JOSH: Yeah, give it to him.

AARON: But if Bartlet is going to have to pay a price for what he does, and he does have to pay a price — I'm telling you the rules of drama forbid him from getting away with this for free — then we have to feel it. We don't feel any empathy at all for Shareef and even Bartlet, as much as he doesn't want to — he doesn't want to break the law, he doesn't want to...you're not allowed to just assassinate people, this is new territory. He refuses to shake Shareef's hand in

the Oval Office. He makes up excuses. He despises Shareef. Doesn't matter he's a human being, and other people frequently pay for Bartlet wielding the power that was thrust upon him constitutionally. Mrs. Landingham, Josh, that's why Bartlet at the end of season — I'm sorry to get off of Posse Comitatus — but the end of season two in "Two Cathedrals" has had it with God. "Stop it! I'm doing the best I can! Stop knocking these people off! If you have to do it to someone, do it to me!"

HRISHI: Right.

AARON: Sorry, got a little...upset.

HRISHI: Well, there's another part to the death of this episode, all the death in it, when Simon Donovan dies, as you said, we hear a little bit of Jeff Buckley's cover of "Hallelujah" and I was wondering if you could talk about the choice of that song because the song is already so haunting and so beautiful but this is an instance where the work takes on a different meaning...

["Hallelujah" instrumental plays in the background]

AARON: Yeah.

HRISHI: ...because of context with Jeff Buckley having died a very young, very tragic death himself.

AARON: I have no sophistication when it comes to music and I'm always the last to things. I'll see something, I have a teenage daughter and I'll say, "You've gotta check this woman out, she's phenomenal!" and my daughter will say, "Dad, that's Beyonce. I've seen her before. All of us." Okay, yeah, everybody's right! She's great! And I had never heard the Leonard Cohen song, I'd never heard "Hallelujah" until one day after 9/11. September 12th, 2001. I turned the radio on in the car, and that's what the station was playing when...and it was haunting for that reason and it stuck with me, and of course I thought I was the only person who'd ever heard the song and that this was gonna be a discovery for everybody. But I think even knowing what I know now, which is that it's a very famous song, I would have used it anyway just because the combination of the song and Allison and, when you think about it, there really aren't many — if any — other than this. Moments on The West Wing where I take my hands off the keyboard and just have an actor, give them the ball, and say, "It's yours now."

JOSH: I was going to say, Allison's work is always exquisite. And in this episode, and you really do hand her the keys. And I don't know if you can do that with every actor.

AARON: Not every actor. But I think you can do it with every actor who was on The West Wing, including you, Sir.

JOSH: Okay.

AARON: But I'm not sure that every actor on The West Wing I would have do 'The Jackal' as a teaser — that may be just Allison.

JOSH: Let's have a real round of applause for Allison Janney. Come on.

AARON: Allison Janney, everyone.

JOSH: No, but really. Let's have a round of applause for Allison Janney.

[screams. Allison comes onstage.]

JOSH: Right?

ALLISON: This is crazy. Oh my god.

JOSH: It's gonna be an extra 10 bucks on the way out.

HRISHI: You're welcome.

ALLISON: I have to say that was one of the most thrilling entrances I've ever made in my life. I really...

HRISHI: I was just thinking, 'Is she still here? I hope she stays.'

ALLISON: I was listening to everyone and I just have to say, I have to tell you, I got here today and haven't been here in a long time. I walked down from my hotel and a street musician was playing "Hallelujah" first of all. And then, the next thing I saw was a street vendor selling alpaca stuffed animals. [laughter] I'm not kidding you. And that episode, of course, is Lily Tomlin's first episode and she's a, you know...

JOSH: And then I saw Brad Whitford on the street.

HRISHI: He was also selling Alpacas.

JOSH: That's funnier. Rewrite! Edit!

HRISHI: Thank you so much for joining us.

ALLISON: Thank you for having me. Thank you. This is...

JOSH: Some of our guests have a hard out at 9:30.

HRISHI: We have the same question for, Allison. What do you remember about making this episode?

ALLISON: Well, I watched it myself a couple days ago and I remember...it took me a while to remember that we shot the interior of the theater in LA. And do you remember...

JOSH: Uhhh...

ALLISON: Oh, right, you weren't there.

JOSH: The show was still in its upswing!

AARON: No, no, it was a theater downtown, which like the Castro, had been very important on the vaudeville circuit.

JOSH: We haven't released the episode yet, but we've spoken to Mark Harmon and he had very lovely things to say about working with you.

ALLISON: Oh, god. Mark.

JOSH: He's difficult.

ALLISON: He's incredibly difficult.

JOSH: Just kidding.

ALLISON: You know, I always consider myself a very professional actress and very easy to work with — he makes me look like a slob. You know, raised by wolves. Whatever. He, I mean, he's the kind of guy that I would go make someone get me a water if I was on set. And say, "Hey, Malina, go get me a water. I'm thirsty." You know? He goes...

JOSH: Why did you always ask me?

ALLISON: Just...but he, he goes to get his own water. He never lets or makes anyone get anything for him, he's does his own he's the most professional man I've ever worked with in my life.

JOSH: You guys are very good together. There's real chemistry.

ALLISON: Yeah, and it was so hard you know, that kiss, you know. I was afraid Alex Graves, we had to kiss outside the, it was the Booth, right? We were...and in that alleyway, I saw the Booth and the camera was so close and I was like so afraid of the, "Just back up a little bit," I felt so intimidated by him and I had to kiss him with—that close and I'm watching it now with older eyes. I'm much kinder to myself and my profile and...

JOSH: It's a great kiss.

ALLISON: It was a good kiss! And he's a good kisser too. [applause] He was a very good kisser and he was very sad that he was trying to think of any way he could convince Aaron that he would not have to die. You had to kill him! You had to, you had to. But...

AARON: Yes, thank you.

ALLISON: You had to kill him. Better him than me, I'm telling you. But yeah, he was, we had a couple of rides in the pass van where he was quite...we had to really try to cheer him up a bit because it was a, he did not want to leave. Who would have wanted to? It was the best group of people and Aaron, no, no this is all good!

AARON: No, I-I agree.

ALLISON: It's a huge compliment to you, honey. He was, he wanted to, I mean...

JOSH: He walked out the door and into 15 years of NCIS. He's okay!

ALLISON: He's doing okay!

AARON: Yeah, I heard he's got like a woodshop and everything? He makes stuff. He makes crafts. He's fine.

ALLISON: He's the perfect man.

HRISHI: Aaron, can you tell us about the casting of Mark Harmon? Especially as someone, you knew he was going to be killed, but you know you were casting him opposite of Allison.

AARON: Here's what I can guarantee. He certainly did not have to audition. But he did have to trust me a little bit because you know, we...I didn't write ahead. I couldn't show him the four

scripts that he was going to do. All I could show him was his first episode, in which he comes in at the very end — he's got a page and a half at the end — when C.J. meets him for the first time and he tells her, you know, "you're being hunted, Ms. Cregg."

JOSH: So what do you do in that situation, "don't worry, the rest — it's going to be Sorkin level." Trust me.

AARON: I absolutely do not say that.

[laughter]

JOSH: That's what I would say.

AARON: I say, "Here's my plan." I probably didn't have that much planned. Except I was able to tell him he was going to die in the season finale.

HRISHI: So, he didn't have to audition, but was there any kind of consideration in the way of like I know, there's chemistry reads...was there anything?

JOSH: Everyone has chemistry with Allison. I'd like to meet the person where it doesn't work.

AARON: There's no one who's not going to have chemistry with Allison. I had no worry about Mark Harmon not having chemistry with Allison and if there was a silver lining to, you know, writing by the seat of your pants, to not being able to get ahead — and there isn't a silver lining — but if there were, it would be that you can, if for some reason there wasn't chemistry, which is really hard to believe that that would happen, or if Allison came to me and said, "This is truly a horrible person" or something like that...

JOSH: He keeps making me get him water.

AARON: I can make a last minute, you know. I can do something else. But that wasn't going to be an issue with Mark. He was a delight. And believe me, I was among those who would have loved to have kept him around but not only did I need to kill him for the sake of drama, but what else is he going to do? How many people is he—you know!

HRISHI: But you know, he could just be, he could be a recurring character every now and then, we see C.J. going home...

JOSH: Oh, give him a break, Hrishi! Give him a break!

ALLISON: I just, you know, I thought it was important. There was something about his death and C.J. feeling a little responsible for his death and feeling like you can't — there wasn't saying that you can't have it all but, Leo says something in an episode, I don't know which episode it was, where he tells his wife, you know, she says, "We have to be the most important thing." and he says, "Not now. This. I work at the White House. This is the most important thing right now."

JOSH: We see Amy and Josh, we see Amy and Josh prioritize what they prioritize in the same episode.

AARON: Absolutely. In the same episode. In fact, we cut right from Allison. We were all just talking about how, for maybe the only time in the four years I was writing for the show, I stopped talking and just gave the show to one of the actors.

JOSH: Is that as much pressure as it sounds like?

AARON: And it's the season finale.

ALLISON: The season finale. Yeah, that was unbelievably hard to do that. And act in Times Square. That was very challenging.

JOSH: You killed it.

[applause]

AARON: You did. It's even more challenging than you might think. Because the sequence begins with, we simply see Ron Butterfield, the head of the Secret Service detail, telling C.J. that this has happened. And it begins with words. He does it the way a secret service agent would do it, without sugar-coating it. "Simon Donovan is dead. He was shot and killed." And C.J. doesn't believe it, "I was just talking to him. No, you're wrong. He went uptown to do some paperwork." And then we just move back and stop the dialogue. And C.J. has to break down without the help of any words at all. In fact, I have no idea what they — I needed their mouths to be moving, but I had no idea what they were saying to each other. So, Allison had to kind of go from zero to 100 by herself and then again out in Times Square which would have been many hours later that we set up for that. And just had to do it on 'Action.' There wasn't anything to help her there.

ALLISON: There was a guy that bumped into me. That, I don't know, cause...

HRISHI: Yeah, that's my favorite part of the whole episode — is that moment where you get into that moment where you get bumped by that guy, it feels...I'm already feeling so bad for C.J. in that moment. And now I'm thinking this guy has to bump — shoulder check her too?

ALLISON: Yeah, that really did it. It actually, I got kind of pissed. He kind of hit me and I was thinking, maybe, and I love Alex Graves for this, the director who— I think he told him to hit me and it really, it really knocked it out of me and I started crying because I wasn't expecting it.

HRISHI and JOSH: Interesting.

AARON: Yeah, I told Alex to tell him to hit you.

JOSH: See, I had that at summer camp once. I was really homesick and we were playing dodgeball and I got hit in the head and I just started crying, and I was like, "This isn't about dodgeball! I miss my parents!"

HRISHI: That was also Aaron told them to do that too.

JOSH: Look, he's had a lot of influence in my life.

HRISHI: So, but you have to stay composed. You have to stay in that moment.

ALLISON: And it was so, you know, people in Times Square were standing across the street all watching me. I was performing — I was on Broadway, literally on Broadway. More than I've ever been on Broadway before, it was really challenging. Cold, late.

HRISHI: Yes, and you often do many takes on the show. Is that a scene that you have to do...

ALLISON: Those are the ones I want to get right away and once I nail it, then they don't have to — and it was late and cold and rainy. I was like, "Please, I'm getting this" and then the guy hit me and I was like, "Oh, thank God." I just felt this wave of emotion.

AARON: The best of the many takes we would do on the show would be if there were an eight-page continuous teaser with no cuts in it at all, I would, say, start out in C.J.'s office, wind through the whole West Wing, sort of collecting people along the way and handing people off. If it's eight pages, you just don't want to have any lines on page eight because you don't want to be the person who screws it up on page eight.

JOSH: That's right.

AARON: And we would always root for Allison to screw it up on page eight because —

ALLISON: Are you serious?

AARON: Yeah! Because we're three rooms away with headphones on, and you would just have the best reactions to that moment when you just tripped over a word or something.

ALLISON: I'd be all "arrrrghhhh."

AARON: And then you would say, "Aaron, is there any chance the word is actually pronounced that way?"

ALLISON: Oh, my God.

JOSH: Yes, Allison. Senate! Senate!

HRISHI: And now we're going to take a quick break.

[Ad break]

[music]

HRISHI: One of the things that makes the death so devastating, and part of the reason why I was asking about Anthony's line, you know, "You're not very bright" is because C.J. just has her way with Simon. She's just running circles around him, you see, in this moment in this episode.

[West Wing episode 3.22 excerpt]

DONOVAN: Can I say something?

C.J.: Sure.

DONOVAN: I'm not allowed to date a protectee.

C.J.: Who's trying to date you?

DONOVAN: I'm not allowed to kiss a protectee.

C.J.: Who's trying to kiss you?

DONOVAN: You did.

C.J.: No, I didn't.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Just straight up denial and he can't even — he has no idea what's going on.

AARON: Well, I will let you answer that, but I will defend Simon, who, yes, C.J., you know, can own Simon a lot. Except when Simon is protecting C.J., then he's happy to remove the engine from her car, take out — you left her with wiper fluid, you know? In other words, he's not going to be stopped from protecting her. And she'll win every other fight.

ALLISON: And I, I don't remember — if I did... it wasn't in that episode, it was in the previous one though. I don't remember, but I probably did though. C.J. did try to kiss him. Right?

JOSH: Yes.

AARON: And he got distracted when you were trying on the black Vera Wang.

ALLISON: Oh, that's right.

AARON: He got distracted for a few moments by your...

ALLISON: Incredible physical...

JOSH: Calves.

AARON: Visage. And it turned out the guy was in the store.

JOSH: My favorite Simon line from this scene though, is, "13." I wanna hear it, and then I'll ask what in God's name it means.

[West Wing episode 3.22 excerpt]

DONOVAN: You're like the girl in Driver's Ed who won't watch the prom night movie because it's gross and so ends up missing an important lesson about drinking and driving.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I love that. And no matter how many times I listen to it, I can't quite parse it. But it's my favorite line in the whole episode.

AARON: He's just telling her that she's not taking this seriously enough, like there's a guy out there who's actually trying to kill her.

JOSH: I love that line. We also wanted to talk about your relationship with Melissa Fitz, who plays Carol.

ALLISON: Yes, my God, my great, great Melissa Fitzgerald.

HRISHI: I love how you just say...

ALLISON: Let me just say, my favorite thing to do is — Carol!

[cheers. Melissa Fitzgerald comes onstage.]

JOSH: Let's unpack C.J. and Carol, shall we? It's not this episode, but there is a scene where the flirtation between Simon and C.J. is heating up and you completely read her. You know exactly why she's mentioned having older brothers and taking her niece for — shopping for her junior prom. The closeness you have in real life led into Aaron's writing in your relationship onscreen, I think.

ALLISON: Is that true?

AARON: Yes, it is. But now I'm trying to remember who played C.J.'s niece.

HRISHI: Evan Rachel Wood.

JOSH: And when we discussed the episode, she's got star quality in that scene.

AARON: Yes, she does. I actually like the moment in The Black Vera Wang when he is showing her how to observe the room. Turn to your left. Turn to your right. Straight ahead and back of you. What did you see? And she sees something here, can't remember there, there's someone in a coat. Okay, it's April. Why is there somebody in a coat? I don't know either, but until he leaves this store I'll always know where he is.

HRISHI: Now I get to ask my question now. We know that C.J.'s stalker sees her in the black Vera Wang. Is it the guy in the coat? It's what I've always wondered.

JOSH: That's a good question.

AARON: I don't know.

HRISHI: I was afraid you were going to say that. Okay, I wanted to ask about a line that you wrote that doesn't get spoken in the episode. Towards the end of your script, there's a line that you wrote: "There are people who have killed people, and people who haven't. And Bartlet will never be in the second group again." It's a beautiful line. Does ever it kill you that you're like, "I'm writing this and no one's ever going to hear it?"

AARON: First of all, thank you. No, it doesn't kill me. I hardly ever do that. I think the actors will tell you that my stage directions and descriptions are pretty spare. If you have to pull out a gun at this moment, you know, you have to pull out a gun at this moment. I really want them to feel free to bring to it what they're going to bring to it. It was a silent moment for Martin. And I wanted him to internalize that. And you know, in these really weird times, I've been asked — I'm sure you guys get asked, because Donald Trump is in the White House, "Wouldn't you like to have The West Wing on again?" Or "What would you write now?" [applause] And thank you, I really do appreciate that.

JOSH: I'm available March 10th. March 10th.

[laughter]

AARON: And the answer is I would put any West Wing episode on the air just to show what it looks like — a normal press conference, where reporters ask reasonable questions and get answers. But even more, but even more...uh, Bartlet quotes to Adam Arkin— is Thomas Merton a monk, who's a really good writer?

HRISHI: Yeah.

AARON: Yes. And I'm paraphrasing here, I'm not gonna get it exactly right. But Martin quotes it to Sydney, he says that Thomas Merton wrote "I don't always know what the right thing is to do, Lord, but I think the fact that I want to please you pleases you." In other words, trying really hard to do the right thing is the right thing. And I don't know if Bartlet did the right thing or the wrong thing at the end by ordering the assassination of Shareef. But clearly, everyone involved in this, from Bartlet to Leo to Fitzwallace, try to do the right thing. Thought it through from every angle and I think that that's what we're craving in the real White House, that we don't feel like people are [applause] you know, that the goal is particularly honorable here, or that they're arriving at decisions in ways that are worthy of where they work.

HRISHI: In that moment, when the President says "Take him." This line that we're talking about compositionally there's thing that happens — it's a beautiful shot. Where Martin Sheen is facing one way and John Spencer is behind him and they almost seem like one figure and the President, he's shrouded in shadow, and it looked like Janus, the two-faced god.

AARON: I know what you're talking about. The very last moment and the cast onstage is singing...

HRISHI: Yes.

AARON: "What's victorious in war shall be made glorious in peace."

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Musical theatre major.

AARON: Yeah, and I have to tell you, I feel bad about it to this day. The way it works is the editor does this cut and the director, in this case Alex Graves, comes in and does a cut. And then it's given to me. And I start to work on it. And so when Alex gave me his cut, I was actually furious about the last two minutes of the episode. I have no idea why. I really don't. And I took it out on the editor and obviously word got to Alex, who called me and he was so remorseful. And I don't know what I did wrong, I felt terrible, but I looked at it again and, what did he do wrong? It looks great! I don't know what my problem was there, except that he did something with that curtain that you're talking about. And this never matters to me, but it's not how I saw it, or when I wrote it I saw it in a slightly different way, where we would move in tight on Bartlet's face and, again, it matters less now that you don't do the teaser that was originally written with him shaving and singing that song, but I had just seen a push-in on Bartlet's face and Alex did it as a silhouette behind the silk, which was beautiful and I just hope that in the 15 years or so that's gone by, that I have sufficiently apologized to Alex for doing that.

JOSH: This should do it.

AARON: I hope so. I think he may have been nominated for an Emmy for the episode.

JOSH: He was.

AARON: And that would have done it as well.

JOSH: I think you're right.

HRISHI: I'm just going to get a little bit pretentious here for a second, if everyone will forgive me.

JOSH: Oh, now?

HRISHI: For the first time ever. But it really did remind me of Janus and I was looking, and I looked up what are the two faces of Janus and what does that mean and it's supposed to signify the beginning and end of conflict. And so I thought it was this brilliant thing where you're tying it into the "victorious in war, glorious in peace" and all that, so...it's very impressive.

AARON: Boy, I mean, we were doing a lot in that episode, but we should have done that.

JOSH: Aaron, is that song from Nicholas Nickleby?

AARON: Yes, and like I said, John Oliver's uncle wrote it. It's from the original production of Nicholas Nickleby.

JOSH: Which I saw.

AARON: And I saw too, starring...

JOSH: Roger Rees.

AARON: Starring Roger Rees! Lord John Marbury.

JOSH: May he rest In peace.

AARON: And there's a, yes, there's a play within a play in that too. And it's the end of Act 17 or something like, Nicholas Nickleby was long. And I loved it. I always remembered it. I really don't know what order things came in, whether, and sometimes I'd talked about this on the podcast before, sometimes you just start with song and you want to write an episode that can support that song, where it makes sense for that song to go. Sometimes you start with a joke, you know, like 'I've got this great joke for Will Bailey and C.J.. It's four lines. I can't have an episode that's four lines long, so and I really want to do this joke so I'm got to write this episode so it can contain this joke but I knew I wanted to do this number because of that line, "What is victorious in war shall be made glorious in peace." And you know, that's kind of Bartlet's only justification for doing what he does. Remember, we're talking about a very devout man, and even if you weren't — you don't have to be devout to have morality. And he was really conflicted but the only thing he can hang onto is that there's a greater good out there somewhere, and maybe this is how we get peace on earth. By blowing this guy's brains out.

HRISHI: Allison and Melissa, Aaron had said he had not seen this episode since it maybe originally aired. When was the last time, before watching it for our discussion, when was the last time that you saw "Posse Comitatus"?

MELISSA: I think the last time I saw it, aside from last night at Allison's, was, uh, when it aired.

HRISHI: So what was it like last night when you guys were watching it? What was your reaction — I mean, did you talk during the episode during? We you like, 'Shhh...I'm watching.'

ALLISON: No, we don't like to talk when we watch TV.

AARON: Yes. Yes.

ALLISON: Especially when it's Aaron Sorkin...

AARON: Yeah, I appreciate that, but yeah, you really shouldn't talk when watching TV or a movie...

ALLISON: No, but it...

AARON: You shouldn't watch it on your phone.

JOSH: A little PSA recording.

ALLISON: No, we did have a little. I'm lying, we did pause and I go, "Do you remember that?" I mean, we were watching it, I really don't think I had watched it since or may not have watched it in its entirety when it first aired. Because after a while, we ate, breathed, and slept West Wing and we'd get home and it wasn't my priority to watch. I loved doing it and wasn't a fan of watching myself, now watching, I'm like, "Oh my God. I looked great! I wonder what I was worried about." I hated the way I looked! And now I'm like, ugh, I looked — so great looking! I was lovely.

AARON: I agree. But you both have been frozen in time. But I have a question for Melissa and Allison. Press briefing scenes in the press room, which you'd both be in. I was writing the show also while we were making it. Basically, my routine would be, I would come to rehearsal. That's the actors and we'd just sit around and read through the scene; if anyone had any questions, I might tweak something. But usually that didn't really happen. And then I would be called back to the set for camera rehearsal, which is the first shot that you get as the master, the widest possible shot of the scene. Once you cut it together you're not going to be in the master a lot. You're mostly going to be in singles and doubles. We'll be in a couple different sizes on Allison. We'll get coverage of Melissa, will hit the people — you know, Tim Busfield, who's out there — we'll hit the people who are asking questions and that kind of thing. I don't need to watch all that being done, I should really be back in my office, napping on the couch. So I just watch the master being done. And the rest of the morning or the night is everything else that's in that scene and my question is, what was it like in there during those, during like the sort of all night in the press briefing room set?

ALLISON: I tried to make those as painless as possible and usually that was determined by how well I knew my lines. And that was, I think what made me so good at learning my lines, knowing how much more difficult it would be for me because, the script supervisor, if I missed one little thing they would come up and that would totally start to — and my performance would start to devolve into insecurity so I'd have to know it cold and when I when I knew it cold, it was so great to be able to be that, say, C.J.'s words...

AARON: Yeah, and lots of times I gave you long lists of names and dates and unpronounceable countries

[talking over each other]

ALLISON: Yes, you gave them to me and most of the time I had no idea what I was talking about, just...I mean, it was so much fun to get one of those briefings down and know it cold. And whatever angle that they wanted and I wanted us in and out of there because it was challenging to do those

AARON: It was. And by the way, I'm not sure if everybody knows the evolution of The Jackal. But we would always shoot late on Friday nights. The day would get later.

ALLISON: Fraturday, that's what we'd call it.

JOSH: My people call it "Shabbat."

[laughter]

AARON: You have to give the cast and crew a 12-hour turnaround. You can't bring them back fewer than 12 hours from when you release them. So as you get further in the week, and you know you go an hour late on Monday, you're starting an hour late on Tuesday, still going on later, and so by the time you get to Friday, you're not starting until 2 in the afternoon and you're wrapping when the sun comes up on Saturday. Allison's trailer on Friday nights.

ALLISON: The flamingo. The pink flamingo.

AARON: Became the Flamingo Lounge, because it was her secret service code name, and she had a flamingo on top of her trailer. And you'd go in there for a drink. It was like The Swamp on M*A*S*H.

ALLISON: It was!

JOSH: Yeah, because it's okay to drink when you're working.

AARON: And I'd only heard tell of this place. Like, Brigadoon. I'd never seen!

JOSH: Musical theatre major.

AARON: And it was a Friday going into Saturday around midnight, you know, whatever I'm working on was due yesterday and I haven't started it or something and so I was panicked. Anyway, I stopped into Club Flamingo and I couldn't believe my eyes. Allison was doing The Jackal and sitting on the side, with like a stub of a cigar in his mouth and a drink and sunglasses, is Schiff. He's going like this. And I'm watching Allison and I can't believe my eyes. And I said, "Alright, this is the teaser for next week. You're just going to do this and Richard, you're going to do that, and I'll come up with a reason for why." [laughter] But at that point I think people started to worry that it was every man for himself. You're just going to have to start improv-ing your own thing on the show because I'm out of ideas.

HRISHI: Wanna just, get back to this episode? Because we don't have a lot of time. But there's something ironic to me about the fact that you were so well-known for the incredible articulate nature of your characters, that one of the lines, that's become most famous from the show, is from this episode, partly because of who's in the White House right now, but it's an example of someone being incredibly inarticulate.

[West Wing episode 3.22 excerpt]

GOV. RICHIE: *Crime. Boy, I don't know.*

[end excerpt]

AARON: Hey, what I wouldn't give to have Rob Richie in the White House right now. Yeah, that was not a mind at work. Bartlet in the scene that he has with him, you know, begs him, says, you know, "We can have a really good debate about these issues." He can insist on being better informed, tells him that, when he ran the first time, two hours a day, it was Bartlet college. And he didn't know anything and he had to get taught stuff and Richie is insulted by it. But you know, Bartlet's cowboy moment in the scene is...

[West Wing episode 3.22 excerpt]

BARTLET: *[to Governor Richie] In the future, if you're wondering: "Crime. Boy, I don't know," is when I decided to kick your ass.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: How did you come to cast James Brolin for that role?

AARON: Damn, again, I guarantee you he didn't have to read and my guess is that our Emmy Award winning casting director came to me with a list of a few names and I said...

ALLISON: Can I just do a sidebar here? Because I wanted to ask you, because I had heard that Lily Tomlin — the reason she was cast was because she wrote you a letter saying what a fan she was of the show and she wanted to be on it. Is that true?

AARON: It's that easy.

ALLISON: Did she really do that? That's what I heard. I don't know. Just wondered if that was really true. That's what I had heard, that she had asked, she wrote you a letter.

AARON: That is true and Mary Louise Parker got on the show by leaving a message on the answering machine of the production office. Forgive my language, but she said, "This is Mary Louise Parker, I think Josh Lyman needs to get laid and I'm the one to do it."

[laughter and applause]

JOSH: That's awesome.

ALLISON: That's fantastic.

AARON: Yeah.

JOSH: Sadly, we are rapidly getting to the point where you have to be whisked away to an airport.

AARON: I'm afraid so, just because I have to make a plane, but I've been having the time of my life.

JOSH: So just quickly, I want to quickly promote. You have a movie coming out that you wrote, the first movie you directed, none of us is in it. Unacceptable, but...we still want to say "Molly's Game" is coming out.

AARON: Hey, thanks very much. I actually I didn't come here to plug "Molly's Game." I just came here to do this.

JOSH: No, you don't need our help.

AARON: It opens November 22nd, the day before Thanksgiving. But the world premiere is next week at the Toronto Film Festival, if anyone happens to be in Toronto.

JOSH: The trailer is out. It looks awesome. I still watch it, thinking, "I gotta be in this somewhere." In fact, I'm actually not in it. And then I have one last bit of audio I want to play. It's a weird — I'm glad we mentioned Lily — it's a quick, weird little throwaway line from Lily.

HRISHI: When she's stoned and leaving the botched —

JOSH: This is the scene that most spoke to me actually, because I once played Celebrity Jeopardy and I took two Ativan beforehand and it did not work out well. So I empathize with her.

HRISHI: And she says this on her way out.

[West Wing episode 3.22 excerpt]

DEBBIE FIDERER: Whatever happened to the Swingle Singers?

CHARLIE: I don't know

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Whatever happened to the Swingle Singers?

AARON: First of all, the scene, I'm just remembering this now. The teaser had to be cut. Simon Donovan being really hungry had to be cut. And the scene that Lily Tomlin has with Bartlet in the season four opener used to be in "Posse Comitatus," okay?

ALLISON: Oh.

JOSH: Interesting.

AARON: Why? What was I thinking? I mean this thing, what was clearly going to be an hour and a half long. There was no way that it was going to be 42 minutes. But I had to cut that so Lily's entrance into the show is kind of truncated and I really liked her as she has the exact same moral sector as every other character on The West Wing, which is to say, and you know we find this out at the beginning of next season, but the reason why she got fired from the White House, and the fact that she will not rat out her boss, who's not that great a guy, is what finally impresses Bartlet. That, and she was able to make him laugh. She was able to remember what the Dow was doing, right? But other than that, she was kind of a goofy, she had just become what I had imagined happens if you take a woman who has — she didn't just work at the White House, Dule lists a whole bunch of things that she did, she was the executive assistant to the head of the International Olympic Committee, and all these things, and just make her unemployed several years. But she's not giving up. She's going to do this alpaca farming thing. And just the line, whatever happened to the Swingle Swingers? It was just one of those things that I knew Lily could do —

JOSH: I want you to know now, they're just known as the Swingles. They've been around for 55 years. Their latest album came out in February. I can't say that month! February. It's called Folklore, it's available everywhere you can find albums. They have a holiday tour coming to the southwestern United States coming up. You can check out their tour at theswingles.co.uk/shows. And I reached out to them and they had a little message for you, Aaron.

AARON: No.

[audio]

Hi! We are what happened to the Swingle Singers. And we're coming to you live from the South Terminal of Gatwick airport where we're off on tour and we just wanted to say hello and a big thank you for making us a tiny, tangential part of the greatest TV show ever made.

[applause]

[acapella version of The West Wing Theme]

AARON: Unbelievable.

HRISHI: Gotta thank you guys so much. Thank you so much for joining us. Thanks for doing this.

AARON: Thank you all. Thank you all very, very much. This was a blast. Thank you.

HRISHI: Before we wrap up, you know, you guys know how the show ends. Before we get to that, we say “The West Wing Weekly” is part of RadioTopia. We’ve got a bunch of RadioTopia folks here. Julie Shapiro, the executive director, Kerri Hoffman, the CEO, Roman Mars from 99% Invisible, Helen Zaltzman from The Allusionist. Please, stand up if you guys want. For making this foundation and for people like you — thank you for making this happen. If you want to talk to us about this episode, you know where to find us. We’re on the WestWingWeekly.com. We’re on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram. Allison, Melissa, you guys are both on Twitter. People can find you and we’re also, in honor of our guests tonight and in honor of all you guys coming here, we’re making a donation to Justice For Vets.

JOSH: Melissa, will you tell us a little bit about Justice For Vets?

MELISSA: Well, first of all, I just want to thank you guys for all the incredible support you’ve given Justice For Vets and the work we do on behalf of veterans who return home who are struggling on the homefront, getting in trouble with the law, we fight for them to get treatment instead of incarceration when they’re struggling with substance use disorders and mental health conditions. And honestly, I have been traveling around the country to veterans treatment courts for almost four years now, I can’t believe it, and without the support of this West Wing family, I don’t know that we could have done what we have done and I certainly wouldn’t have wanted to without all of your support. Truly. And that includes The West Wing Weekly family. Thank you guys for all the support you’ve given us too. And yeah, the website is JusticeForVets.org. It’s pretty straightforward. And we also have a Twitter handle which is @Justice4Vets. But I am really proud to say and happy to say that today right now that there are 15,000 veterans who would otherwise be incarcerated who are receiving life-saving treatment in veteran treatment courts across the country. And we can do even more, so thank you so much for everything and thank you.

HRISHI: Okay.

JOSH: Okay.

Audience: What’s next?

JOSH: Love you guys!