

The West Wing Weekly
3.09: "Bartlet for America"
Guest: John Spencer (Previously recorded interview)

[Intro Music]

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

HRISHI: And I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Today we're talking about "Bartlet for America." It's episode 9 from season 3.

JOSH: It was written by Aaron Sorkin; it was directed by Tommy Schlamme, just like the pilot. Unlike the pilot, it first aired on December 12, 2001.

HRISHI: This episode was submitted for several Emmy award nominations. Thomas Del Ruth was nominated for an Emmy for his cinematography, Lauren Schaffer was nominated for outstanding picture editing, and John Spencer won best supporting actor in part because of this episode. This episode was also part of the Emmy submission package for *The West Wing's* Outstanding Drama Series win. Coming up later in this episode, we have something really special. We have an interview from 2002 with John Spencer, much of which has never been heard before, and we're going to get to present it to you for the first time later in this episode.

JOSH: Very special. It's a pretty great episode.

HRISHI: It's the Christmas episode, and the Christmas episode on *The West Wing* is typically a standout. Every season so far, the context of it is so sentimental. And I don't mean that in a bad way.

JOSH: No, it's beautifully written and acted, and we step back from what we've had in the last couple of episodes which were wonkier and issue-heavy and we get a real character piece. I mean the characters, I think, are served and developed in every episode of the show, but an episode like this has a little bit more breathing room for a deeper dig down into one character and it's Leo, and it's very well done. I like the time shifts, and I thought that this episode benefited from having a really, really long period where the show's ahead of the viewer.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: In a kind of exciting way, where you don't know exactly what's going on. I mean this is something that Aaron does frequently, to great effect [cross talk]. But here, there's really a long, slow reveal.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

JOSH: For us to catch up with essentially what Josh Lyman is trying to prevent for most of the episode.

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

LEO: Don't start again.

JOSH: There's ways to get the guy out of the room.

LEO: Hey, I'll keep my head here, you keep your head there.

JOSH: I used to do this for a living, Leo. The guy gets the floor for five minutes, I can get him out of the room.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I think it also benefits from the fact that there are very few plot lines going on in this episode. It's really Leo's story. That tree has many branches -- how he met the president for the first time, the campaign, and the president's MS and how all these things relate and his own alcoholism. But it's really just one story. The only other thing that's happening is the story about black churches in Tennessee that are being threatened and FBI agent Mike Casper, played by Clark Gregg, makes his return.

JOSH: Yes, a welcomed return of Clark Gregg to our TV screens. I've known Clark for a really long time and I love his physicality. He's got kind of a swagger and kind of a specificity to the way he moves that just *is* Clark. If I couldn't see his face but saw only the silhouette of his body, I would be able to identify Clark in a second from the way he moves. And then there's an extra element in his face which is that there's always, I think, almost no matter what is happening on screen, there's a little sly smile to Clark [cross talk] that I really appreciate.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah.

HRISHI: Physically, he manages to sometimes be very still, but because of the expression on his face, it still seems like he's moving a mile a minute.

JOSH: And a sort of refreshing surprise to me in this episode was Aaron's writing him as being a bit daunted to be in the presence of the president. I mean there's an element, at the end there's also an element of this guy is a pro and we don't take curtain calls. There's that. But there's clearly also an element of "No, I don't want to go in there, I'll just stay out here". There's a little bit, which is one of Aaron's favorite things to do, how do people deal with being in the same room as the most powerful person in the world or the President of the United States, and often they are, you know, reminded of how comfortable the core staff is around him by seeing the discomfort of someone who is a little bit newer or not used to it or maybe never met him before.

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

MIKE CASPER: *Hang on, this wall is curved.*

JOSH: *Yeah, let's go.*

MIKE CASPER: *I don't have to go in there, I can wait out here.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, right. I know where we are. That's a great line.

HRISHI: I love that we get a call back to this character. We get a call back to a few characters that we've met before, in this episode. Mike Casper is just one of them. But I love that we get to bring him back. We met him for the first time in "Somebody's Going to Emergency, Somebody's Going to Jail". The only interaction that we really get is his contentious argument with Sam where it turns out he's actually right, but in the moment it kind of seems like Agent Casper is being a jerk because in the moment of the episode when they have that interaction, we are all on Sam's side and it seems like, yeah this guy is stonewalling in order to preserve the reputation of the FBI. By the time we get to the end of the episode, it turns out Sam is wrong and Casper is right. But we never get to see him again and he doesn't take a curtain call there. It's nice to bring him back and have him back in this sort of non-adversarial role.

JOSH: Yeah. I also thought as I watched that this is the difference between a home game and an away game. So we've seen Casper in his own lair, where he really owns it, and then he's at the White House, which is one of the biggest home-field advantages in the world.

HRISHI: Right. Did we talk about how much Agent Casper is a precursor for Agent Coulson?

JOSH: No, I don't know that we've have, but certainly you can see it.

HRISHI: I'd like to think that the blueprint was in place for Clark Gregg's role as Agent Coulson in the Marvel movies and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* from these episodes in *The West Wing*. If you're listening to this podcast episode, but you have not yet watched "Bartlet for America", I would suggest that maybe you should watch "Take Out the Trash Day" just beforehand, re-watching that as a kind of appetizer for this one. It's the episode where we meet Congressman Bruno and they talk about the investigation into Leo and his addiction issues. You might also want to watch "In the Shadow of Two Gunmen Part II". So, yeah, if you have some time and you want to watch a lot of *West Wing* [cross talk] watch "Take Out the Trash Day", "In the Shadow of Two Gunmen Part II", and then watch this episode. Then you'll get a really nice, I think like a little super *West Wing* experience.

JOSH: [cross talk] That's a lot of homework you're assigning during the episode.

HRISHI: But yeah, so we met Congressman Bruno for the first time there. That's James Handy who plays Congressman Joseph Bruno.

JOSH: We get a nice little parade of familiar faces in this episode with the hearings.

HRISHI: Actually, I had a question about Congressman Bruno's name, because his name is Congressman Joseph Bruno, but then at one point he gets called Phil.

JOSH: He gets called Phil?

HRISHI: Yeah. Congressman Gibson, when Cliff and Gibson and Bruno are in the backroom and Cliff has that amazing line of...

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

CLIFF: I will resign this committee and wait in the tall grass for you, Congressman, because you are killing the party.

JOSEPH BRUNO: Who the hell is this?

CLIFF: You don't have to make up your mind right now.

GIBSON: Phil.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That is inexplicable.

HRISHI: Yeah. So Joseph/Phil/Bruno played by James Handy, he comes back and you know who else comes back? Mrs. Landingham.

JOSH: Yes!

HRISHI: Just like a knife through the heart when we go into the flashback and we're in the governor's office. Of course Mrs. Landingham would be there.

JOSH: Of course.

HRISHI: And there she is. And it is like, there's some visceral shock that I felt, seeing her.

JOSH: I agree. Although I appreciated that Aaron resisted what might have been the urge to make a meal of it.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: We just get a little slice of what their life was like together and see that their relationship was largely what we came to know to be when he became president.

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

BARTLET: Speaking of crusty New England relics.

MRS. LANDINGHAM: Governor, does it frustrate you to constantly aim for humoring me so dramatically?

BARTLET: Nah.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: It's just a nice, refreshing little dose of Mrs. Landingham, whom we've missed, so it cuts. But he doesn't try to do that. He doesn't have her say anything or have some interaction that, you know, has great significance knowing what we know. He just lets it breathe for a moment.

HRISHI: Yeah. It somehow hits harder because it is exactly what we'd experienced before. The president making a wisecrack at her, and then she takes him down a peg. The only thing that is different is that instead of calling him Mr. President, she calls him Governor.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Speaking of guest stars in this episode, in the Governor's office, I was really excited to see Carlos Jacott.

JOSH: Yes, oh really. I know Carlos a little bit. How do you know of him?

HRISHI: I am a big fan of his primarily from Noah Baumbach's first movie, *Kicking and Screaming*.

JOSH: Mmhmm.

HRISHI: And then I've just liked him in everything I've seen him in. He was also fantastic in *Being John Malkovich*, when he plays John Malkovich's agent.

JOSH: Yes, he's a terrific actor.

HRISHI: Yeah. He was on a show called *She Spies*.

JOSH: Yes, of which I did one episode.

HRISHI: And in the first season, the show was very campy and kind of silly.

JOSH: That's when I was on it. You know, at one point I am on screen, and I think Barry Bostwick was the governor and I was an aide of his and they sort of flashed my resume and the final one was like "looks like that guy from *Sports Night*" or something like that. It was that level of silly. And I believe I had some sort of, I think I fought a guy with a sword but I had a loaf of bread. Like yeah, it was pretty silly. Fun to do though.

[*She Spies* excerpt]

JIMMY (played by Josh Malina): *I don't care what anyone says, Hollywood is a magical place filled with magical people and they deserve all the awards they give themselves.*

[end excerpt.]

HRISHI: I really enjoyed that show and I'm sure I saw that episode and was probably, at the moment, really thrilled to see you in it. Especially at that time, you and Carlos Jacott both really loomed large in my mind as my favorite guys, so.

JOSH: It's hard to imagine such a time, but I'll take you at face value.

HRISHI: It's really, really true. So Carlos Jacott's scene, correct me if I'm wrong, they're pitching the president leaf-peeping.

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

PERSON: We've got an aggressive strategy.

BARTLET: Yeah.

PERSON: The Office of Travel and Tourism has got around print ads throughout New England encouraging people to drive here and view the fall foliage.

BARTLET: Oh, slow down, you're going too fast.

[end except]

JOSH: Yeah, I made the same connection. I thought, "oh, callback," but then nobody said it.

HRISHI: Nobody said leaf peeping. But still, you know, the President earlier said:

[West Wing Episode 2.05 excerpt]

BARTLET: Leaf-peeping? Is that something we do now?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: At the time, when we had come across that early in the podcast we were like, “Come on, a governor from New Hampshire, obviously he knows about leaf peeping, or he ought to know about leaf peeping” and I feel like in some ways, this was a subtle correcting of the record.

JOSH: Well I took it more as like an Easter egg, like this is why he doesn’t know about peeping, he’s not really listening to these two guys.

HRISHI: I like that interpretation.

JOSH: It was retconning, I thought.

HRISHI: Yes, exactly. Yeah, absolutely.

JOSH: Oh, okay, now I get it. He had a chance to learn all about leaf peeping and to embrace it and didn’t do so.

HRISHI: Yeah. There’s something so tragic about this episode in general, just the way that time is used like showing Mrs. Landingham in a very mundane way and a mundane mention by the president that “Jenny and Mallory are okay?” he says to Leo and Leo says “yeah.” You know, like these things that we know now that have ended tragically, but they don’t know it yet.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: There’s this dramatic irony to it, and it makes it so much more poignant.

JOSH: Of course, it’s very powerful, but it’s helpful that it’s used as a throwaway rather than [crosstalk] trying to lay something significant on us or more significant.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Exactly.

JOSH: Let me ask you this: So Leo arrives to pitch Jed on taking a run at the presidency and at first Bartlet thinks Leo is pitching himself. Who is Leo at the point we see him walk into the governor’s office?

HRISHI: He is a former Secretary of Labor. You know, that was his highest credentialed position.

JOSH: Right, because it’s interesting. I don’t know if it’s out of friendship, I was trying to figure out---

[West Wing 3.09 excerpt]

BARTLET: Leo, I swear to God there's no one I'd rather see in the Oval Office than you, but if you run, there's going to be a lot of discussion about Valium and alcohol, I mean---
[end excerpt]

JOSH: It seems to make sense to him that maybe Leo would consider this for himself.

HRISHI: Yeah, I think we've heard him described as a big player in the Democratic Party, I think when we were in "In the Shadow of Two Gunmen".

JOSH: The thing that struck me most about this scene is the revelation that Leo's saliva has some sort of preternatural adhesive quality. Leo seems to be like part frog. He just lightly licks a napkin, and it just adheres to a piece of wood.

HRISHI: Because of knowing how poignant the napkin ends up being, I tend to gloss over the kind of gross aspect of him licking the thing and then sticking it to an easel with his spit.

JOSH: Yeah. Well there are two aspects for me. One, it was kind of gross and reminded me of my great-aunt Jean, may she rest in peace, who would kind of lick and clean your face with it. Lick her finger and "let me get that." There's a little bit of that. And then it was just the remarkable adhesive quality of his saliva. It was really like wow, that [expletive deleted] works. I wanted him to maybe turn around at the end of the scene, shoot his tongue out, and take the napkin back with it.

HRISHI: [Laughter] We know he was in the military. Maybe he was a frog man.

JOSH: Nice. TIFOL! That said, now that I've ruined the moment, it is beautiful what Leo has written. I like that it's simple. I like that it's "Bartlet for America." You know, it's a subtle distinction between "Hey, Bartlet for President" and this is the right thing, like you're the right guy ---

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: --- to do what needs to be done for our country. It's just there's so much in the subtle, simple wording of it. There's a feeling of hope and energy and a movement that we know our heroes are going to get caught up in. I like that that's the way he chose to articulate the run.

HRISHI: Yeah. And speaking of our heroes getting caught up in it, you know we go for more than 16 minutes in this episode before we ever see Sam, C.J., or Toby. And they only appear in this episode in flashback, during the days of the campaign, which I thought was a really neat way of separating the two timelines and also separating possible conflicts with C.J.'s hairstyles.

JOSH: See, I thought it was just that Brad looked so old that they knew they had to keep him out of the flashbacks because it just wouldn't look right.

HRISHI: I wrote "C.J. has flashback hair."

JOSH: Yeah, indeed she does.

HRISHI: I love in their first scene when they're throwing the basketball around, how impatient C.J. was to get the ball back from Toby.

JOSH: Yes, their physicality is very funny there.

HRISHI: Yeah, he's teaching her how to throw a chest pass and every time she lets go of the ball, she's got her fingers beckoning "give it back to me, give it back to me." I love that. And you could tell that Toby was really into it as well, that he loved how impatient she was for it too.

JOSH: Yes, and I am going to give you my small quibble with that scene.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Which is that it's very funny that she just heaves the ball through the window, but they don't really react like people that just threw a ball through a pane of glass, I mean out into the street, shattered. It was like ---

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

C.J.: Can we get an intern over here?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And then they continue the discussion.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Which, it's funny but it actually made me think of another moment in another Sorkin work that I also always felt funny, but I don't really buy it. There's a scene in *The American President* when the girl at the flower shop, you know woman, is behind the counter and kind of not really paying attention because she's on the phone, and then she kind of does a double take and realizes that it's the President of the United States. And then she just literally falls over on her back. She faints, cold. And then he just has a line.

[*The American President* excerpt]

PRESIDENT SHEPHERD: Does any of this ring a bell?

(sound of woman fainting)

PRESIDENT SHEPHERD: Same girl, she remembered me.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Instead of saying “Oh my god, this girl just split her head open, get an ambulance. Somebody call 911!” It’s like, I get it, it’s funny, but if someone really cold fainted on the floor, you’d have to respond to what just happened. It’d be a medical emergency. And I think, there’s a similar element to that when throwing the ball through the window. I think that they’d deal with it immediately rather than continue their conversation.

HRISHI: I think that moment in the movie also kind of ties in to the Butterball hotline, when the President says that “I am just a citizen.”

JOSH: Oh yeah. There’s this scene of him ordering it on phone, trying to order them on the phone. They don’t believe him.

[*The American President* excerpt]

PRESIDENT SHEPHERD: Perhaps it would be better if you bill me for the flowers, I’m sure it’ll be alright with your boss. Well, I don’t know if you recognize my voice, but this is the President...Of the United States...hello?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Some listeners have pointed out the parallels between the Butterball hotline and the Flowerball hotline. So it’s funny that you happen to remember that scene for a totally different reason here.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: Leo is asked in the hearing when he met the president and he says ---

[*West Wing* Episode 3.09 excerpt]

LEO: We met for the first time about 32 years ago, but I would say our friendship began eleven years ago.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: But this is what I am talking about. Aaron needs to write this show, when they met for the first time 32 years ago. That’s the moment I want to see: in 1968 or 69 whatever it is, you know. I want it to start in 1968, they do not know each other yet. The President, Fitz, and Leo are on their separate paths and then show how their paths intersect at various points. Again, we

see how amazing a flashback, these moments in the past, how poignant they are when we know how the future is going to turn out. I want to see that.

JOSH: Hrishi, qualitatively, it's a wonderful idea. But ultimately, it doesn't get me work.

HRISHI: [laughter]

JOSH: And *Scandal* is ending in a season. Yeah, I can't exist, Will Bailey can't exist in the '68 version of *The West Wing*. That's a problem. So keep thinking. [crosstalk] It's a great pitch, but keep thinking.

HRISHI: [Crosstalk] Double roll, double roll!

HRISHI: I have it. What if you play Will Bailey's father?

JOSH: Hmm. No, I think he is too accomplished for me to play. I don't think he looks that much like me.

HRISHI: I think you could do it. I think that's how you work it in.

JOSH: One more moment about that scene with the basketball. It's in that scene that Sam, Toby, and Josh are discussing what Governor Bartlet needs to do in order to make clear how serious he is, I guess, about the run. And I think C.J. says:

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

C.J. : We'll release his tax returns, put all his stocks in a blind trust.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: [laughter] Because that's how you know somebody is serious about being the president.

JOSH: Ay-yi-yi.

HRISHI: Ay-yi-yi.

JOSH: Alright, that was just a complete like "we certainly have to do this."

HRISHI: I know.

JOSH: How quaint.

HRISHI: That's just what you do, Josh. If you didn't, it would just be unrealistic.

JOSH: No, you couldn't. Nobody would be elected, had he or she had not done those things. And for that matter, the medical information, too, is considered to be of utmost importance to share.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: At least, he has to have a physical. So, he asks Abbey "what's going to show, what are they going to find?"

HRISHI: Right and this is really the first on-screen evidence that we really get of deception.

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

BARTLET: What's a physical right now going to show?

ABBEY: It'll, uh, nothing. You're in remission.

BARTLET: I'm not lying to anybody, Abbey. I'm taking a physical.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: This is no inadvertent sin of omission. They are very calculatedly leaving out the whole truth.

JOSH: Yes, it's intentional but it's more, again, yeah, you're right. It's not "how do I falsify the tests, it's what's going to show if I do this?"

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: "Am I going to be able to go undetected?"

HRISHI: Yeah and I thought it was neat that in a totally different context in this scene, you have that reverend who's talking to them about those church bombings. He says "a sin of omission by any other name." Kind of like when they were tying in big tobacco into the deception. There are these little refrains here and there that pop up to underscore the severity of what's going on in the rest of their lives.

JOSH: Yeah, good point.

HRISHI: There was one thing that the president said in relation to the bombings which were in Tennessee. He's talking to the Governor of Tennessee and he says:

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

GOVERNOR: Because, with due respect Mr. President, you do it without my consent and it's a clear violation of state's rights. And you would have said the same thing when you were governor of New Hampshire.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: This doesn't happen in New Hampshire.

GOVERNOR: You got a pretty big black population in New Hampshire, do you?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: What I would absolutely call the President out on separately is there might not be a lot of black people in New Hampshire, but there certainly are a lot of white supremacists.

JOSH: Indeed.

HRISHI: And I've met some of them! And it wasn't very nice. As a lifelong New Hampshire, he should know about the Klan and New Hampshire, they've got a long shared history.

JOSH: Right. He has a line later about pleasing "the blacks" in your state, which I thought sat a little strangely. It may well be realistic that he would say that kind of thing, but it was a weird moment.

HRISHI: Yep. Another weird throw away line was Agent Casper saying to Donna:

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

AGENT CASPER: Listen, churches are burning down. Otherwise, I'd be hitting on you.

DONNA: I appreciate that.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Rough come-on.

HRISHI: Yeah. Were you saying "rough, period, come on" or were you saying that was a rough come-on?

JOSH: You know punctuation is so important. Yeah, it's a rough come-on. On about nine different levels. One, something important really is happening, so don't stop to say things like that. Two, do you think she was sitting around feeling slightly offended because you hadn't hit on her yet? Like, dude.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: There are a few more moments like that in this episode. There's, I think in the cold open, President Bartlet is sort of in and out of paying attention to what's going on on C-SPAN and his wife is being questioned. There's a lot of "the things we do to women."

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And I don't -- That line may be well, good and true to Bartlet and it felt like something he might say, and in fact it is something he said. But I thought, what is it? Sometimes we treat them like men? I mean, you know, she's being questioned.

HRISHI: It's both, yeah. It reduces their own sense of agency.

JOSH: I knew I could get you to say "agency."

HRISHI: You could have just asked me [crosstalk] where Mike Casper works.

JOSH: [crosstalk] Thereby preserving your own sense of agency.

JOSH: Oh, you're good. Damn, you're good.

HRISHI: As we were getting ready to record this episode, I got a note from Margaret, our editor. She said, "When you recap this episode, can you please discuss what a horrible, [expletive deleted] way this is to ask a woman on a date and advise your listeners not to emulate it? Thanks in advance."

JOSH: "This" being Leo and Jordan?

HRISHI: Yeah. So I thought rather than just us talk about it ourselves, we should just get Margaret to talk about it. Because, you know, agency.

JOSH: Yes, let's do it.

HRISHI: Hi, Margaret.

MARGARET: Hi, Hrishu.

HRISHI: So let's talk about Leo and Jordan.

MARGARET: Well, when I saw him ask her out, I was especially horrified because it was happening at a time when she had no way to escape and no way to say no, you know what I mean?

HRISHI: Right, because she's on camera.

MARGARET: Yeah, she's on camera; she's basically trying to do her job.

HRISHI: Right.

MARGARET: And, you know, it's a situation where if she even so much as makes a horrified face, it will be captured by national television. And she's very direct about it.

[West Wing 3.09 excerpt]

LEO: So what are you saying about dinner?

JORDAN: I'm not kidding around.

[end excerpt.]

MARGARET: She is very clear and he does not listen. People do that to women in the service industry all the time. So actually, I shared with my feminist Facebook group that I was going to be doing this and asked them to share their stories, and a lot of people have experienced this, where they're working at a call center and the guy on the other end of the line won't stop talking about how pretty their voice is. And just things that men would never get in the line of doing their job. This is kind of that take into the extreme where, yes, she's a high-powered lawyer, and yet she's basically being treated as there for his dating fun. From the beginning, where President Bartlet says, you know, "What's she wearing?" *That's* the thing President Bartlet wants to know about your lawyer?

HRISHI: And the thing that makes it complicated is the President is like "I like you guys together. You're like a 50's screwball comedy." And it's like, we do like them together.

MARGARET: Yeah, I think they're a fine couple. I have no problem if they start dating. I just hate that Leo is getting rewarded for what is basically like a *horrible* way to ask someone out, to put her on the spot while she's working. And then the result is, oh hey, it worked [crosstalk], what a great strategy, Leo.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] That's true.

HRISHI: It did work. Yeah. This is a trope that is being deconstructed more and more often now where if you just keep asking, if you are just persistent, then eventually a girl will say yes to you. Like, guy pursues girl, she's like hard to get, but eventually she falls for him, and it all works out.

MARGARET: Yeah, exactly. And that's why my takeaway message would be: please guys, don't emulate Leo when you ask someone out. It works on *The West Wing* and it works on a lot of other TV shows, but it is not fun for the women in real life.

HRISHI: An excellent point. Thanks, Margaret. Thanks for chiming in!

MARGARET: I appreciate it!

HRISHI: It's nice to hear your actual voice on the podcast. You're a big part of every episode, but usually in ways that people can't detect, as you edit and keep Josh and me from sounding like idiots.

MARGARET: Well I'll trust that you will do the same for me.

HRISHI: Good deal.

MARGARET: Bye, Hrishu.

HRISHI: Bye.

JOSH: Good points.

HRISHI: Yes, and I suspect that before this podcast is over, Margaret will have replaced one or both of us. She can have my job. If I could somehow make this podcast without having to speak on it, I would.

JOSH: Aww, you've said that to me before, which shocks me. You know that I'm the sidekick, right?

HRISHI: [Laughs]

JOSH: I've thought that recently. I wasn't sure if he knows. Certainly all the listeners know. You're the driving force, you are the big thinker, you are clearly more organized than I. You know the show better; you certainly are able to link to and find the bigger themes. I'm focusing on "wow, that extra is running way too fast" while you're parsing the themes, great and small. So it surprises me when you say that you would like to, if you could remove your voice from the podcast, you would. Because you realize it would be just me and it would be a disaster.

HRISHI: I feel like you are making us out to be sort of like I'm Garry Shandling and you're Jeffery Tambor on *The Larry Sanders Show*, but I think of us more as you're Garry Shandling and I'm Rip Torn.

JOSH: [Laughter]

HRISHI: That's how I see our dynamic.

JOSH: I see.

HRISHI: I hope there are some *Larry Sanders* viewers out there who will understand that dynamic. Wait, Josh, were you on *Larry Sanders*?

JOSH: I was. I played two different characters on *Larry Sanders*.

HRISHI: That's right! I knew as soon as I started saying it, some other distant bell in the back of my head that's right next to the bell that rang when we started talking about *She Spies* also rang. See this is what I'm talking about. You have lived in my conscious and subconscious for so long.

JOSH: By the way, we haven't gotten to her yet, but obviously another prominent guest star in this episode is Joanna Gleason.

HRISHI: Right!

JOSH: Does she ring any musical bells? I guess all bells are musical, but does she ring any for you?

HRISHI: Uh, no. She was in *Into the Woods*.

JOSH: There you go.

HRISHI: Is that the one?

JOSH: Well she's done a multiplicity of musicals. She was in *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* on Broadway and *Nick & Nora*, but famously she was the original Baker's Wife on Broadway in Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*.

HRISHI: Again, Aaron loves to pull guest stars from the world of theater. I mean, Joanna Gleason has done a lot of film and TV as well.

JOSH: Yes, quite an accomplished actor.

HRISHI: And she's great and such a formidable, fantastic character. Again, just leaps off the screen fully formed, with just a few sentences.

JOSH: Yes, and I think our Margaret makes a very good point. It's very easy to root for them.

HRISHI: As a couple.

JOSH: Yes, I mean I can see why she sent that email, worried that perhaps -- I mean I think we would have commented anyway on Leo's approach -- but it would be easy to ignore some of the icky-ness involved because they are both pretty winning, and they are good together, and there is good chemistry.

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

LEO: Wanna go and get breakfast or something?

JORDAN: No.

LEO: Breakfast is my favorite meal to eat out. I love tomato juice.

JORDAN: They're waiting for us, Leo.

LEO: They can wait.

JORDAN: No, they really can't.

LEO: Yeah, they really can.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And you do want Leo to have a date. I mean the man deserves a date.

JOSH: Oh, certainly, by the end of the episode. I mean again, this is one of the things -- I mean obviously you have seen this episode many times, I watch everything with fresh eyes -- so, it ain't nothin' but a family thing. I was like ooh. I didn't know what the payoff on that was going to be by the end, so that was a great little thing that Aaron weaved in that really is off emotionally. And there is something particularly touching, too, about Leo's scoring the date and then saying:

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

LEO: Do you wanna do it tomorrow night instead?

JORDAN: What's tomorrow night?

LEO: It's Christmas Eve.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: In other words, you know that's a night I really don't want to be alone and maybe fight the urge to drink, I felt, was a part of the unspoken plea.

HRISHI: I thought another unspoken element in that part was him maybe not being up for a date after the incredible emotional toll that that day had taken on him. You know, he's playing it really kinda cavalier in all things, you know -- making congress people wait because he thinks they're being annoying and he wants to annoy them back a little bit. He's riffing with Jordan the whole time. But then that final moment, when the president give him the napkin, and then he just finally

lets his emotions break. You know, then you're really like yeah, it's probably not a good night for a date for Leo.

JOSH: Yeah, you're right. It's almost an entire episode of stoic, brave-faced Leo and I love that they gave him that little moment at the end to let the air out.

HRISHI: Yeah, it really broke my heart, as many times as I've seen this episode. I haven't seen it in a while. And that part made me cry. I am not ashamed to admit it.

JOSH: Yeah, well it's a stupendous piece of writing, and John is an exquisite actor. He's one of those people -- he's as compelling at rest as when he's actually speaking. Even the episode opens with a sort of darkly lit, silhouette profile of Leo and something even just in his body and body language that's compelling. There's certain people who always draw your eye to them, obviously the camera often tells us whom to look at, but in a scene with multiple people, I often find myself being drawn to Leo and to John's performance because there's just so much going on there. Subtly.

HRISHI: You mentioned the camera work. I was going to ask you if you felt like something in the visuals of this episode changed from what has come before it. To me, it seemed like there was this step up in image quality. I don't know exactly why it feels like this episode more than previous episodes this season.

JOSH: That's interesting. I couldn't tell you quantitatively what the difference is. I don't know or that there is any. I always feel just whenever they get out of the White House more often I feel like the visuals open up. There's a greater variety, there's new kinds of lighting, there's different environments for them to be in. I always appreciate that. I'm like, "Okay, the world is opening up a little bit." It can get a little claustrophobic in the same hallways and the same offices and I like to see them in new locales, you know "oh, there's an outside, even. Look, it's snowing." I enjoy when the show opens up altogether. But I'd be interested to find out.

HRISHI: I think you might be onto something, because the moment when I wrote that down and when it struck me the most was those moments when Leo is in the waiting room at Congress in the break and before the hearing when he is framed by that window. Maybe it's just that I'm responding to the fact that it is a different look or it's a different room, that it gives them the chance to take those rich production values and put them in another setting. And just the fact that I'm seeing something new -- maybe that's what I was responding to.

JOSH: Well my guess is, too, it allows the people on the technical side and the crew to open up and flex some muscles. I'm sure they enjoy the opportunity. Thomas del Ruth likes to get to light new areas and new places and new rooms and do a little bit more than the sort of set lighting palette that within which the more limited palette within which he has to work in our familiar surroundings.

HRISHI: Right, because they have to actively make sure other people recognize that this isn't the White House.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: I didn't know when I was watching and I made that note about the sumptuousness that he was nominated for an Emmy for this episode, but as I saw it I was like, yeah of course.

JOSH: This makes sense. So how about seeing Leo, whom we've come to know as just an absolute rock for the president and really anybody else on the staff, and the guy who keeps things running smoothly and on course, seeing him raiding the minibar and, you know, out of it in bed when he's supposed to be at the debate? I mean it's really, it's painful to watch.

HRISHI: Yeah. I felt like for the first time the audience was kind of confronted by the demons that have only been mentioned kind of in an off screen way.

JOSH: Right. Things that I have imagined but not put specific images to.

HRISHI: And there's so much pressure to that, too. You know, it's sort of like in horror movies, the moment where you see the monster, it suddenly becomes less scary because it was actually more frightening when it was just sounds and music and the implication of the monster, and when you actually see the effects you're like "oh okay, that's what it looks like?" But here, they manage to execute it in a way where the reality of it really did live up to the tragedy that he talks about in "Take Out the Trash Day," and other sort of glancing mentions of his addiction issues.

JOSH: Yeah. And through Leo, Aaron speaks so eloquently and genuinely about addiction. It's striking. I mean Leo knows what he's dealing with, and he sort of lays it out kind of so clinically for Jordan:

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

LEO: I'm an alcoholic, I don't have one drink. I don't understand people who have one drink. I don't understand people who leave half a glass of wine on the table. I don't understand people who say they've had enough. How can you have enough of feeling like this? How can you not want to feel like this longer? My brain works differently.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Right. I definitely credit this episode with educating me in that regard, too. I didn't really know anything about the reality of addiction when I was watching this for the first time. Hearing this articulation of "this is what it really means," it completely changed my perspective of it because it did seem to me like the kind of thing that happens to people who lacked willpower or discipline or something like that. I really appreciate this episode.

JOSH: And she does start to really lay into him, in a very judgy -- “how could you be so stupid” I think is what she said -- “how could you” and he just sort of, without anger, lays it out for her. Educates her. And with her, us.

HRISHI: In the moment, too, when Leo takes the drink, finally, he takes the Johnny Walker Blue, he’s like:

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

LEO: Give me a sip of that.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Your heart breaks because you know this isn’t what he wants to do, some core part of him, he doesn’t want to take the drink. And the performance you see, his hand shakes a little bit. Just ever so slightly before he’s taken the drink as he lifts the glass to his lips.

JOSH: Yeah, it’s a great piece of physical acting.

HRISHI: It’s incredible.

JOSH: And you have the same moment, too, which is “no, don’t, why are you doing -- no, no, don’t do it.” And again, it’s not about that. It’s not why, or how, or didn’t he know. That’s addiction. You’re seeing it at that moment.

HRISHI: Yeah. Were you a fan of Mitch Hedberg, comedian Mitch Hedberg?

JOSH: Yes, mmhmm, sure.

[Excerpt from Mitch Hedberg stand-up performance]

HEDBERG: My alcoholism is a disease, but it’s like the only disease that you can get yelled at for havin’. Damnit, Otto, you’re an alcoholic. Damnit, Otto, you have lupus.

JOSH: Well said. Mitch Hedberg, who sadly died way too young from an overdose.

HRISHI: Exactly.

JOSH: He was incredible.

HRISHI: There’s a line that kind of flits by almost off-handedly because the actual punchline is so powerful. But in the first exchange between Josh and Leo over the phone, Leo says, “Don’t help me.” And Josh says, “I’m going to help you, you know why?” Leo says:

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

LEO: 'Cause you're walking around with so much guilt about everybody you love dying that you're a compulsive fixer?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And you can't really even sit and kind of marinate in that line and how heavy and how complex all those things are that he's just said because then Josh comes back and says "no, no 'cause a guy was walking down the street and falls in a hole, see." You have this callback to "Noël" and that incredible moment between the two of them. That's a beautiful callback; I don't know if it counts as an Easter egg. But, if you hadn't seen "Noël", you would have no idea what he's talking about there, but it's a beautiful callback. But as a result, what do you think of this line -- "You walk around with so much guilt about everybody you love dying that you're a compulsive fixer"?

JOSH: Yeah, I was also knocked out by that quick, lightning bolt insight as to how well these guys know each other. They don't bring out this personal stuff very often, but they've got it right at their fingertips. They've read each other completely.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: These are people who know each other intimately.

HRISHI: It's funny to think about Josh being this guy who's a compulsive fixer and Leo sort of trying to get the president to run. The things that these say about their personalities. But yeah, you know, it's a rare moment when one character's psychology is just laid out in just very bare terms. We know this about Josh. His sister died, his father died. And we know how loyal, how fiercely loyal he is, sometimes to a fault, sometimes in ways that make him make poor decisions -- because of his fierce loyalty. And now suddenly Leo's just like "and this is why." It is a rare moment. And also, I don't know if it changes my sense of Josh or it changes the audience's sense of Josh in that moment, but it really deepens it, I think.

JOSH: Yes, I agree with you. But also, one of the things that struck me too, is that it doesn't knock Josh out -- to be read so completely like that, in one sentence from Leo. He knows that he knows. And like "okay, you're going to play that, but no, I've got a response and I've got it immediately."

HRISHI: Exactly. He's like, "I can parry that no problem because here's what I've got in the other hand."

JOSH: Right. Cliff Calley -- his stock shoots up in this episode. After taking some hits on the exchange. We get our moment of like, oh, it's kind of his "he's one of us" moments. Spoiler alert. It's just, we realize he's also a hero, like, boy, does he do the right thing.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And he does it in classic Sorkin fashion. I like it.

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

CLIFF: This is bush league. This is why good people hate us. This right here. This thing. This isn't what these hearings are about. He cannot possibly have been properly prepared by counsel for these questions, nor should he ever have to answer them publicly.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: This is the utmost in *West Wing* fantasy, that not only is it our team in the White House that is high-minded and principled and like believes in America as an ideal over petty partisanship, even their *opponents* feel the same way.

JOSH: Right. I wrote down "Where's *that* Republican?"

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Hello? Hello? Are there any Cliff Calleys out there now?

HRISHI: Watching this and seeing how an investigation that's supposed to be about whether or not the president committed a fraud or conspired against to deceive the American people about his MS, you know they end up being able to take that opportunity to really do a character assassination potentially of Leo. Watching that, I kept thinking about Sally Yates' testimony on the congressional hearings into Russian interference in the election and the *insane* tangents and byroads that were taken by different Republican members who were just trying like to stir up dust here or there or here or there in areas that had absolutely nothing to do [crosstalk], that really shouldn't have fallen under the purview.

JOSH: [crosstalk] No, just complete misdirection.

HRISHI: Yeah. You'd think that the purview of the case, if it were a normal court, the way you understand it is that there's like a scope of a hearing and you have a judge who can sustain objections to people going too far afield, talking about things that have no relevance. But when it's a congressional hearing, you can say "oh this is our reason over here, but we are going to talk about something else entirely."

JOSH: Absolutely. Yeah, no these congressional hearings become political theater.

HRISHI: But I also appreciated that it wasn't just, you know, they also showed the side that there are friendlies in the hearing as well. And so, you know, Leo gets some softballs and, of

course, that happens, too. They get their two minutes and they're going to do what they can to help your cause.

JOSH: Right. What about Hoynes's scene? Hoynes/Bartlet?

HRISHI: The part that was most surprising to me was, they go to the scene where they all decide yes, they're in agreement about Hoynes. Leo opens the door. He's right there, waiting to be invited in. Hoynes. He comes in, and the President says, "I'd like you to be Vice President." And Hoynes' reaction, he has like a reaction of surprise, which I thought was surprising.
[crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] He looked floored.

HRISHI: Like what did he think that meeting was going to happen? Yeah.

JOSH: Well this is my assumption, because I was struck by that moment as well. My assumption is that we've grown used to knowing well before the convention who the VP pick is of each candidate, so I have the feeling this was one of those rare times, apparently since 1980 it's only happened twice that the VP was pick was made at the convention, which is super dramatic.

HRISHI: But still, you're being invited into the suite of the guy who just got nominated. I mean, maybe did he think it's just like a "hey, good game?" I don't know. But I also definitely think you're right. I didn't know this about running mates being chosen at the convention. I didn't know that there was that history in reality. I'm so used to running mates being chosen before the convention that that part kind of slipped past me.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: So thanks for pointing that out. I also like at the end of that scene:

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

BARTLET: I'd like your answer now, John.

HOYNES: You'll have it when I give it, Jed.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And again, this is another little thing in the flashback, where, just like Mrs. Landingham calling him "Governor" instead of "Mr. President," Hoynes here also calling him Jed instead of Mr. President, you know, it's just this, without drawing like a ton of attention to it, without talking around it, having the script reflect this is a different time and in this different time things were so different, and you can see it just in the evidence of one word.

JOSH: Very palpable difference, correct. Yeah, that's right.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And also, what's interesting, is he's having a little bit of the reaction that some, I guess, of the public will have upon discovering that Bartlet has MS, which is he feels ripped off.

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

HOYNES: Did you just tell me that you have MS?

BARTLET: Yeah.

HOYNES: Which you never mentioned during the campaign.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: You know, he can point specifically to what he's lost as a result of this sin of omission. You know, he seems to be thinking, "I might be the candidate."

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: So it's a little window into the enormity of what, I guess, Bartlet has chosen to do.

HRISHI: This really doesn't get said here, but thinking about the sort of admirable qualities of Cliff Calley -- Hoynes really here is posed as an adversary and maybe not even a nice guy, but you have to extrapolate that here he is, the president told him this information. He could have gone back out onto the floor like "Hey guys, I have some information that you may want to change your mind about who you're nominating for president."

JOSH: Absolutely. No, I think you almost see it play out in his mind a little bit. Like what the [expletive deleted], like okay, okay, let me think about this. And I like that he leaves pissed.

HRISHI: Yeah, but we know that he didn't do that. He didn't out the President. He didn't torpedo his nomination in favor of trying to get nominated himself. Which, you can imagine any number of real-life politicians doing that instead.

JOSH: Absolutely, absolutely. There's a little linguistic moment that I appreciated too, which was when Hoynes sort of somewhat, snidely says:

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

HOYNES: *But I suppose your trusting me is consolation prize enough.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I was delighted that he used a possessive with a gerund. Rather than saying, "I suppose you trusting me is consolation prize enough." Many people make that mistake. And it grates on the ear.

HRISHI: Here's a beautiful piece of writing, I thought:

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Leo's made out of leather. His face has a map of the world on it. Leo comes back.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I wrote those two lines down, too.

HRISHI: Yeah. There's also, again it happens so quickly, but there's a part where Leo's is describing...

JOSH: I know where you're going with this.

HRISHI: He's describing to Jordan the scene when the president collapses. He goes to the debate site to walk it and he's just talking about the president and there's just so much love in his voice. And he says:

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

LEO: That's the President. He sees it as a genuine opportunity to change minds, also as his best way of contributing to the team. He likes teams. I love him so much.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I wrote that down. I wrote, "it's so simple and sweet."

HRISHI: Yeah, I mean you hear it, again this is like just peeling back layers to reveal something basic that in a poor writer's hands would be basic writing. But this is a thing that never really happens. Like you hear Leo talk about the president all the time and he talks to the president and the implication of his love is so palpable. But it never gets to the point where he says, the president is like this, he does this, he does this, I love him so much. *That* doesn't get said. And when it gets used sparingly here, it is like devastating.

JOSH: Yeah, it's very well put. That's a line that any of us could write, but Aaron is capable of such incredibly complex writing, and he knows when to pull back and just throw out a simple sentence like that. And it just sucker punches you.

HRISHI: Yeah. You know, it's funny. I was worried that we would not have a lot to talk about with this episode [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] Me too.

HRISHI: ...because I think it's so great. And I feel like sometimes it's hard to talk about something like "yeah, that moment was perfect, that moment was perfect". And then twenty minutes go by and you're like "alright, well, yep it was a great episode." But clearly there is so much depth to this episode, there is a lot to talk about.

JOSH: I have one other tiny little thing: we've barely mentioned Sam Seaborn or Rob Lowe, which I guess is another reflection of the fact that he has been largely written out in the last few episodes of the more significant storylines...

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: ...Interestingly. And we can hypothesize. You know, I've heard all sorts of stories about what was going on maybe behind the scenes between Aaron and Rob, and there's some sort of conflict there I think and it seems like it is the end result is a diminished role for Sam at least in the last few episodes. One thing I did notice -- there's a moment there where Josh has come to Sam for help in getting a contact who can get to Gibson and somehow pull him out of the room, and Sam takes out a kind of day planner, like rolodex-kind-of book and it's filled with scribbles and Post-Its and an incredible amount of information. It looks like the kind of day planner that Sam Seaborn would have, and I just thought, wow, it's on screen for about four seconds and the Properties Department, you know, somebody put in hours of work for this fantastic prop.

HRISHI: Right, yeah. I made a mistake, I misspoke when I said that Sam only appears in flashback.

JOSH: No, right, 'cause he's in that --

HRISHI: 'Cause he's in that scene, yeah. It's just Toby and C.J. who are only in the flashbacks. I really like, actually, one of the scenes with Sam and Josh where Josh is asking him to get the guy out of the room the first time and Sam doesn't know what it's for. And he starts off kind of jovial, Sam's kind of joking around and he's laughing, and by the end of the scene, even though Sam doesn't know what Josh needs, they end up on the same page emotionally. 'Cause Sam starts talking about that moment from the flashback and he's kind of lost in memory, in this pleasant memory from the campaign but Josh is like fixated on trying to get Darren Gibson out of the room. Sam slowly, throughout those few lines comes around and by the end, he's like:

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

SAM: What's Gibson got?

JOSH: You'll get a guy for me?

SAM: Yeah.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And Sam doesn't press it, he doesn't ask him. He understands and he just says "yeah." Sam gets it.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: Okay, let's take a quick break and when we come back we will present to you this interview with John Spencer from 2002.

HRISHI: John Spencer won an Emmy for his performance in "Bartlet for America," and we're so thrilled to present an interview with John Spencer to go along with our discussion. And joining us now is the man who conducted this interview, David Daniel, senior producer at CNN. David, thanks so much for joining us and can you tell us when and where did this interview take place?

DAVID: It's a real pleasure to be on the podcast. I'm an avid listener as much as I was an avid viewer of the series. The interview actually took place on the set in the Roosevelt Room. This was about ten days before the Emmys in 2002, almost 15 years ago. I had set it up because, as every good *West Wing* fan knew at that point, getting the "A" storyline in the Christmas episode meant you were going to win Best Supporting Actor. You know the first season we had "In Excelsis Deo" with Richard Schiff, and he won the Emmy. And in the next year, of course, was "Noël" with Bradley Whitford, and he won the Emmy. So I don't know if two makes a trend but it certainly had by that point.

JOSH: Let the historical record reflect that I, as Will Bailey, never received the "A" plot in the Christmas episode. Otherwise you might have interviewed me at some point.

DAVID: And this is why, you know, that Emmy has still alluded you. If only you would have had the "A" subplot, then it would have been yours.

HRISHI: So in what form did your interview actually air?

DAVID: It was about a three-minute story all told, with about four different sound bites with John and a few clips from "Bartlet for America" as well as from the previous two Christmas episodes. But I kept it because obviously I was a huge fan. I was a poster, a regular poster, on Television

Without Pity and *The West Wing* board there. I'm pretty sure John Spencer had never been interviewed by a fan before, and he really seemed to delight in it.

JOSH: I was just about to say he had a twinkle in his voice in this interview.

HRISHI: So the edited piece that you made was around three minutes, so the raw audio that we're about to play, is it right to say that much of this has never been heard before?

DAVID: The only place it has been heard is in the second year of *The West Wing* Television Without Pity Convention.

HRISHI: Well thank you so much and thank you to your bosses as well at CNN for letting us use this.

JOSH: Absolutely. Thanks again for joining us here and sharing this interview.

DAVID: My pleasure.

DAVID: How long are the days when you're shooting here?

JOHN: They're pretty long. I would say a short day is about eight hours. And our normal day could be twelve to thirteen and often toward the end of the week we'll go fourteen/fifteen. People don't realize that. I mean even loved ones kind of go, "Are you ever going to come home?" you know. But it takes a lot to put an hour of quality onto film. But we try to fill the time. We often, when they're setting up for one scene, the director and the participants in the scene, the actors, will be in the other room rehearsing the next scene that they're going to do, to kind of use every available moment.

DAVID: Right, right. I know that Aaron Sorkin, while being an incredible writer, is not necessarily known for getting scripts to you years in advance.

JOHN: No. Aaron, his strong suit is also challenging because he writes out of passion and he writes in the moment and when it's ready to come out, it does. The good news is, it's always remarkable and it's always brilliant material. But sometimes it comes the day before you have to film it. But, you know, the tradeoff -- would I want a script three months in advance or no, let's be realistic, a week in advance with a lesser writer? No. No, I'd rather Aaron's words the night before than somebody else's a week in advance.

DAVID: Excellent. You've just had the opportunity to work with some tremendous writers -- David E. Kelly, Warren Leight.

JOHN: I've been incredibly lucky with writers and philosophically and intellectually, I do believe first comes the word. I'm not being falsely modest. Mine is an interpretive art. I interpret other

people's words. I can build a character. I think I'm a good actor, so I'm not demeaning myself, but first comes the word. The true creative art is the writing. I'm an interpreter. And unless you have great raw material, you can only be so good. You know, you can make mediocre good, but you can't make mediocre great. And Aaron gives us great raw material.

DAVID: That's a good point actually to start backing into the Emmy stuff. I know that one of the episode that you submitted for your nomination, "Bartlet for America" [crosstalk] is a tremendous episode.

JOHN: [crosstalk] Yes.

JOHN: Thank you.

DAVID: There's a lot of tremendous writing in that episode, of course, and we'll come to that. But there are also, as through the series, there are moments where, the most arresting moments sometimes there is no dialogue. It's a reaction shot. Does the writing help you there when you have no dialogue, or is it just the character that has been built through the writing that leads you to that place?

JOHN: I think it's a little bit of both. I mean I think the writing sort of is the map of the journey that your character goes on. So even if you are led to a point of no dialogue, you have all the previous dialogue that leads you up to that moment. Also, we are very fortunate here. My theory is we all really wanted to do this gig. Actors, crew, directors. We knew when we saw the pilot that this was something incredibly different and rare, this quality of writing. It's sometimes like a stage play. I mean where in film does a character speak monologues this long sometime on the page? I mean usually film's very quick, like that (snaps fingers) and Aaron lets things breathe. We're under the careful supervision of one of my heroes, Tommy Schlamme, who could inspire passion in a cockroach. I mean this man is limitless with his *esprit* and his passion and his creativity. And just when you feel you can't do anymore, that there's nothing left, Tommy can re-inspire you. So we have a very careful and very brilliant eyes and hands watching us. And I think it keeps us well honed. Here we are in our fourth season and as anxious to do the best work that we possibly can as we were with the pilot. And we all knew we had something great. The wildcard was how the audience was going to *react*. And you never know that. And there was some thought when we were starting that we might be a creative hit, we might be critically successful and a commercial failure. We didn't know. And our audience built slowly and by the end of the first season, we had a good cross section. And now we get twenty, twenty-two million a week watching us. So it's thrilling.

DAVID: I think the *New York Times* panned the pilot, if I recall.

JOHN: The *New York Times* turned on a dime. The *New York Times* is my paper. And I used to believe that if it was in the *Times* it was in concrete. But they are certainly not infallible. They hated our pilot and then sometime during the first season they turned on a dime and we were somehow very popular in the *New York Times*. But I've kept that initial review.

DAVID: I remember in the pilot, you know, you get these quick snapshots of all the characters. You get C.J. on the treadmill and Toby on the plane, but your character was the one that really set the tone, not only with that wonderful long tracking shot as you're walking through and showing us [crosstalk] the West Wing, but just in the attitude - the sort of bad-mouthing the klutz president in a way only a really true friend can do.

JOHN: [crosstalk] Showing the West Wing.

JOHN: That's right. It was a thrilling eight scenes, it was. I have to give Tommy Schlamme credit again because as written, they were eight separate scenes. And we had the good fortune of having the time to rehearse the pilot, which once the show is on and a hit you have no time anymore. But we had a week's rehearsal so we were able to plan what we were going to do and charge up. And Tommy came to me the first or the second day of rehearsal and said, "I have an idea. I would like to put those eight scenes together in a walk and talk and have you sort of geographically show us the West Wing. It's going to be our first vision of the West Wing, of this workplace." And I said, "It sounds very exciting." He said, "Yeah, if we can pull it off, it'll be very good."

It took us seventeen takes and we did it our first day, it was the first thing we shot. And it was thrilling. It was for a stage actor, which ostensibly I was until about ten, twelve years ago. The first twenty years of my career was all on the stage. So to have that charge of being able to do eight scenes back to back without stopping is sort of like a stage performance, it's thrilling. The bad news with a walk and talk that size is if one person makes one mistake you gotta go back to the beginning, you know.

DAVID: And I was thinking seventeen, at first sounds like a lot but for something that complex, I'm sure it's not a record.

JOHN: It's wasn't. No, it wasn't. No, I think our record was thirty-three. We did the longest, I believe, the longest maybe walk and talk on film in our third or fourth episode the first season. We took Bartlet from a speech in a hotel, through the hotel, through the kitchen, through the bowels of the hotel, all the way out to a motorcade. And that took us thirty-three takes.

DAVID: Wow.

JOHN: We took bets, ultimately. Finally we were laying odds.

DAVID: Do you remember who won?

JOHN: Yeah, it wasn't me!

DAVID: You've done a ton of stage work, a number of movie roles, this is your second series, but there's never been a show that had this much popular and critical acclaim and awards.

JOHN: Prizes are great. And God, to be nominated is thrilling and it's a great honor and you realize that your peers are stepping up and saying that you did a really good job. But ultimately, it's cream on the cake because the real prize is having this material. You know, that's the real prize for an actor. I mean, unlike a lot of professions, we're always looking for the next gig. Usually you'll find actors love their craft and the big secret is we'd do it for free, but don't tell anybody, you know. So that's a thrill in itself, being involved in this project, in this event. And then on top of that, to be nominated for a prize is... I mean, it really is thrilling. And it's a hard concept, because if you think of art, and thinking and coming up with the best. I mean my analogy is if you show five paintings -- a Picasso, a Van Gogh, a Manet, a Monet, maybe a Rembrandt...and the winner is -- Rembrandt. You know.

DAVID: It's an odd-

JOHN: Yeah, if you apply that analogy, you can see that it's a strange concept. But an honor. And I'm really happy we've all been nominated, because the truth of the matter is this is an ensemble. And you remove one piece and the machine is not working as well. So the true award, the one that really thrills all of us is the SAG Award because that one includes all of us.

DAVID: Of course, that doesn't mean that person ego is totally out of it, right?

JOHN: Oh no, and I'll tell you something--

DAVID: Do you write speeches?

JOHN: Oh no, I don't. They make me too nervous. Therefore, I get a fifty-fifty chance. I can totally fail or I can be inspired in the moment and be beyond what I think is capable for me and really impress myself and go "God, I really free-flowed and my ideas were there and it was heartfelt." But when I plan something and I try to write it down on the page I can never come up with anything. This is my third nomination and I haven't prepared a speech yet. So, we'll see.

DAVID: Especially if you believe in trends or you look for trends. Year one -- "In Excelsis Deo" -- Richard Schiff gets the "A" plot in the Christmas episode and he wins the Emmy. Second year [crosstalk] -- "Noël" -- Brad. Which you have one of the most memorable scenes in that.

John: [crosstalk] "Noël."

John: I loved doing the Irish story.

David: I get chills [crosstalk] when I hear "man falls into a hole"...and it's reprised, almost like a signal to people in "Bartlet for America," which is yours.

JOHN: [crosstalk] It's a wonderful story.

JOHN: I know, I know.

DAVID: Is there talk on the set about that trend, kidding or otherwise?

JOHN: Well, I think so. It's either said or unsaid. Certainly, if you think you're going to get the Christmas episode, it puts a smile on your face 'cause history has shown that they're very potent episodes. The Christmas episode has done for Richard and for Brad and for myself, is it's kind of singled out a character each time and we don't often do that, again, harking back to the true ensemble we are. When I did *L.A. Law*, which was another incredibly well-written show, we would have "A" storylines and "B" storylines and "C" storylines so often, you know unless you had the "A" storyline, you might be working two days of the whole event. Here, everybody is sort of equal balanced. You know, there are no real "A" storylines except on like a Christmas episode like that. You know the fearful guy in mean goes, "Well I've gotten the Christmas episode, what if I don't win now?!" You know, so I gotta be honest with you. It's a double edged sword. It's very thrilling and on the other hand, what am I going to do if I don't win?! Jesus, I have all the ammunition here, you know.

DAVID: The storyline, of course, had a great deal to do with addiction.

JOHN: Yes.

DAVID: And that's something that you've dealt with and it's something that Aaron Sorkin has dealt with.

JOHN: Yes.

David: Is that totally a creation of his on the page and you said you interpret it? Because I can't imagine every person who's faced addiction their story is the same.

JOHN: No, but there are through-lines. I mean the important thing to keep in mind for an addict, and I've been in recovery now for thirteen years, we tend to, as addicts, see ourselves as very unique. Our problem, our own personal journey, why we pick up, why we use. The rooms, rehab, twelve-step programs, part of their task is to show us how similar we all are. We are basically garden-variety addicts and you don't drink or use because things are bad. You drink or you use because you are an addict. And you can drink -- I can, you know, in the old days when I was out there, I would celebrate good news with a drink. I would give myself solace with bad news with a drink. If there were no news at all, I would deal with the boredom with a drink. It's sometimes a lot of responsibility to be a poster child for sobriety because my own sobriety is a huge responsibility. I don't want to be responsible for everybody else. So that's the double-edged sword there. But I've been asked a lot about Leo's alcoholism and addiction, and the common question is, "Did Aaron base it on you?" I had no answer. So I finally took the question to the man. And I said, "Aaron, you know, I'm asked this very often, is Leo's addiction based off mine and only you have the answer." And he said, "No, not particularly. It's mine. It's yours. It's all of my friends who are addicted." So that's the answer from the writer.

DAVID: I read that when he was first thinking about casting, he said, "Who can we get that's like John Spencer?"

JOHN: Apparently!

DAVID: "Why don't we get John Spencer?" "Oh we'll never get John Spencer."

JOHN: Apparently he said that. That's a classic old Hollywood story. I mean I had not known that and that knowledge came down to me. I also didn't realize until a good year into the show that I was the first character cast. I knew the audition was good. I did. I knew the audition was good. I loved the material so that I was obsessed with it. And I learned all those eight scenes. So when I came and I read for Aaron and John Wells and Tommy, I had it all memorized. So, Aaron said to me, "You're not going to use your book?" and I said, "No, no, no, I want to put the book aside so I can act." And he read with me. And I said, "You're going to read with me?" and he said, "Yeah." I said, "Well, how are you going to watch me and read with me?" He said, "No, that's the way I do it." So Aaron and I acted those eight scenes together. It was thrilling. And I finished that audition on a high and I knew I had done my work. And really, as an actor, that's all you can do. Because the choice is somebody else's and the most control you have over the situation is to give the best example of your craft as possible. More than that, you can't do. Ultimately that can get you the job and it may not get you the job. But I felt very positive about it and by the time I drove back to my house here, the offer was already on my telephone machine.

DAVID: That's great. Returning to the "Bartlet for America" just for a second-- Aaron has made various comments that he is not necessarily trying to take stands about issues just because he presents issues [crosstalk] on the show.

JOHN: [crosstalk] That's right.

DAVID: That it's entertainment, it's dramatic. At the same time, with his public acknowledgment of his battles, with yours, with a storyline like that -- it doesn't take a leap for a lot of people to at least wonder if a statement is being made. And I know a lot people who have battled various addictions were thrilled to see the representation, to see you explaining that your brain just works differently, that how could someone not want to feel this way.

JOHN: The classic statement. Wonderful Joanna Gleason says to me:

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

JORDAN: I don't understand how you could have a drink. I don't understand how after everything you worked for, how on that day of all days, you could be so stupid.

[end excerpt]

JOHN: That's why, you know, something like Nancy Reagan's "just say no," just wants to... I mean, talk about you wanna push a button of anger in me...because coming from a place of addiction, that is such a *pathetic* response. And it's evil. I mean I don't think the woman sat around thinking she wanted to be evil. But that did so much more harm because you have addicts out there going, "Why can't I say no? What's wrong with me, I can't say no. The President's wife said 'just say no.' I should be that strong. I should say no." And it's just a lack of intelligence and a lack of understanding. And it doesn't help anybody. That kind of thinking doesn't help anybody. Once we can realize it's a disease, like cancer, like pneumonia, like any other disease -- and doesn't necessarily make you a bad person, it's just something that your body is dealing with -- then you can attack it in a logical and intelligent way. But to make it a moral choice is just stupid. So I think, bravo Aaron. I think another thing that Aaron's done remarkably is to show that there are people battling addiction that are in government positions. Which one's never thought about before. I mean I never knew, I don't know if I'm talking out of school, there is an AA meeting on the Hill. And it doesn't surprise me, but I never thought about it before I did the episode. I never thought about it at all.

DAVID: Have you seen a lot of changes in Leo McGarry's character? Has there been an arc or has he remained pretty constant over the three seasons?

JOHN: I think there's been a reveal. I think Leo is a pretty consistent character on some levels. I love Leo. I mean I see Leo as a much greater evolved human being than I am. Leo is a hero in my eyes and how nice to play someone you have that much respect for. I respect his devotion to the government, and to the country, and to the office of president. Not necessarily just his friend but to the office of the presidency. And in my three years on this show, that's one of the ideas that has really become honed in my own mind -- that it really is the office, more than the man who sits there. I think, you know, Leo is a pragmatist and Leo is much more conservative than I am. And I think Leo is more conservative than Bartlet. I think Bartlet's, you know, what the right wing might call a bleeding-heart liberal. My kind of man. I think Leo is a wonderful human being and instrument of the *West Wing* because he balances Bartlet. I mean Bartlet is a great leader, he's a, in many ways saint-like and a wonderful human being, but not necessarily as pragmatic as Leo is in the world of politics. And Leo, who loves and is devoted to this man, his best friend and the president, kind of has to balance it, has to show Bartlet a way of moving through the political red tape and making the right political choices while not being a hypocrite or, you know, selling his ideas out. And sometimes it's a balancing act. And I think Leo, having fought in Vietnam, as most warriors, hate war after they've been there. You know, it's a last resolve when nothing else works.

DAVID: Those must be amazing scenes to play, you and Martin. I mean it's not only working with another tremendously talented actor on a variety of levels, but it's a very intricate friendship.

JOHN: Allison Janney saw "Bartlet for America," and she came to Martin and I, and she said it's the most beautiful love story between two men that she'd ever seen. It brings tears to my eyes because it's purely that. It's one human being having a love and a respect for another human

being in their life. It's not a sexual love story, it's not a romantic love story, but it's a pure kind of love, and devotion, and respect. And I am so honored to be able to play that. First of all, to be able to play that with Martin, who has become one of my closest friends in my life. I just adore the man. And as an actor, the ease of the task I've been given, I mean I'm given the role of a man who is devoted to this man who he thinks is great, who he thinks is capable of leadership and greatness and kindness, who's a unique individual. Well that's exactly the way John feels about Martin. I would love to be as good a human being as Martin Sheen is. I don't mean that pretentiously at all. I mean he's a remarkable -- I'm not sure I've ever met another person like him in my entire life. And then to have the honor to act with him and to act in a parallel environment: two friends, two friends.

DAVID: That final scene is one of the ones I was talking about, where there's almost no dialogue. You unwrap this napkin he saved that you gave him all these years ago. And you see Leo just desperately trying not to disintegrate and cry [crosstalk] in front of his friend.

JOHN: [crosstalk] In front of his friend.

[West Wing Episode 3.09 excerpt]

BARTLET: That was awfully nice of you.

[end excerpt]

DAVID: You're working with a tremendous company of actors. If there's a personal connection among the staff that Leo has besides the president, it's probably to Josh Lyman.

JOHN: Almost in a mentoring fashion, right? I mean Josh is a "Little Leo." You know, and I don't mean little in the diminutive form. He is my Deputy Chief of Staff and he's a remarkable political mind and a remarkable intellect. I'm talking about Josh now, sometimes the lines become very vague. And of course, Leo's personal connection with him with the Irish story, with him getting a shrink for Josh. I think there's a paternal thing going on there too. You gotta realize Leo has left family, and this has become his family. I mean I think one of the most remarkable lines I've had in three years -- and it was remarkable when I read it -- and I went to Aaron and I said, "You know, if I say this, I really have to mean it because it's quite potent when your wife asks you"

[West Wing Episode 1.04 excerpt]

JENNY: It's not more important than your marriage.

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

[end excerpt]

JOHN: That, to me, was one of the hardest, most intense moments of the whole, including "Bartlet for America," including all of that. Because it's so starkly real and honest. I mean nine out of ten people would say, "Well no, of course not, marriage is most important but this is important too." But Leo fessed up at that moment in his life and for better or worse told the truth and it cost him his marriage. But you know what? I've met the staff of both President Clinton's and President Bush's, and we're not unrealistic in our level of devotion here. That's what these people are like, who work in the West Wing. It's their life and their hours are as unique as ours. When I first met John Podesta, who I *adore*, I really got to know him, and what an incredibly fine man he is. And people ask, "Did you talk about inside things with him?" Well actually no, we never did. We talked basic shop like two guys who work at a factory. What are your hours like? Do you have to come in on Saturdays? And I was amazed to know that their hours are as unique as ours. Their weekends are not their own, their families are not their own. So Aaron is not creating a fictional world here necessarily on that level. My absolute truth and inner feeling about this whole event is that there is no irreplaceable member of this entire production except for one person. And when I say that, people usually go "Martin Sheen" and I go, "Aw, Martin's great." No, it's Aaron Sorkin.

DAVID: Here's one thing I wanted to ask you about. There's an incredible amount of detail in the show and some continuity errors are going to creep in. Leo is described as being a man of Chicago at one point--

JOHN: And now he's Boston-

DAVID: Boston Irish-Catholic, yeah.

JOHN: I don't know, I always thought I was from Boston until recently. I have been now made from Chicago. How I justify that -- Irish-Catholic working-class Chicago, Irish-Catholic working-class Boston, Irish working-class New York -- it's the same geography. It's the same block. It may not be the same apartment house, but it's the same block. So it's easy enough for me to justify. Leo's wealth also! Leo is apparently a very, very wealthy guy.

DAVID: Sometime between Vietnam and serving in Congress and on the cabinet supposedly Leo was a lawyer--

JOHN: I asked Aaron about that. It's legal practice. It's advisory positions in legal service. And it's like the lecture circuit, because he was Secretary of Labor.

DAVID: Right.

JOHN: So he's made a lot of money on the lecture circuit. Also, I have an idea his wife was very rich. I think he married very patrician. [crosstalk] Sara Botsford played it and she was very patrician. She was one of the heads of The Red Cross, I mean the character, so I think I see her as kind of a society woman.

DAVID: And Mallory went to private schools.

JOHN: Absolutely. One of the things, see, I love the little -- what Aaron gives you in raw material, you can take and run with it as an actor. The little specific things. Maybe you know they're not talked about but they're mentioned slightly ten different times and then it adds up and you go "oh wow." Leo's appropriateness. I mean Leo never, never calls Jed "Jed" in the Oval. I think he's done it once when they were having an argument. Never goes into the Oval Office without buttoning his jacket or putting his jacket on. These are little points of behavior that I have incorporated with the knowledge and the signposts that Aaron has given me in the writing but have bloomed into a lovely character trait. I love that about Leo. I love the line where the President goes to me, "You know Leo, most people leave a casual set of clothes here so that if they're working late, you know, I would like you to do the same." and I go, "I do." And the President looks at me and I say, "Don't you see I'm not wearing a tie?" and means it totally seriously! And the convention of always calling him "sir" and "Mr. President." That was a Bobby Kennedy's, you know. That was Bobby Kennedy. When Bobby was with John, publicly, it was always "sir" or "Mr. President," and I picked up on that knowing the Kennedy history and I thought it was perfect for Leo because that's the dynamic when you are not only serving this man but you are his best friend. Is you've got to keep, at least at the workplace, those lines very separate. And to call him "Mr. President" and "sir" is a constant reminder that it's the office more than the man.

DAVID: You are rigid about certain things where you don't want to deviate because you've decided what's important and you've decided---

JOHN: Oh absolutely. I would say Leo is a complete control freak, absolutely. Not only in his own life but in trying to keep the natives not restless. You know, that's another wonderful thing about the character is I find myself plunked right in the middle of the President and his staff. So I'm almost the liaison and the interpreter, interpreting for him to them and interpreting for them to him.

DAVID: The lynchpin.

JOHN: Yeah. Yeah, it's a unique and rewarding character. And challenging. Because it becomes so thick, the more you delve into, and that's the great thing about an hour drama -- there are drawbacks to playing same character week after week after week-- but one of the high and strong suits about it is that you get to know more, and more, and more, about the character. So suddenly you're learning how that character would react in any given situation. It was great talking to you.

DAVID: It was wonderful.

JOHN: Let's talk again.

DAVID: I appreciate it. Thanks, I'll make sure to give Katie my card on my way out.

JOHN: Thanks!

HRISHI: And that's it for this episode.

JOSH: Thanks for listening to this episode of *The West Wing Weekly*. We'll be back in a week, hence *Weekly*.

HRISHI: You can find us all kinds of places online, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and our website, thewestwingweekly.com. If you want to tweet at David Daniel to thank him profusely for giving us this interview, for arranging it with CNN so that we could have it and so that we could hear this, he's @CNNLADavid. Thanks so much, and thanks to all you guys for listening.

JOSH: Why don't we try something new this week. If you have something positive to say, just start it with three asterisks and end it with three asterisks, that way we can read just those comments and tweets. *The West Wing Weekly* is a proud member of Radiotopia, which is a delightful curated selection of the finest podcasts available in the world.

HRISHI: You can learn more about all of them at radiotopia.fm. Radiotopia was made possible by a grant from the Knight Foundation and by listeners like you who donate to keep the lights on in the Radiotopia office and here in the *West Wing Weekly* offices, metaphorically.

JOSH: *The West Wing Weekly* is made possible by the skills of Zach McNees and Margaret Miller. Margaret Miller, who appeared on-mic for the first time today.

HRISHI: If you'd like to tweet at either of them, Zach is @ZMsuited and Margaret is @reginamint.

JOSH: Ok.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOHN: What's next?

[Outro Music]