

The West Wing Weekly Episode
3.18: Documentary Special
Guest: William Couturié

[Intro Music]

JOSH: Hello and welcome to a very special episode of The West Wing Weekly. I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: And I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Today we're talking about the "Documentary Special". It aired between the episode "Stirred" and "Enemies Foreign and Domestic" in the regular West Wing time-slot. So we're going to discuss it as one of the West Wing episodes even though this is a very special episode.

JOSH: It first aired on April 24th, 2002, it was directed by William Couturié, and credits say that interview material was provided by William Couturié, our very own Eli Attie, and Felicia Willson.

HRISHI: And when they say "interview material" that's because this episode is really a clip show – it's a collection of scenes from previous episodes of The West Wing interspersed with interviews with real-life political figures including Presidents Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter, and Gerald Ford.

JOSH: I like this episode! Here's one thing I was struck by, for this episode of The West Wing Weekly, we're going to talk to Bill Couturié, who kind of conceived the style of this documentary and then went on to direct it.

HRISHI: There's no plot in this episode for us to re-cap, so we're going to jump right into our interview. Joining us now is Bill Couturié, the director of the documentary special episode. Thanks so much for talking to us.

BILL: My pleasure. Glad to talk to you.

JOSH: How did the project come about?

BILL: NBC wanted Aaron to write another episode at the end of the season, and he was fired and said, "no way" and, I wasn't party to these discussions, but NBC wanted him to do this episode, he couldn't do another one. And either he or Tommy Schlamme, who is an old friend of mine from HBO, had the idea to do a doc, and Tommy had worked with me in the past, and so Tommy called me, I came in. And Aaron said, you know, they want us to do a doc, we got an idea, it's going to be really great, you get to go talk to all these big shots - and little shots, I mean, people who worked in the West Wing from presidents on down. That was always part of the idea. You go talk to them and ask them what their favorite scene from the show is, and we'll show the scene. And I said, you know, "All due respect," because I have enormous respect for Aaron, I said, "I think that's a terrible idea, sir." [everyone laughs] And he said, "OK, y'know, you're so smart, what would you do?" And I said, "Well I would do something sort of like that, I would talk to those people but I would get their own stories from the West Wing but write

questions so that we knew that they would touch on scenes from the show and use the scenes to illustrate their stories, and their truths about the West Wing.” And, blessedly, Aaron and Tommy said, “Oh, you’re right, that is a better idea, let’s do that.” So that’s what we did.

HRISHI: And can you go back to how you knew Tommy? What’d you worked on together?

BILL: We worked at HBO together and in those days, HBO was a small place and you knew each other, so we didn’t do a show together, we just were both working at HBO at the same time and ran into each other there, and respected each other’s work.

HRISHI: You’ve been making documentaries since the 80’s really, right?

BILL: Forever, yeah.

HRISHI: Because of that, did this feel like a new kind of film-making experience for you or did it feel like you were in your wheelhouse?

BILL: Yeah, I mean, from a filmmaker’s point of view, it sounds pejorative but it’s not meant so: The West Wing footage was B-roll. You know? It was stuff that was there to illustrate the stories that were being told. And when it was working at its highest level, it took it to another level beyond what these people were talking about because the show itself was so dramatic and so well done that it just takes you to that, you know, filmmaker heaven place.

[West Wing Episode 3.18 excerpt]

DEE DEE MYERS: There’s a lot of ways to screw up, there’s a lot of different ways to do it.

[Cut to West Wing Episode 3.01 excerpt]

CARL (interrupting): I’m sorry Joan – CJ, would you say that the President’s situation makes it harder for him to focus on the situation in Haiti?

[Cut back to West Wing 3.18 excerpt]

DEE DEE: For me, it was the flip comeback.

[Cut back to West Wing 3.01 excerpt]

CJ: To be honest with you, Carl, I think the President’s relieved to be focusing on something that matters.

[Cut back to West Wing 3.18 excerpt]

DEE DEE: Sometimes you say something and as it’s coming out of your mouth, you’re like “Oh, nooo. Put that back.”

[end excerpts]

BILL: All my films haven't had talking heads, a lot of them have. And I think the thing that I'm most happy with in that department is I'm really good at getting people to relax and be themselves, and to forget the camera's there. Some people are prone to that – Bill Clinton. I don't think an idiot could get a bad interview with Bill Clinton because he's just a natural. I mean, he talks in sound bites, the guy is like a machine. But somebody like David Gergen, who, you know, you've seen on TV...he is a quote unquote "talking head" on TV, right? But he's always giving you pundit-type spin, whereas I was able to get him to just totally let go of that and be himself, and got, I thought, some incredibly wonderful-- -he was one of my favorites in the show.

[West Wing Episode 3.18 excerpt]

DAVID GERGEN: It's almost as if somebody whispers in her ear, you know, "There's room up on Mount Rushmore, for one more face [laughs], and if you do well you might get there." Now there isn't room up there, I've checked it out [laughs], but that sense pervades a White House.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Watching it, Gergen was one of my favorites as well, knowing this guy, who was an advisor to I think four different administrations, that he had almost a giggly enthusiasm at times.

BILL: No, he did! He was giggling.

JOSH: So genuine.

BILL: You know, when you try to talk to a President, of course you never talk to him until you're in the room, but his people always say "OK you've got twenty minutes," it's like, somewhere that's printed, that's carved in stone somewhere in Washington, that if it's the President is doing an interview, it's twenty minutes and they're out of there. Well Gergen had said the same thing, and I was like "Oh [expletive deleted], this guy has been in both Republican and Democratic White Houses, he might have more stuff," and he's like "No, I'm flying out of here, I gotta go, gotta go, gotta go." And then once he sat down and started going, we were there two or three hours, he canceled his flight, [Josh laughs] he spent the night in New York, and y'know, it was a love-fest. In fact, all the out-takes from that show are at Harvard, in the Kennedy Center for Government or whatever the official title of that is, that Gergen got NBC to donate. So the outtakes, which are actually a lot of really fabulous stuff that just didn't fit into the show.

JOSH: Oh I wish we could get some of these to share; that would be awesome.

BILL: I don't know how you get them, but they are available, you know, they're like a library book or something, you can get access to them.

JOSH: Yeah, that's good to know, I'll have to give it a shot. See if we can track them down.

BILL: Yeah, it's a lot of stuff. I mean, I must have interviewed twenty, twenty-five people, so there's probably be fifty hours or more of material.

HRISHI: Can you tell us what the process was like, before you actually sat down, what was happening between your pitch to Aaron, about 'this is what I think the concept should be', and, you know, the moments when you're actually sitting down with these political figures, what happened in between? And what was the process like and how did you figure out what the shape was going to be?

BILL: Well, there was a wonderful writer on the show named Eli Attie.

JOSH: Yes.

BILL: You know, I'm not a Washington guy. I'm a fan of West Wing and stuff, but I'm not an insider in Washington, and Eli is. So I'd say he was my critical partner and co- conspirator. Because, you know, certain people are obvious. Bill Clinton – do you want him in your show? Yes, of course you do. But there were other people that were not obvious, and that Eli either knew, or knew that this guy would have good stories, or, even better, this guy would have good stories that we have good scenes from our show for.

[West Wing Episode 3.18 excerpt]

There was a phone in this closet. And so I was in there and I thought "OK I'll be fifteen minutes." It went on an hour. And by that time, I had to go to the bathroom. So I picked up the phone and called his secretary, and said "Marie! Get me out of here! I'm freezing and I've gotta go to the head!" That was my introduction to the West Wing.

[Cut to West Wing Episode 2.04 excerpt]

BARTLETT: How you doing? We met last night. You were singing and dancing in a bathrobe.

AINSLEY: Yes, sir.

BARTLETT: Why were you in the closet?

AINSLEY: I had to pee.

[end excerpts]

BILL: The interviews were not open-ended, let's just shoot the breeze. They had a focus to them because we knew this guy had stories that could apply to scenes that were in the series. So that took a level of insider knowledge of Washington that I didn't have and without Eli I would never have done it.

JOSH: It's an incredible roster you put together. Did you get a sense that most of them were, in fact, fans of the TV series?

BILL: Oh yeah. Maybe Karl Rove didn't say anything all that complimentary, but this was right after Aaron had [Josh laughs], you know, ragged on Bush, so...

JOSH: Fair enough.

BILL: Although I mean Karl Rove was a perfect gentleman. Although I must say he had a young, very lovely assistant who fed him chocolate covered strawberries as he was getting made-up. [Josh and Hrishu laugh] True story.

JOSH: Wow, that should have made it onto the series.

BILL: Yeah, I thought of rolling the camera without telling him, and I thought, "No, they've got CIA people that could totally whack me," so I left it alone.

JOSH: Probably a good choice.

HRISHU: Wow. He was the only Bush administration official that you had on, right? I think everybody else was from administrations past.

BILL: Yeah, we wanted the boss, but after Aaron's comment, he wouldn't talk to us, so...

HRISHU: How were you able to get Karl Rove to agree to talk to you?

BILL: Oh, you'd have to ask the big boys that, I didn't have anything to do with it. But I think what they understood was that it was a cultural touchstone, and that to not have somebody higher... I mean, we did get Gerald Ford. David Gergen is arguably a Republican, so there were others. But we wanted somebody from a recent administration, and so basically they gave us Karl instead of George.

HRISHU: Still a great get.

BILL: It was, but you know what, he was, again, perfectly... he was one of those guys I thought it would be like Darth Vader, and he was quite genial and very bright, and sat down and was easy-going. But what I told everybody, you know, before I would roll, I had my little spiel I would do, and it was "OK guys, we're trying to split this even between Republicans and Democrats, this is not about politics, this is about the West Wing as an institution, and everybody loves it whether they are red or blue, and we're not going into political stuff, we're talking about the institution of the West Wing. Got it?" "Oh yeah, yeah I got it." So people were pretty good about that. But Karl just, he couldn't say five words without bringing up what a great guy Bush was, and what an important...he would just go into campaign mode, you know?

JOSH: He had an agenda.

BILL: Yeah, and I'd have to stop the camera and I'd say "Mr. Rove, sir, you know, you're doing great but I can't use this stuff. There's no place in the show for talking about what a great president he was after 9/11. It just doesn't fit." And he kept trying to divorce himself from his

political operative mode and he just couldn't do it. So there's only one clip of Karl in the show, because we had to have him, because if he hadn't been in there show, there could have been ramifications because in those days, of course, The West Wing was still shooting in Washington and had to have some cooperation from the powers that be. So he said something kind of innocuous.

[West Wing Episode 3.18 excerpt]

KARL ROVE: This is not writing a paper in high school. You know, you very quickly come to understand that the decisions that you help frame have a power and a might and a significance that is pretty awesome at times.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: President Carter and a couple other people in the piece talk about how daunting it could be to walk into the Oval Office and converse with the President. Was it at all intimidating for you to speak to some of these people?

BILL: I mean, I have been in the Oval Office with President Clinton beforehand. I did a film called "Earth and the American Dream" back when Clinton was first elected and Al Gore, surprise surprise, was a big fan of the film. So he got it at the Kennedy Center and we got to go meet President Clinton and some other folks. And so, yes, being in the Oval Office for me, was...yeah you feel like you're in the center of the world or something. It was a very daunting experience. Although, again: Clinton can charm the moon out of the sky. I mean, he had everybody eating out of his hand in seconds and wasn't intimidating at all. I would, I think, have been intimidated had I not done my homework and had Eli and other folks from The West Wing give me tips and suggestions for ideas and things to ask. When people know that you know who they are and what they've done and have a good idea of what they're thinking, they relax and they feel "OK, this guy knows his [expletive deleted] so he's gonna be OK." And so I never...no, I never felt nervous. The only guy I can think of I've ever shot that made me nervous was Steve Jobs.

JOSH: [laughs] That's a whole other Sorkin project.

BILL: I worked for him for 6 years and he was a brilliant and fabulous man, but extremely volatile, God bless him.

HRISHI: So you had 50 hours of footage by the time you were done with all these interviews...

BILL: Mm hmm.

HRISHI: How long did it take just to collect the 50 hours? Forget about sorting through them and editing them for the final episode, just to record all that footage. I'm assuming you couldn't just get everybody, you know, booked for the same few days in a week.

BILL: No, you take Presidents when they are available, they don't respond to summons. It would be rare that we could shoot more than one person a day. Couple of the people in Washington especially, you know, that were like assistants or something, they were more flexible. But I'd say we probably shot 30 days to get a similar number of people. [Hrishi chuckles] And the other thing is that The West Wing was shot on film, so it had a good look, it was beautiful. In those days video which I was forced to shoot on looked like [expletive deleted]. It was all hard, everything was in focus, everything was crisp, everything was clean, there was no grain, there was no soft backgrounds. So we went to great lengths to put netting – to do things to soften the background. And we also had a whole electric company and grips and a gaffer and things so that we could light it, because we had to intercut it with the show, so if our stuff looked crappy, it was not gonna work. It had to look like it was part of the show.

JOSH: That's intriguing actually, and you were very successful.

BILL: If you look at it, you'll see, that it kind of sort of looks like it was shot by the same guy that's shooting The West Wing. And we spent a lot of time and effort and NBC's money making sure of that.

[Josh chuckles.]

JOSH: Well done.

HRISHI: And while you were filming these interviews over 30 or so days, did you have much interaction with the production, or were they sort of leaving you to do your own thing, with some trust, that you know, what you'd come back with was going to be good and they didn't have to interfere?

BILL: We're pretty much on our own. The day we shot Dee Dee, Tommy dropped in because Tommy and Dee Dee are pals, but all men want to be pals with Dee Dee. She's extremely charming person. You know, they wanted me to call the second I was done with Karl Rove, they wanted to make sure I hadn't done something really stupid and pissed him off.

[Hrishi laughs]

BILL: But I was, you know, I was thousands of miles away, so no, they didn't have little spies, or, you know, none of them were actually there for the shoot. But they definitely wanted to see the dailies. And once we started cutting it, then Tommy was all over it.

HRISHI: I'm interested about the timing of all of this, because you said that Aaron basically needed to turn in one extra episode, but he was burnt out.

BILL: I mean you know how Aaron wrote. [Bill laughs]

HRISHI: Sure.

BILL: [cross talk] You know —

JOSH: [cross talk] So this was the end of the season.

BILL: This was the end of the season, so he was writing stuff at lunchtime that you were going to shoot after lunch. The cast wasn't getting sides before they had to shoot. The director had no idea how to block a scene. Tommy was pulling out his hair, everybody was, you know, fried. So, no, there's no way he was going to write another episode. But we had to move quickly, because we had to get this done in time to fit into that season. [cross talk] And it was near the end of the season.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

BILL: So we did this whole thing from, I think meeting Aaron to delivering the show, God it might have been three months. Which for me, is a -- I take a year normally to make a documentary. So this was all hands on deck.

JOSH: And I would think the editing process must have been rather lengthy.

BILL: Yeah, I had about two months to edit it. And you know, again, had it been a normal film where you would be getting footage from all sorts of sources, you know archival sources. I knew what my archive was, it was the body of the show. And I knew every scene in that show cold. Basically, you know, you're looking at your dailies, and you say "Oh, that's perfect. That's a perfect moment." They say something cute, and then they look in the camera.

[West Wing Episode 3.18 excerpt]

BILL CLINTON: The President has to make some tough decisions. And there is no appeal, if it's an executive decision, so that's part of life. And we ask for it. And almost invariably, we ask for a second term to do it again.

[end excerpt]

BILL: Those moments where they connect, those always pop and then you say okay, that's a great story, what can I fit that with from the show that will work with it? So, it was basically a matter of saying, yeah this scene with this story will be great. So you just put that aside and say, okay, I know that's going to work, I can do that. And then you try to get enough stories working with scenes from the show to say okay, I can make this show out of this, and then the question structurally was okay, what's the beginning, middle, and end. And that took a little bit of screwing around with, but you know, I tend to -- my films tend to be organized in chapters. With like, a title card that starts each chapter. So, that helped me sort of conceptualize things. And the other thing is just, you know, when you've got a deadline, it's amazing how creative you can be with the gun that you're hit.

[Hrishi chuckles.]

HRISHI: You ended up winning an Emmy for this.

BILL: I did.

HRISHI: Was that a surprise to you, or did you feel like you knew that this was going to be awards-worthy by the time you finished?

BILL: I knew I'd made a great show. I did not expect it to win an Emmy actually, because this was a clip show. I wasn't sure the Academy would see it. I always thought that they would look at it and say, "eh, it's a clip show." And it was up against, that year, there was a big 9/11 doc on HBO. That was, you know, the shoe-in. That was like a given that that was going to win. It was 9/11, it was HBO, you know, you get the picture. And obviously it didn't win, we won, which made me very proud. In fact, Aaron didn't even come to the Emmys. Tommy showed up. [cross talk] Aaron was sure we weren't going to win. And I guess he didn't want to go and not win. So, Aaron didn't show, but Tommy did. So yes we were very happy that night.

JOSH: [cross talk] huh!

[Ad break]

HRISHI: When you get to the editing stage, was Tommy hands on at that point for the post production, when you were actually shaping what it was? Or was it similar as to when you were shooting, where they would sort of check in and leave you to do your thing?

BILL: No, no, he -- Tommy saw cuts. And Tommy would give me notes. Aaron might have given me some notes, but I think they were filtered through Tommy. Tommy, you know, a couple times, came into the editing room, but he would always -- as I cut a scene or cut a chapter, I would show it to him, and I would get notes right away. And he had a lot of input. And again, you know, he's a wonderful filmmaker. And his notes were generally very insightful and very helpful. And you know, made me look like I knew what I was doing.

HRISHI: What kind of notes would he give you, since, you know, he is not a documentary filmmaker, that's really your area. What were the kind of notes that you would be getting from Tommy?

BILL: You know, I mean, anything that came to his mind. He would just say, "I think you can punch this up more," or "is there more to this story," or "have you thought about this scene?" Because you know, if anybody knows The West Wing better than I did at that time, it would be Tommy. So he was just trying to use his vast knowledge of the show to make this as good as it could be. I don't think Tommy looked at all of the dailies. Concurrently to this, they are making the actual dramatic TV show, shooting it at Warner Brothers. So they're working, what, 14, 16 hour days already, so adding this, it's not like he had a lot of time to hang out. It's amazing he spent as much time as he did. And I think he made it better and, you know, helped push it over that top so it won its Emmy. But just like all of us filmmaker types, he just reacts. And he will tell you what he likes and tell you what he don't like. Or if he has an idea on how to make it better,

he would tell you. But he was good in the sense that he didn't come in and [expletive deleted] on the rug. He would come in [Josh chuckles] and figure out what could be done to make it better.

HRISHI: Did you have to structure it in such a way where it fit the act break structure of a regular episode? Where you know, your chapter had to be this long and then commercials?

BILL: Yeah. Most of my films I've done for HBO, so I'm not used to commercials.

HRISHI: Right.

BILL: So that was a drag. Having to structure it. But, you know, we did it, it wasn't the end of the world. It's just like, "oh God, this is one more hoop you got to jump through." And you know, and end every act, on some dramatic beat, yeah that was a little bit of a learning curve to figure that out. But we did it.

HRISHI: Who was the hardest interview, maybe it was somebody who didn't make it to the final episode? But which interview was the most difficult to conduct?

BILL: Well, Kissinger. He was grumpy. [Hrishi laughs.] He didn't really want to be there.

[West Wing Episode 3.18 excerpt]

HENRY KISSINGER: To tell the truth to power in a mature White House, should not be a problem. What is a problem is if you tell the president something that is very contrary to his opinion, and very contrary to what he'd like to hear.

[end excerpt]

BILL: In those days, if you shot on video, and like a shirt or a tie had small patterns in them [Hrishi mm hmm], it would create what are called moray patterns. It would look like you were tripping in the '60s. It would be like these purple and orange moray patterns. And they were extremely distracting. And so I would always tell people, you know, wear a plain shirt, wear a plain tie. You know, blue's probably a good idea. And then we would always bring a couple of shirts and a couple of ties in case they forgot. Dr. Kissinger came in, and he had on like a paisley tie. And it was the camera went crazy. I mean, literally, it looked there were special effects, that you know, there was crazy stuff going on in his tie. And it's like, "Dr. Kissinger, sir, please, this isn't working, would you mind wearing this tie?" And he wouldn't wear it. He didn't like it. And it's like, well, how about this tie?

[Everyone laughs]

BILL: And he refused to wear it. And finally, he came with his brother, and his brother said, you know, "Henry, here, use my tie." And so he did. Although the brother's tie had a gravy spot on it and I had to frame it out. [Josh laughs] But finally, I got him. And he was also another one of

these 20 minute guys. So he was like, it took 10 minutes to get him in front of the camera. And then he was like, well I've only got 10 minutes left. And it's like, well, okay. So yeah, that was a little stressful. And him again, he was largely trying to defend his actions during the Nixon years, which was not what the show was about. But he -- I think we got a couple of good bites, but he was a -- well, just personally as well as trying to get the material, he was by far the most difficult. I mean he wasn't nasty, he just -- you know, he was doing something he didn't really want to do.

HRISHI: Mmm hmm. Outside of the Wells-Schlamme-Sorkin producer conglomerate did you have any sense of the reaction from Warner Brothers or from NBC at large when you turned in the final episode?

BILL: Well, we had a screening for the cast and crew at Warner Brothers, and they loved it. So, that was the only people I really cared about. Because I was afraid, you know, that they would have thought I had somehow defiled their sacred show. And they were the biggest fans. So, that was fabulous. I think NBC was just so happy to get another show out of Aaron [Bill & Hrishi laugh] that I don't recall any pluses or minuses there. And then when it got nominated for an Emmy of course, then everybody loved it to death. But I think, I mean, it's a pretty ingratiating -- I mean, it makes you cry at the end that you're so proud to be an American. You remember those days, guys? I mean...

[Everyone laughs]

BILL: The show itself was a very pro-America, pro-Washington love of country thing. Even for all its liberal politics, that's shown through. And so, I think I captured that, because that's how people do think of The West Wing. Again, it's not like I'm making any of this stuff up. You don't tell Bill Clinton what to say. He says what he wants.

[West Wing Episode 3.18 excerpt]

BILL CLINTON: And the third thing they say is but I sure miss the work. I sure miss the work. There is nothing, nothing like it.

[end excerpt]

BILL: Every one of these people from the brand new secretary to President Carter and the others, their love and respect for the institution was so strong. And again, I'm about to tear up here because to see that so destroyed or torn down now is heartbreaking.

JOSH: I was particularly struck by that when Peggy Noonan was speaking.

[West Wing Episode 3.18 excerpt]

PEGGY NOONAN: A modern president who is a natural will almost breathe in the presidency. Breathe it in. Straighten out his shoulders, and walk forward. And whatever reality he walks into, he is bringing the presidency with him.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: It made me rather wistful [cross talk] for earlier times.

BILL: [cross talk] Exactly. Now Peggy was one of my pleasant surprises because you know, you read her articles, and it's like, okay, she's a hardcore Reaganite.

JOSH: Right.

BILL: You know, surprise, surprise I'm a liberal. So I didn't expect to care much for Peggy Noonan. But she was actually fabulous. She was one of the better interviews. She was really great.

JOSH: Yeah, I also think that the way you chose to frame the piece and to have real politicians and staffers talking about the West Wing and then cut to images and scenes from the show actually lends more credibility to the show in terms of its accuracy. Because you get the sense that these things we've seen in episodes are straight out of reality.

[West Wing Episode 3.18 excerpt]

PEGGY NOONAN: She looked around at the office they had given me, and obviously this office said, totally unimportant person.

[excerpt ends]

[West Wing Episode 2.05 excerpt]

AINSLEY: I'm working in the steam pipe trunk distribution venue?

LEO: No, you're...

[excerpt ends]

JOSH: It's a very clever thing, it adds both legitimacy to the television series, and also makes you feel better about the people, at least at certain times who are running the show.

BILL: Actually, that was part of my pitch to Aaron and Tommy. I said, "Guys, if we make this show where they're telling the camera their favorite scene from The West Wing, it's not going to make you look good. It's just going to make them look like fanboys and I don't think some of these people are going to be comfortable doing that." I said, "But if they tell stories about themselves, and their own experiences, and then you see that mirrored and reflected in scenes from the show, it's going to make the show look like it knows what it's talking about." Which it does, obviously. And of course, that turned out to be true.

JOSH: Well done on you. As a result, it stands as and feels like an episode of The West Wing. It was very, very well done.

BILL: Well, it is an episode -- I'm proud to have one of the episodes of *The West Wing*. Even with the crunched production and post-production, it was, I think the most fun one I ever did. Because it's just, you know, it's thrilling to be in a room with President Carter and he's talking to you person to person. Or any of these people. It made me feel good about America, so you know, I think everybody wants to have that feeling. It's just, you know you got to have the people there that has the respect for it to work that way. I mean, like Lanny Davis telling the story of the night Nixon resigned.

[*West Wing* Episode 3.18 excerpt]

LANNY DAVIS: The most powerful person on the planet left this place on his own because of the rule of law. And that may be corny, but I said to myself, "God Bless America that made a system like this."

[end excerpt]

JOSH: It's a very touching story. Are you working on anything currently you want to tell us about?

BILL: I'm finishing up a film about the Sixth Extinction. It's an environmental thing, you know, on how we're wiping out the biosphere at an alarming rate, and we really ought to think twice about what we're doing. So, I'm doing that. And then I'm starting up a show about diabetes. So staying serious for the time being.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Well, thanks for taking the time to talk to us about your experience making this incredible *West Wing* episode.

BILL: Well, thanks to all of the guys back there that actually made *The West Wing*, that allowed me to do it.

[music]

JOSH: And I guess that's it for this very, I think you have to agree, very special episode of the *West Wing Weekly*. Here's something that struck me.

HRISHI: What's that?

JOSH: As I was getting ready to record these little wraparounds with you, I got a news alert of one type or another, as I get frequently throughout the day, through email, telling that new polling suggests that three quarters of Americans feel that they cannot trust what comes out of the White House. [laughs] And this struck me because I was particularly taken with the David Gergen quotation from the documentary.

[*West Wing* Episode 3.18 excerpt]

DAVID GERGEN: A president who is trusted by the people, by the Congress, by the press, by foreign countries, is a president who can get a lot of good things done. You break that trust, you violate that trust, everything else tumbles around you.

[excerpt ends]

JOSH: Wise words, indeed. And it does feel a little bit as if things are in fact, tumbling around us. Or about to.

[Hrishi chuckles]

HRISHI: It feels especially poignant and maybe more painful coming from someone who worked in administrations of both parties.

JOSH: Indeed. More powerful coming from him.

HRISHI: Well, this was a really fun episode for us to make. And it felt a little bit like a meta-commentary because, in the documentary special, they're talking to people from the real world of politics about The West Wing and I feel like it's a mission that we try to accomplish here as well. Of course, they did it in a much more elegant, refined way. Without the dad jokes and bad jokes.

[Josh laughs]

JOSH: I miss that. I'll be honest. [Hrishi laughs] In any event, the West Wing Weekly remains, as ever, part of PRX and within that, part of PRX's Radiotopia. Which is a fine sellllllectioooooo [sic] of the [Hrishi laughs] podcasts to be found anywhere.

HRISHI: To learn more about all the shows on Radiotopia, go to radiotopia.fm . Radiotopia's made possible through a grant from the Knight Foundation and donations from listeners like you.

JOSH: Mmm hmm.

HRISHI: Our show's produced by Josh and me, with help from Margaret Miller and Zach McNeas.

JOSH: No more Izzy?

[both groan]

JOSH: Izzy's back at school, and she can't be bothered helping out our podcast. [Hrishi laughs] Anymore. For money. Speaking of donations, I feel like we're remiss in not thanking our listeners, every month, at least somebody hits that button. So, there's a donation button on The West Wing Weekly.com webpage, and I'm always touched that some people throw us a few bucks to help keep putting this out.

HRISHI: That is really, really nice. Trust may be the coin of the realm over in the White House, but coins are the coin of the realm over here.

JOSH: Oh that is so true. Although true is probably not relative, I guess you can't qualify it. It's just true. [Hrishi laughs] You can follow us on Twitter by following us on Twitter. [Hrishi laughs] And you can always leave a message or a question or just random insults, if you're Logan, on our website, thewestwingweekly.com.

HRISHI: We're also on Facebook and Instagram. Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

BILL: What's next?

[Outro music]