

The West Wing Weekly
4.05: Debate Camp
Guest: Ronald Klain

[Intro Music]

HRISHI: You're listening to the West Wing Weekly. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway.

JOSH: See, that's how it's done. That's a classic opener. And I'm Joshua Molina.

HRISHI: Today we're talking about "Debate Camp". It's episode five of season four.

JOSH: This episode first aired on October 16, 2002.

HRISHI: One of my favorite episodes.

JOSH: Interesting! Really? It is a very good episode. I don't know if I'd put it on my favorite list, but perhaps you'll talk it on to my favorite list.

HRISHI: I don't know what my favorite list really means anymore, but I love this episode.

JOSH: This episode was written by Aaron Sorkin and the story is by William Send and Michael Oates-Palmer. And it was directed by Paris Barkley, who also directed "The Portland Trip" and "Indians in the Lobby" from earlier seasons and the "ICU" episode of Scandal, for Scandal fans.

HRISHI: I love this episode because it involves flashbacks, which are always one of my favorite things on The West Wing. In this episode, the President and his staff are preparing for the upcoming debate. There's only one debate, remember? Coming up with Governor Ritchie? So the stakes are high. But meanwhile, as they prepare, there are interspersed flashbacks from the beginning of the administration, right when the President was inaugurated- shortly before and shortly after. Part of the substance of the flashbacks is one of the points in the debate. That's what prompts it, which is the nomination of Attorney General Cornell Rooker. And then the other nonpolitical big news in this episode is that Andy is pregnant and Toby is the father.

JOSH: Yes, bombshell! I too enjoy the flashbacks and this episode has another element that I've mentioned before as being something I enjoy, which is getting them out of their usual workplace environment. I like the whole camp aspect of it. I liked the 'SIT barn', for example. Makeshift 'SIT barn'... It's fun to watch Brad try to dribble a basketball and look like someone who's done that before. I thought they made a wise decision not to show any actual basketball being played.

HRISHI: We've seen them play basketball before, though.

JOSH: Yes, and I think based on that they decided never again. And I salute them.

HRISHI: And coming up later in this episode, we're gonna be joined by Ron Klain once more-friend of The West Wing Weekly. He joined us previously for our discussion on "The Short List" as the person in charge of President Bill Clinton's judicial nomination process. He also is the guy when it comes to debate prep for the Democratic Party. I mean, he's the expert. And he's gonna talk to us all about his own experiences with debate prep and how they compare to what we see in this episode.

JOSH: Look at us- we booked the perfect person for this episode.

HRISHI: We did. But before we get to that, here's a bombshell even before we get to Andy's pregnancy. It turns out that Toby and Andy were still married when President Bartlet was inaugurated.

JOSH: Right! Who knew?

HRISHI: Not us.

JOSH: No, not me.

HRISHI: It makes the detail that we've discussed before about Toby wearing his wedding ring even though he's divorced, and makes it I guess a little more heartbreaking for me because you realize how recent the divorce actually is. When we start The West Wing, they're one year in to the President's first term, and he's already divorced at that point. And so it is fresh and that makes the wearing of the ring- I don't know, it changes it. It's not just this habit that he's kept for a long long time since being divorced. It's-

JOSH: Right, he's still right in the thick of it emotionally.

HRISHI: Yeah, he maybe hasn't fully accepted it. Exactly. Also, I don't want to get too blue right at the top of the podcast, but [cross talk] I love when Toby is talking to Andy in the flashback and there's a word he doesn't want to say.

JOSH: [cross talk] Bring it.

[West Wing Episode 4.05 excerpt]

TOBY: It's not a good out loud word.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: He's such a prude! It's kind of cute to discover.

HRISHI: Do you know what the word is that he doesn't want to say?

JOSH: Oh, it's spermatorium or something?

HRISHI: It's worse- it's masturbatorium.

JOSH: Masturbatorium! There you go, yeah.

HRISHI: It's not a good out loud word and I'm not sure if it's ok that we- I don't know how I feel about us saying it out loud, but, you know.

JOSH: I think it's ok. Sorry kids. Or, sorry parents. Spermatorium...I really could have gone the extra step and probably figured out what it was called.

HRISHI: Moving quickly off of this topic. One of the reasons why I love the flashbacks too is just the changes in hair style.

JOSH: Yes. That seems to be the number one way in to their younger selves. [cross talk] They are fun to watch. And actually I thought they did a very good job- they do a good job when they do flashbacks of sort of reverse-engineering the characters for us. It was fun to see them just landing and dealing with the transition and trying to find places. And we get that excellent self-aware joke from Aaron about the origin of the walk and talk altogether.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

[West Wing Episode 4.05 excerpt]

SAM: I don't even know where I am right now.

JOSH: I'm looking on this side again.

SAM: Do you mind if I talk to you while we walk?

JOSH: Well, we may as well get used to having meetings in the corridors from now on. It may be our only hope.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Oh, it's so great!

JOSH: It's fantastic! It's rare that a meta-moment actually is entirely credible within the conversation being had. [cross talk] Usually little wink-wink jokes like that play like a wink-wink but it was organic to their conversation. Kind of brilliant.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

HRISHI: Yeah, I love that. One of the things I love in that scene as they are doing their very first walk and talk and they're looking for the office- as they're walking and talking, at one point they

turn down one corridor and it ends up leading to an exit, but you just see the exit. And without verbally acknowledging it they just look at it, look at each other and then turn around and just keep going.

JOSH: Carry on.

HRISHI: I think this episode is really funny and that is one of the little moments. There are some really great, subtle jokes in this episode. That's one I really like. There's another one in the flashback where Donna's predecessor is giving her the lay of the land and setting her up for this prank, really I guess. You know, messing with her with the Twenty-one magazine article. But before he even gets to that he has this little line that just skates by. She says she doesn't have kids, and he says:

[West Wing Episode 4.05 excerpt]

JEFF: Good. Because there are days you're gonna need to be here at eight. Maybe even earlier. And not go home 'till six or seven.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: And it's not played at all for a wink or [cross talk] anything. It just goes by. And only if you are really paying attention do you realize: this is the very first moment of him messing with her.

JOSH: [cross talk] No.

JOSH: Yeah. Mean what he does, though. The joke itself is very very funny, but the extra added layer of setting her up to be humiliated publicly...mean! [cross talk] It's so mean.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yes! Yes. It is. But I'm kind of surprised that it isn't more of a thing.

JOSH: That kind of stuff?

HRISHI: No no, that the consequences aren't, I don't know- they aren't immediately out for revenge or anything, they just say "Ah, they gotcha! Ha ha."

JOSH: True.

HRISHI: There's a great moment where Donna gets Josh back at the end when he's realized what has been done and the guy from the NSA is actually her friend and they acknowledge everything. As that ends, he shakes his hand [cross talk] and I think maybe that's the feeling here. They're just like "Well, well played."

JOSH: [cross talk] Mhmm. Yeah, it's kind of like a "Well played" moment.

HRISHI: In that article, brief ai-ai-ai. Just the briefest of ai-ai-ai's, but when they describe Donna's outfit she's wearing...

JOSH: Oh, oh yeah. I had the same thing. Donna Karan.

HRISHI: Sleek Selia Yang slacks and a DKNY top! And yeah, I thought, "Ah, Donna Karan, ai-ai-ai."

JOSH: Yeah, I did an inner hiss.

HRISHI: And if you don't know why we're hissing, it's because she said this:

[Daily Mail Interview excerpt]

DONNA: "But I also think: how do we display ourselves? How do we present ourselves as women? What are we asking? Are we asking for it? You know, by presenting all the sensuality and all the sexuality?"

[end excerpt]

JOSH: She's been doing some furious backpedaling since.

HRISHI: Oh, has she? I haven't been paying attention to that part.

JOSH: Yeah, no, I think just today I read she's now saying, "I made a huge mistake!" I think [cross talk]. But too late! I feel.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Ah, ok.

HRISHI: Also, when Josh confronts Donna with the copy of Twenty-one magazine, he's walking down the hall and then he runs in to Donna, and he has a look on his face immediately, as soon as he's- he's not totally in focus. Donna's in the foreground and she's in focus. But just, even out of focus you can see the mischievous, devilish look on Bradley Whitford's face as he turns and he acknowledges her and he walks up closer and he says, "Oh, hey."

JOSH: Yeah, I also like when it finally dawns on her how thoroughly she's been gulled.

[West Wing Episode 4.05 excerpt]

DONNA: Oh my god! I'm too stupid to live!

[end excerpt]

JOSH: It's a fantastic delivery.

HRISHI: I remember that's how I felt when you explained that Toby and the President hadn't actually played miniature golf at all.

JOSH: Which, by the way, still a raging debate among our listeners.

HRISHI: Oh, really?

JOSH: Yes!

HRISHI: Oh, I feel pretty well convinced that I was too stupid to live.

JOSH: There was a frothy conversation on the boards about it.

HRISHI: Mm. There's also a great moment after "I'm too stupid to live" where Josh is leaning on the file cabinet afterwards and Donna, to get past him, just walks under his arm.

JOSH: That's great blocking!

HRISHI: Yeah. And then one of my favorite Josh lines ever:

[West Wing Episode 4.05 excerpt]

JOSH: Ah, I'll just walk around some more. See if I can get in to a pick-up meeting.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: That seems more suited to him than basketball.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: There's a funny little echo that happens back and forth between these two moments where Donna says:

[West Wing Episode 4.05 excerpt]

DONNA: Oh, we can't all be you!

JOSH: You can all try a little harder to be.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And Andy happens to also say to Toby:

[West Wing Episode 4.05 excerpt]

ANDY: You know how you're always saying you wish people were more like you? Well...

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Talking about in the flashback getting his white blood cells.

JOSH: Oh right. Very good. Um, going back to the “SIT barn” in the cold open, we get as we’ve seen before a sort of joking Bartlet. But this time the levity, in quotation marks, has teeth. When Leo objects to President Bartlet’s concept of figuring out something they can offer to the Qumari’s, Bartlet says:

[West Wing Episode 4.05 excerpt]

BARTLET: Honey, if we’re gonna have this fight can we not do it in front of the Joint Chiefs? It just scares the hell out of them.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: It is, you know, purportedly a joke. But the looks exchanged between them- the President is pissed and Leo knows it but Leo’s also dug in on his point of view.

HRISHI: Yeah, and in the end Leo gets his way.

JOSH: Yes, Fitz agrees with Leo too, which helps.

HRISHI: And Nancy as well. [cross talk] That’s really- you know, the President listens to his advisors in this case. I appreciate how direct Fitz is when he says:

JOSH: [cross talk] Yes.

[West Wing Episode 4.05 excerpt]

FITZ: I couldn’t agree with Leo more.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, no. He just- no pause.

HRISHI: It’s almost like he’s been sitting as a bystander while they have this kind of bickering back and forth and then waiting to finally be asked his opinion so he can say “Yeah, Leo’s right.”

JOSH: Yeah, that’s right. That leads- when they do that second scene- it leads to Leo’s, I think, classic line:

[West Wing Episode 4.05 excerpt]

LEO: We’ll worry about tomorrow tomorrow, we said that yesterday.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah. I love stuff like that. Stuff like that always seems like it’s so simple, like why can’t I think of aphorisms like that?

HRISHI: Right! Why can't I create something that sounds like an age-old saying?

JOSH: Right! And yet I can't.

HRISHI: Maybe that is an age-old saying. [cross talk] But in any case it's well-deployed here and it fooled us.

JOSH: [cross talk] Possibly.

JOSH: Yeah, that's right.

HRISHI: Here's one part I did not like as much, just a little thing, but the conservative Christian reporter who speaks with C.J. in the press briefing room happens to also have served on a city council with [cross talk] their A.G. nominee. It seems incredibly convenient- I mean, too convenient! They have both that shared past and he happens to mention it to C.J. that he's "the first African American man I've ever heard make sense on racial profiling." He's like, "Hey, I have this huge coincidence, also I'm going to in this moment just give you a little piece of incredibly controversial information."

JOSH: [cross talk] With Rooker?

JOSH: Yes, this little nugget that you need. Yeah, I agree with you. I think I didn't catch on that because I was too stuck trying to figure out how he got 365 names on that tiny little card. It so bothered me that I paused and counted and I think 120 tops including both sides.

HRISHI: If you played Dungeons & Dragons you might be familiar with "The Bag of Holding" which is basically a fancy name for Mary Poppins'... [cross talk] Uh huh, exactly! And so maybe he had an index card of holding.

JOSH: [cross talk] Mm! It's like the Cloud, kind of?

JOSH: Perhaps so. And later he would cast a dweomer that would somehow- what is it, dweomer again?

HRISHI: It detects if something is magical. So if you had cast dweomer on this card of holding...

JOSH: Ok! I wasn't so far off. [cross talk] I really obviously wanted to just say the word, but...there you go. I'm in the ballpark. Or in the "bweoall park."

HRISHI: [cross talk] No.

HRISHI: Nope! Uh, speaking of silly words, let's turn to the Latin section of this episode. At one point, reaching new highs of nerdiness for even this show, seven characters appear on screen singing in Latin:

[West Wing Episode 4.05 excerpt]

GROUP: Gaudeamus igitur, Iuvenes dum sumus.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Do you know this song? De Brevitate Vitae? On The Shortness of Life? [cross talk]
Also more commonly known as whatever the first words are that they say: “Gaudeamus igitur”
Which means “so let us rejoice”.

JOSH: [cross talk] No.

JOSH: It's very college singing group, that scene.

HRISHI: It really is! Which is why I thought you might know it, having been in a college singing group.

JOSH: No, I concentrated on funny intros.

HRISHI: Did you know that your buddy, and now mine, Tom Lehrer, makes a reference to Gaudeamus Igitur in his song? He has a song called Bright College Days.

JOSH: I know that he has a song called Bright College Days. I don't remember it and I have to confess, I don't remember that allusion.

HRISHI: I looked it up. And so this is how I found it out. But he says, in the song Bright College Days he has a line:

[Bright College Days by Tom Lehrer excerpt]

Turn on the spigot Pour the beer and swig it And gaudeamus igit A-tur!

[end excerpt]

JOSH: C'mon, how can you not like that? How can you not like those lyrics? That does put me in mind of another school song of his, Fight Fiercely Harvard:

[Fight Fiercely Harvard by Tom Lehrer excerpt]

Fight fiercely, Harvard! Fight, fight fight! Demonstrate to them our skill.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: You're probably not familiar with that.

HRISHI: I'm not familiar with any of it. All of this stuff, it sounds like the kind of song that would have been sung at a place like Mory's in New Haven.

JOSH: Right? There you go! Should we tell the listeners about Mory's?

HRISHI: This is one of the aspects of Yale and that world of Ivy League stuff that really, you know, one of many aspects that didn't appeal to me.

JOSH: I can understand that, yes.

HRISHI: I did go to Mory's one time my senior year. I did sit next to Jonathan Bush, President George H. W. Bush's brother, President George W. Bush's uncle.

JOSH: There you go. That's the kind of person you're likely to run in to there. Anyways Mory's, or Mory's Temple Bar, founded in 1849 near the Yale campus. And it's a private club I guess, right? You can eat and drink, and you drink from giant silver cups, as I remember. I, having been in a singing group, we would sometimes I guess retire there after a performance and drink. I just remember drinking vast amounts of ridiculous drinks from these giant cups and you had to pass it a certain way to the person next to you, and whoever finished it had to put it on their head and spin it around, and it had to be fully dry. And there's all sorts of [cross talk] nasty things that in the retelling really do sound kind of pathetic. But there you go.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Nasty. That's just nasty.

HRISHI: So that's what this song that Tom Lehrer sings, and the song, of course, that he is referencing that's in this episode, all this stuff evokes these things with a tinge of PTSD for me.

JOSH: Fair enough.

HRISHI: As I spent most of college running away from things like that.

JOSH: I was a member of the EI Spizzwinks, and it was in 1913 that four young men at Mory's decided to create that lovely alternative to the EI Whiffenpoofs. So there you go- I guess my own group has a special tie to Mory's. And I guess that's why we spent time there.

HRISHI: Did you do a lot of drinking in combination with your singing, or was it only at Mory's? Was it really one and the same?

JOSH: There was a lot of- I guess it was, you know, I wasn't in a fraternity. This is as close as I came. It was a performance group and we took performance seriously, but we had a very good time and there was a lot of partying, perhaps before, during, and after.

HRISHI: So it's like a fraternity but the nerdiest possible version of it.

JOSH: I'm guessing there are nerdier fraternities.

HRISHI: Than an a cappella singing group?

JOSH: Yes, I'm sure there are geometry fraternities. When I say 'sure' I mean that I suspect there probably aren't, but I'm guessing there's some sort of [cross talk] fraternity centered around a nerdier activity than male a cappella singing, although perhaps it's a toss-up.

HRISHI: [cross talk] The fraternity of sine cosine sine!

HRISHI: Yeah. Ok, co-signed.

JOSH: Alright. West Wing.

HRISHI: I just wanted you to know and listeners to know, especially those who are disappointed in finding out that I didn't know who Tom Lehrer was...

JOSH: That you have such an open mind, that you are willing to Google and come across his name?

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: Ok, noted.

HRISHI: It's something! Since we're just in the world of elite academic institutions, there's a comment that Leo makes- a stray comment that I thought I would point out:

[West Wing Episode 4.05 excerpt]

LEO: Finally, if the election were held today, the President would be chairman of the economics department at Phillip's Andover Academy.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: So here are a couple things: Phillips Academy in Andover is a high school.

JOSH: True. Boarding school- you're an Exeter man!

HRISHI: That's true. I went to the rival school, Phillips Exeter Academy.

JOSH: See. I went to Phillips Screwdriver Academy- very, very, very, focused course of studies.

HRISHI: Your rivals, of course, Phillip's Flathead Academy.

JOSH: Oh, bitter rivalry.

HRISHI: That doesn't make any sense, Phillip's Flathead Academy. But I was just trying to, you know...

JOSH: Screw those guys.

HRISHI: Damn you. As I was saying, you might get tripped up because these two schools, they were founded by nephew and uncle. One in Massachusetts, near where I lived- that's Philip's Academy in Andover. And one in New Hampshire, far enough away that I had to board there, that's Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire. The way the schools are named-

Philip's Academy and Phillips Exeter Academy- there's a weird little combination that Leo does here by calling it Phillips Andover Academy. It's not actually called that. It's either Philip's Academy, or Phillips Academy Andover, or just Andover. But not Phillips Andover Academy. And the other weird thing is: why would the President, who is a New Hampshire Bartlet, be teaching at that school as opposed to Phillips Exeter Academy, which as I mentioned, is in New Hampshire?

JOSH: It's a very good question. And furthermore, why did you want to get so far away from home?

HRISHI: Four years of sleepaway camp?

JOSH: That does sound good.

HRISHI: I thought the chance to have an adventure seemed a lot more likely if I were somewhere completely different all the time.

JOSH: And you didn't drink at boarding school either, or did you get it out of your system by college?

HRISHI: I didn't drink there either.

JOSH: My god!

HRISHI: One thing I remember from my time there, and from what I know of Andover as well, is there's also no economics department! I don't know that there are economics departments in high school. [cross talk] So a weird set of things in a line like that, thanks to Leo for that further digression into snobby East Coast.

JOSH: [cross talk] Yeah, that does sound more university level type deal.

JOSH: I think Aaron Sorkin has a fascination with elite East Coast educational opportunities [cross talk] or institutions, I should say, yeah.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah, that might be true. I mean, certainly they talk about it a lot.

HRISHI: But opportunity is a good word, because I was sort of offhandedly describing this as snobby, but I should say actually the reason why I went to Exeter and not Andover partly also stemmed from the fact that Exeter gave me a full scholarship. [cross talk] And at the time when I went ages ago, 47% of the student population received financial assistance of some kind. And now I think that number has gotten even higher. So while the curriculum might be snobby and highfalutin, the admissions process- it was really an amazing place and an amazing opportunity for me. And I'm really grateful for having had the chance to go there. I wouldn't have been able to go otherwise.

JOSH: [cross talk] Really!

JOSH: That's heartening to hear. How racially diverse was the student body?

HRISHI: Incredibly. I thought, at least. Racially diverse, also geographically on my floor my freshman year in my dorm. There was someone from Western Virginia, someone from Hong Kong, California. All kinds of places- it was really interesting. So I encourage people to send their children there. Send your children to the number one and number two boarding schools in America!

HRISHI: Hey, you know, another part that I liked in this episode. Sam, at one point, has a great 'ok'. [cross talk] Yes. He finds out from the President about the death of Horton Wilde, who you may remember is the author of my favorite musical, Our Town, President says "No, he's dead." And Sam says:

JOSH: [cross talk] He does!

[West Wing Episode 4.05 excerpt]

SAM: Ok.

BARTLET: Let's go.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I love the way they deploy that word, as you know.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: Josh, do you know what this episode is?

JOSH: No! We're not halfway done!?

HRISHI: No, even more auspicious!

JOSH: Oh, it's Erev [cross talk]

HRISHI: [cross talk] It's Arev Josh Malina!

JOSH: Erev! C'mon.

HRISHI: Erev! Ok, it's Erev Josh Malina.

JOSH: Josh Malina!

HRISHI: The reason why I said 'Arev Josh Malina' and not 'Erev Josh Malina'- it's the fault of The West Wing!

JOSH: Oh, why is that? Is that how they say it?

HRISHI: That's how they say it, arev yom kippur.

JOSH: Sure. If The West Wing told you to jump off a bridge, would you?

HRISHI: If it were eloquently stated.

JOSH: If it were first four seasons West Wing.

HRISHI: Exactly! If it were first four- yeah. And there was a good civic reason that they articulated, then probably.

JOSH: Yeah, that's probably true.

JOSH: We all loved hearing from him in season 1 of The West Wing Weekly. Happy to say that Ron Klain is back.

HRISHI: Ron, would you mind telling us, I feel like you'll do your own resume better justice than I will, will you tell us why you are our number one choice to talk about this episode with?

RON: Well, I have worked for the Democratic nominee for President on getting them ready for their debates in every single campaign back to 1992, so seven Presidential campaigns. And have been in charge of getting the Democratic nominee for President ready for his or her debates the last four elections: Senator Kerry, Obama twice and Secretary Clinton once. So I've been around this process about as much as anyone else, probably more and I actually teach a course on Presidential debates at Georgetown University.

HRISHI: Would you ever use this episode as part of your coursework?

RON: My students are huge West Wing fans, and so they will be super excited to hear that their professor is talking about the debates on this podcast.

HRISHI: Excellent.

JOSH: That's great. So how much did they get right or wrong in this episode?

RON: So look, I think, as with many West Wing episodes, the big things are really right. I think you get a good feeling for what it's like to prepare a sitting President for his debates. What I would say is debate camp is a little less like camp than debate camp in this episode is. There's a lot less singing, there's a lot less beautiful dinners outside. You know, it's like all things in politics- a little more grimy and a little more hard work. The debate camps I've done, people are working 20 hours a day and constantly rewriting answers and yelling and screaming and fighting and whatnot. So I think it's a prettied up version of it, but the big pieces are definitely right.

JOSH: Is there any shared downtime? There's no singing of songs or pick-up basketball games? Or do you just go to your room and decompress alone?

RON: So I'd say as the major activity, when the candidate's not involved, is re-writing answers for the candidate. So there's a lot of shared work, so on and so forth. I will say, I think the basketball thing in the episode is based on the fact that both in 1992 and 1996, Vice President Gore, as attention breaker in both of his debate prep rooms, we actually built in a half-court basketball court behind the set. And so during breaks sometimes he would go back and shoot hoops and some staff would shoot with him. But it was all much less idyllic than the beautiful scene of Toby and Josh and Sam kind of shooting at this beautiful, gorgeous thing. It was like a hoop installed in the back of a warehouse, basically. But I think that's probably where the hoop comes from.

HRISHI: And in the middle of our debate prep, Josh and I were discussing that the President has to leave and go to a makeshift 'SIT room' [cross talk] to deal with real international crisis in addition to his duties, you know, getting ready to be re-elected.

JOSH: [cross talk] The 'SIT barn' as I like to call it.

RON: Yeah, I mean, I think one thing that the episode captures most powerfully is a fundamental reality. We've had seven sitting Presidents engage in debates with their opponents. Six of them have lost their first debate, including some great debaters like Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama. So why do incumbent Presidents always lose their first debate? You see that in this episode. You see all four factors. One of them is that your opponent only has to get ready to debate. The sitting President has to prepare to debate and be President of the United States. And you see that illustrated very well here. We're in the middle of his practice, they interrupt the practice. Leo drags him out to the 'SIT barn' to discuss the crisis in Qumar.

[West Wing Episode 4.05 excerpt]

BARTLET: Apparently eight Israeli Thunder Fighters- these are also known as American-made Boeing F-15 E Strike Eagles, have hit two terrorist bases in the north and south of Qumar.

[end excerpt]

RON: And that happens to real Presidents. And their opponents are just working away on their answers, but Presidents have to be President all the time, even while they're in the middle of debate prep. So that's definitely one of the reasons why incumbent Presidents have a challenge in this process.

HRISHI: Right. I mean, running for election or re-election certainly could be argued as more than a full-time job. And running the country is far beyond the parameters of a full-time job as well. And trying to do both- I can't imagine how one is supposed to juggle all that.

RON: No question, right? The two of them together is really quite a thing to have to do.

JOSH: We see in this episode that the pressure a little bit gets to Bartlet, or he allows Sam to get under his skin in an emotional way.

[West Wing Episode 4.05 excerpt]

BARTLET: Been almost four years, Sam. How long do you wanna say "I told you so"?

JOSH: He wasn't saying "I told you so", sir. We need an answer on Rooker.

BARTLET: What's wrong with "Bite me"?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I think he feels that Sam is re-litigating the decision about Rooker. Does that kind of thing happen?

RON: Yeah, I mean, absolutely. I mean, I think, again, that shows two more of the reasons why sitting Presidents have so much trouble in their first debate. First of all, you know, when you're President of the United States, you're not used to someone standing at a podium next to you and yelling at you that you're a moron, you know? And so Presidents get a lot of respect. They get a lot of people coming in to the Oval Office and telling them they're great. They take questions from the press but it's not the kind of sustained, 90 minutes, someone standing next to you, really hassling at you. That's why, I think, one reason why you see incumbent Presidents kind of get flummoxed by that. And particularly if you watch the 2004 debates, George Bush, George W. Bush in the first debate really got rattled by Kerry from that kind of in-your-face finger wagging kind of thing. And that's why it's so important that President Bartlet be tested that way by Sam. It's why Josh and Toby keep saying to him "Hey, stay in his face, stay in his face." That's not an experience that Presidents have, right? And then the second thing you see in that kind of fight about Rooker is a third reason why Presidents have trouble. Challengers show up at the debate, the only thing they bring with them is their proposals for the future. But an incumbent has to have proposals for the future and also is dealing with all the baggage of their record.

JOSH: Sure.

RON: The incumbent brings in to debate prep a lot of emotional baggage from having to defend these things that they did as President and often re-litigate with the staff members who were involved in that decision. And so you see this other factor weighing on Bartlet in the prep, very realistic of what incumbent Presidents deal with when they have to get ready for their debate.

HRISHI: Right. So you've witnessed that where decisions that could be from previous terms even end up coming back to haunt not just the debate but the conversation among the staff and the president themselves?

RON: Yeah, I mean, I think if you look at, in particular, look at the first debate in 2012 between Obama and Romney and you see that Obama really gets completely bogged down in the defense of Obamacare.

[October 3, 2012 presidential debate excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: Let's make sure that we're providing preventive care so we're catching the onset of something like diabetes. Let's pay providers on the basis of performance as opposed to on the basis of how many procedures they've engaged in.

[end of excerpt]

RON: Gets really deeply in the weeds, his answers are boring and ineffective, and I think it's very similar to what you see Bartlet struggling with in his defense of his choice of Rooker in the episode.

HRISHI: So in your role as the Director of Debate Prep, do you find yourself having to wrangle the staff and their attention as much as the candidate themselves?

RON: Yeah, I would say that one other way in which this episode is a little bit unrealistic is there's just an insane number of people at Bartlet debate camp. I mean, I couldn't even count the number of people who were there at Bartlet debate camp. It seemed like virtually every person who had a role in the show at all was there giving debate advice. And one thing you want to do when you run one of these debate camps is really shrink the room. The President, or any candidate, really can't help formulate their answers if there are twenty different people shouting in their ear, "Do it this way, do it this way, do it that way, do it this way." And so, we always tried to keep it to a group of really six or eight people just interacting with the candidate. Other people may be in a backroom providing written answers, helping edit and revise answers, but really narrowing and funneling the input so it's not quite so cacophonous.

HRISHI: There isn't really someone depicted in the episode that serves the kind of function that I guess you would have played, right? There is no single point person in charge of the debate, as far as we can tell from the episode.

RON: Yeah, I think if you say it looks like Josh, as always, is kind of in charge, maybe Toby. But I agree, I mean, I think one thing about this that is also a little bit unrealistic is that usually most

most candidates do have someone in charge, often someone who's not a permanent member of the staff. Someone who comes in who knows about the debates, who can take this on as a special responsibility and most importantly can provide some discipline to the process to make sure that it isn't a big summer camp endeavor, that it is kind of an organized, well-managed process to help get the candidate to the right answers.

HRISHI: Can you tell us how you got that job, I mean, clearly now you are the person to go to, but starting with 1992 as one of these few people who were selected in the room, how did you end up working on Bill Clinton's prep?

RON: So I wound up working on Bill Clinton's prep because I was working on the policy team on the campaign and was based in Washington, DC. 90% of the staff was in Little Rock. I had just had a child, my first child, and didn't want to move to Little Rock, so I wound up working in a small DC office and people thought I had extra time and capacity so they assigned me to work with Tom Donilon, who was in charge of the debate prep. My job was to really work on the materials to really help write the materials. I had the worst job in 1992 debate prep because my job was really to understand what was in those debate books and understand the policy elements and it was a pointless job because there's no one who knew policy like Bill Clinton. And so I'd sit through these sessions and they'd go on for hours and he got every single policy detail right and there was literally nothing I could say that was at all useful in those sessions, just because his mastery of the material was so incredible. One thing has led to another since then.

JOSH: And would you say there are substantive differences among the candidates that you have coached? Are some campers better than others?

RON: Well, so every candidate is different and they're different as incumbents and non-incumbents. Both for President Clinton and for President Obama, the act of getting ready for the debate was really hard. And I just think the episode does such a very good job of showing that. I mean, you're president of the United States, you're the leader of the free world, you've got so much on your mind, and then your political staff is yelling at you about some answer to some question. And so presidents get in the mindset that basically like, I can do this, I answer questions every day, I'm the president, I did this stuff. And so the challenge with a sitting president is to really get them in the framework to debate, get them in the framework to engage in this exercise that is different than being president, and that's always the challenge. It was the challenge in '96 with Bill Clinton. They took him to Chautauqua to do debate camp and George Mitchell played Bob Dole in the prep, and Mitchell kind of kicked his ass, kicked his ass hard. I think it finally got Clinton going. In 2012, with President Obama, we used Senator Kerry as the stand-in for Mitt Romney, and again, Kerry really just kind of wiped the floor with him in the first few practices. So, I just think it's hard. But every candidate has their idiosyncrasies. John Kerry, when he was a candidate in 2004, he practiced for an hour, he'd go out for a--we did most of his camps up in Wisconsin--he'd go for a long walk and he'd come back and he'd be great. And Bill Clinton, he had a technique of like practicing an answer, having it critiqued, practicing it again, having it critiqued, practicing as many times as he needed to until he had the answer he

wanted, and then it was locked in his head and that answer was done. So, every one of these people was different how they do it.

JOSH: Would you videotape these sessions? Is there any watching tape?

RON: So, with President Clinton we did a decent amount of videotaping. He liked to watch the answers over and over again. Senator Kerry did as well. President Obama, we videotaped a lot of the practices. He hated to watch them. I think particularly in 2012 he knew that the practice for the first debate wasn't going well, and he just didn't want to see it. He knew that he was struggling with it, so watching it just made him grumpier and grumpier.

HRISHI: I can appreciate that.

JOSH: So is part of your job "handling" the candidate? You know, sort of emotionally getting him or her in the right place, in the right mindset?

RON: Well, you know, look, these people are super sophisticated and experienced people, whether they're a sitting president or someone who's won the Democratic Party nomination, and so I don't think handling is the right word. But I do think, what you do have to figure out is what presentation of information, what level of detail, what kind of practice is going to be most effective? And some candidates react best to just really having it laid on very hard and some react best to winning their practice debates and success builds on success. So I think you have to figure out what's the most effective tactic for each candidate.

HRISHI: We keep talking about winning the debate, and I wanted to ask you about victory in debate. Really, how you judge that because so often a debate will happen and then there are two to three days of conversations on the news about who won the debate. And then, on top of that I wonder, does it feel like the winners of the debates end up really having a better chance at winning elections? Because I feel like there are a lot of times when I've watched debates and felt like there was a clear winner, a better debater, someone who's performed better and then that person doesn't end up actually winning the election.

JOSH: Yeah.

RON: Well, so this is great because actually we just did this in my debate class last week, so students can listen to this podcast and really review the material.

JOSH: This will be on the midterm.

RON: Yes, it will be on the final exam. So look, I think there are a couple of answers to that. First of all, how do you decide who won the debate? The way we usually answer that question is news organizations poll people after the debate asking who won and they report that poll. You know, 42% said Candidate A won, 30% said Candidate B won, so Candidate A won. And that's the most common way we talk about it. There are problems with that because generally people say that the candidate they're for anyway won the debate.

HRISHI: Right.

RON: So that question just captures people's inherent biases.

HRISHI: Right.

RON: So a more subtle way of looking at it is what was the vote before the debate, what was the vote after the debate? Did anyone get their minds changed? Did voters move? So, a lot of ways of answering that question. The second point, though, is the person who won the debate on debate night might not be the person who won the debate three days later. That's why debates are different than football games. At the end of the game there's a score on the board, someone won, someone lost, it's over. With debates, there's spin after the debate and that can change people's minds. In 2000, on the night of debate polls, Al Gore won all three debates, but by three days later after every single debate, people thought George Bush had won. Because the Bush campaign did a better job of spinning that different things Gore had done in those debates were bad, people shouldn't like that, and a couple days later people changed their minds. So, to say who's won, that's not a static question. That's a question that kind of moves over time. Now the third thing about this I'd say is this has now changed. Very different from the era of The West Wing because we now have Twitter, and Twitter offers a verdict in and of itself. Particularly the first debate between Obama and Romney in 2012, Obama got creamed on Twitter, and I remember sitting in the staff room during the debate and, Stephanie Cutter, David Axelrod, David Plouffe were sitting there saying, "What are we going to go out in the spin room and say and try to persuade people Obama won after the debate is over? And the answer was Twitter had rendered such a resounding defeat for Obama, there was really nothing you could say in the spin room. So, social media definitely changes that. And then, in terms of the impact of the debates, look, I think there's a lot of evidence that they are a big factor, but they're not the only factor. And so maybe a candidate wins the debates, it helps them, it moves numbers. But, you know, it's only one factor and other factors take into account. I mean, if you look at 2004 as an example, John Kerry won all three debates.

HRISHI: Right.

RON: After each debate, the gap between them in the polls, which him and Bush closed, he would tie Bush and then the fundamental factors in the race, like a current underneath the water, pulled them back apart. So Kerry was ten points behind going into the first debate, two days after the first debate he was only two points behind, but then the lead started to widen back out. Closed it again the second debate, lead widened back out. Closed again the third debate, and then between the third debate and Election Day, Bush pulled away. And so, I think they definitely have an impact, but other things have impact, too.

JOSH: I would think that would also include the clips that the media decides to play afterward. So many people who haven't watched the substance of the debates get the highlights and those are generally what are considered the most dramatic parts of the debate.

RON: Yeah, there's no question that clips play a factor. And now, again, today in 2016, social media plays a big factor. In 2012, we wrote for Obama a line about Romney's defense plan.

[October 22, 2012 Presidential Debate excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: I think Governor Romney hasn't spent enough time looking at how our military works. You mention the Navy, for example, and that we have fewer ships than we had in 1916. Well, Governor, we also have fewer horses and bayonets because the nature of our military has changed.

[end of excerpt]

RON: And we wrote that line understanding that it would be hashtagged on social media.

JOSH: Right.

RON: And that, you know, it would become a big trending thing on social media, and so it is both media clips now and the kind of clips that get shared socially that also impact how people understand and react to the debates.

JOSH: So it also impacts how you prep your candidate if you're looking for those things.

RON: Yeah, absolutely. We practiced in debate prep all the way back in 1992 always, 1996 with President Clinton, we practice what we call "moments." So we think about, before the debate, hey, what's the key exchange going to be here? What are the issues? What are either the special lines or attacks or defenses we want to have? And then we rehearse that over and over again. In 2012, people remember the famous exchange between Romney and Obama where Romney came after Obama on whether or not he had called Benghazi an act of terror after the attack. This was in the second debate where Romney said, you know, "You didn't call it an act of terror." Obama said, "Yes, I did." Romney said, "You didn't." Obama said, "Well please proceed, Governor." And Romney then steps into this kind of this mistaken attack on Obama that Candy Crowley ultimately corrects him on. That was an exchange we absolutely expected. We practiced it seven or eight times specifically over and over again, just to really think about how Obama would deliver his answers and how he would juxtapose his position on this with Romney.

HRISHI: There's a line in this episode where the president says:

[The West Wing Episode 4:05 excerpt]

BARTLET: I swear to God, the winner of this debate's gonna be the next president.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I wondered if there was an overinflated sense of the importance of the debates that comes from candidates who happen to be good at debate.

RON: There probably is a little bit of that, I agree with that. But I will say, for example, I'll tell you where I think that sentiment comes from. It was certainly our view in 1992, if you go back to President Clinton's first election, by the time you got to the fall, the polls were close but Clinton had a lead, but people still just weren't sure. Was this young candidate, who had these controversial things in his background, was he really capable of being president? Was he up to being president? And I think we all, James Carville and George Stephanopoulos and Mandy Grunwald, Stan Greenberg, Paul Begala, the senior team in 1992, definitely had a feeling, President Clinton had a feeling, that to become president he was going to have to beat George Bush in a debate. And that it was a hurdle in people's minds. They liked Bill Clinton, they liked change, they liked his youth, but they weren't quite sold, and I think he definitely went into that debate in 1992 with a feeling that to become president he would have to beat George Bush in that debate.

HRISHI: And this episode's setting, you've let us know, it's based on the 1996 debate camp in Chautauqua.

RON: Yeah, I mean, it is, it has that same kind of--in 1992 we got Governor Clinton ready for the first debate, our biggest debate camp, was in the downtown Hyatt in Kansas City, Missouri. And so there was nothing bucolic about that at all. In fact my most vivid memory of that really is when we left that hotel to go to the debate in St. Louis, I remember thinking literally this is the first time I've been out of doors in four days. And so it certainly wasn't based on that debate prep experience. I think it's probably more likely based on, in fact, in 1996 to get President Clinton ready, the team took him up to the Chautauqua Institute. It was fall, the place was kind of empty, we had run of the place, and it had that kind of outdoorsy, summer camp setting.

HRISHI: How does it feel to you to watch this episode? Does it stress you out?

RON: It stresses me out a little bit. Both halves of the episode do really because I was in the Clinton White House the first two years and the flashback elements of this episode where they're going back to the incredibly rocky early days of the Bartlet presidency really gives me a lot of PTSD from the first few weeks of the Clinton presidency in 1993 where it seemed like literally we could do nothing right at all and every single day was one disaster after another, so that part of it definitely gives me PTSD. The debate prep thing, you know, I think it just does capture a lot of, although honestly I would say real debate prep tends to be even a little more tense and a little more strained than what you see. I think Bartlet strides back into the room near the end of the episode ready to go with that super confident, I'm going to win this thing, we're going to win the presidency demeanor and then kind of a bring it on attitude. And generally by the end of it, in fact, presidents are tired and complaining and looking to get rid of it and tense and nervous. And so, it's a little bit more upbeat in its tone than I think the real world has been.

JOSH: And in our story, though it's not referenced in this episode, they've decided to let it all ride on a single debate.

RON: Yes, they did. I mean, I think obviously it makes it a little more dramatic, but we have not

had since, with the exception of 1980, that's the only time we've had only one debate between the two major party candidates for president. But in 1996 when Bill Clinton was running against Bob Dole, the Clinton campaign used the lead in the race to insist on only two debates instead of three.

HRISHI: Even though President Clinton is an excellent debater and Bob Dole was not a great debater.

RON: Yeah, I mean, that's true, but I think the flipside to that is, as we've talked about before, President Clinton was busy, he was being president. He didn't really want to do three of them.

HRISHI: Right.

RON: And look, he was ahead in that race, he was ahead in that race pretty substantially. And every debate is a risk, every debate's a chance that something can go wrong, a chance you can make a mistake. I think that is the biggest pressure about debate prep that maybe the episode didn't capture. Which is, you're always thinking about how you can win, but you're just as much thinking about how you can lose. And these debates are kind of famous, in part for winning moments, but also in part for mistakes and gaffes [cross talk] and other things that can go wrong.

JOSH: [cross talk] Gaffes, sure.

RON: And so, there's just a lot of pressure in debate prep about that. Looking at lines, looking at what could go wrong here. What could we stumble over? What could the mistakes be? And that's where a lot of the tension comes. You do not want to be the staff person who hands the president a line that ends up being a huge gaffe. And if you see him say something that's bad, you want to try to keep it from becoming a gaffe in the debate. And so, a lot of the tension in debate prep is around that.

JOSH: Can you remember an instance in which you were caught off guard or a candidate was? How often are you surprised by something or a question?

RON: I think that if the staff's done a good job you kind of know the questions. They're usually pretty predictable questions. There are always surprising moments and surprising things that the opponent does and things that don't come out well. So in 2004, you know, near the end of the second debate, I believe, John Kerry made a comment about how Dick Cheney's daughter was a lesbian and how much he respected that the Cheney campaign had been supportive of that. And it was very well-intentioned on Kerry's part, but the Bush people cried foul and said that he was trying to kind of out her on national television or something like that. And that answer kind of became a big problem for us, a big snafu for us. For Gore in 2000, you know, we were caught in this trap of what became a lot of small factual mistakes. So in the first debate, he said George Bush had talked about some disaster in Texas and Gore said, "Yeah, I know because I went there and James Lee Witt, who was the head of FEMA, and I went there and saw all the damage and blah blah blah." Well it turned out that, in fact, Gore had gone there, but

James Lee Witt had not traveled with him, his deputy had traveled with him. And in the debate also we talked about overcrowding in schools and said he'd been to some school where a girl didn't have a desk and it turned out that in fact there was overcrowding in the school but that girl just didn't have a desk because of some logistical thing. So we got whacked for these kind of lies and so we had to spend a lot of time in the subsequent debate preps really fact checking every single thing he planned to say and making sure they were absolutely factual and that became a big part of debate prep.

HRISHI: That's gotta be such a bummer when you're trying so intensely to focus on performance.

RON: Yeah, and it's obviously very distracting and we're all humans and these people go out there to debate without notes, without papers and they're supposed to remember all these things, they're supposed to remember the strategic things they're supposed to, the tactical things they're supposed to do, every little precise point. And if you're under a microscope it's very, very, very, hard and it adds to the pressure just that much more and I know Vice President Gore definitely felt that in the second and third debates in 2000.

JOSH: Do you get into the level of granular detail about wearing this or, you know, how you're going to present yourself, here's how we'll do the handshake, that kind of stuff?

RON: Not so much wearing this, I'm not a big clothes person and usually these candidates have people who advise them on that, but I will say we spend some time thinking about the pure performance elements of it. In 1992, for example, going back to what I said a few minutes ago about this idea that Clinton somehow had to beat Bush, we practiced his first answer. And part of his first answer in that debate was a very dramatic thing that really had not been done in debates before, which was, he talked about change, which of course was our theme in 1992, and in the middle of that very first answer he actually physically pivoted and looked at the President of the United States, turned his body, turned his head and said:

[October 11, 1992 Presidential Debate excerpt]

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: Tonight I say to the president, Mr. Bush, for 12 years, you've had it your way, you've had your chance, and it didn't work. It's time to change.

[end of excerpt]

RON: And that physical act of turning and pointing at him, of directing his answer directly to him was very dramatic, particularly as magnified by the small screen of television, created a moment of confrontation between the two that we had chosen. And that was something that we practiced and spent a lot of time thinking about. Would it be too confrontational? Would it be too aggressive for a young governor to really, kind of, you know, go directly at the sitting president? And he did it and it worked out very well and it's something I think people at the time really were very impacted by.

JOSH: Well that makes me wonder, do you think Trump's skulking behind Clinton was a spur of the moment wandering or a choreographed move?

RON: I think a little bit of both. I mean, I think he tended to wander in the town hall debates and town halls that he'd done. It's kind of what he did. It certainly was designed to intimidate her, I supposed, I thought she did a good job of handling it. You know, I think candidates can get in trouble that way, too. In the 2000 debates there's a famous moment of Al Gore, in the town hall debate, Al Gore getting off his stool and walking over and trying to loom over George Bush and George Bush kind of just turns his head back, looks at him and says, "Hello!" And then goes back to talking and it kind of humiliated Gore. Gore tried to intimidate him and instead it wound up looking like he looked like a jerk kind of, unintentionally but that's kind of how it came out. And so, body language matters, staging matters. That's one reason why, and this is a little bit unrealistic in the episode, that's one reason why, actually for most of the debate preps for the general election, we tend to build sets for the candidates to practice on that are much more realistic. Not just two podiums at the front of the room, but sets that really resemble the physical layout of the debate.

JOSH: With the dimensions of the stage.

RON: With the dimensions, the stage, where the moderator's going to be, how far downstage the moderator's going to be, how far apart the podiums are, where the stools are for a town hall. So the candidate can really practice all these theatrical elements of where their opponent's going to be, where they're going to be, how all this looks out. With, you know, also a chance for the media consultant people to see what all the camera shots will look like and offer some advice on that.

HRISHI: Let me ask you about another moment of performance, possibly, from the 2016 debates. In the second presidential debate, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump came out and they did not shake hands.

RON: Yeah.

HRISHI: Was that something that your team had decided, this was the plan?

RON: Yeah, I mean, Secretary Clinton had the very strong view that after the second debate in 2016 happened two days after the Access Hollywood tape was released.

HRISHI: Right.

RON: And the hour before the debate, Donald Trump did a press conference with women who had accused President Clinton of different things. With a rape victim whose alleged assailant Hillary Clinton as a young lawyer had been assigned by a court to defend. Trump had said horrible things, and she just basically came in that night and said, "Look, I'm not shaking his hand, I'm just not going to do it."

JOSH: That was an emotional decision.

RON: It was an emotional decision, I don't think it was a political decision, it was a personal decision.

JOSH: Sure.

RON: And so she went on stage and stood kind of on her side of the stage and made it clear she was not walking over to shake his hand and I think Trump knew that and didn't walk over to shake her hand and so no hands were shaken that night.

HRISHI: But that wasn't something that, a matter of protocol, where somehow the debate committee and the other election team was made aware that that was going to happen.

RON: We did tell them that she did not intend to shake his hand.

HRISHI: Oh, ok.

RON: The debate commission's perspective on this is that once the candidates walk out on the stage it is their debate. So there's no rule that they must shake hands or they won't shake hands. The debate commission's view is their job is to, you know, basically assemble the event, put the podiums up there, make the thing happen, but then once the candidates walk out, the debate belongs to them. So we said, "Look, she's not going to shake his hand." The debate commission said, "Well, that's up to her and him." And they did not shake hands.

HRISHI: Still it was, I feel like, it was sportsmanlike of you to give advance notice that she wasn't going to shake his hand.

RON: Well, I suppose it was sportsmanlike. I think the point was that she didn't want to shake his hand and she didn't want him to come over and propose a handshake.

JOSH: It would have been very awkward.

RON: It would have been very awkward to kind of have to brush the thing off so I think it was the best thing all the way around.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Did you say earlier that it was Reagan-Carter that they only had a single debate?

RON: They only had a single debate. Basically the dispute that fall was over whether or not John Anderson, third candidate, could participate in the debate. And Carter wanted to go alone and Reagan wanted to elevate Anderson, thought Anderson was digging into Carter's votes. So Reagan said, "I'll only debate if Anderson's also on the stage." League of Women Voters invited all three. Carter said, "I won't come if Anderson's there." Reagan and Anderson then debated one-on-one without Carter. And Carter held his ground and ultimately a week before the

election, the latest debate we've ever had, Reagan finally conceded, and Reagan and Carter debated one-on-one a week before Election Day.

JOSH: How did that go?

RON: So I think that went pretty well for Reagan. That's the famous, "there you go again," debate where he kind of said that. Where he ends the debate with the question, "Are you better off today than you were four years ago?" So it was a pretty brilliant performance by Reagan and helped him seal the victory. Now, by the way, a little historical fact about that, it came out later, two years later, that the Reagan team had a stolen copy of Carter's debate book and helped Reagan get ready with the stolen debate book. And so, while it was a brilliant performance by Reagan, can't take anything away from that, it was a brilliant performance knowing what the other team's playbook looked like.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Huh, fascinating.

HRISHI: That is fascinating. Ron, thank you so much for talking to us about all of this, this is an incredible treasure trove of information.

RON: Happy to do it.

HRISHI: Professor Klain, schooling us once again. People can follow you on Twitter @RonaldKlain and we'll have a link to that on our website.

JOSH: Well that was *The West Wing Weekly*.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: Thank you all for listening to the show and, of course, big special thanks to our guest, Ronald Klain. And be sure to follow Ron on Twitter, he's @RonaldKlain.

HRISHI: You can find us on Twitter. You can also find us on Facebook and on Instagram and our website, of course, is TheWestWingWeekly.com, where you can leave a message for Josh. I won't read it.

JOSH: That's true. The West Wing Weekly is a proud member of Radiotopia, a saucy collection of scintillating podcasts aggregated and presented to you at Radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: Radiotopia is a project of PRX. The West Wing Weekly is a project of Mr. Joshua Malina and myself. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Our editors are Margaret Miller and Zach McNees.

JOSH: They're wonderful.

HRISHI: We have been adding transcripts to our site. Thanks to Krista and Evie for continuing

that project.

JOSH: The holidays are coming up. It's the perfect time, if you haven't yet, to throw some money down and buy some West Wing Weekly merch. By doing so, you get the finest gifts in the land and you support the podcast you love.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

RON: What's next?

[Outro music]