

The West Wing Weekly
4.15: "Inauguration: Over There"
Guest: Gene Sperling

[Intro Music]

JOSH: We're back. You're listening to the West Wing Weekly. I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: And I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Today we're talking about episode 15 from season 4. It's the second part of the inauguration two-parter. It's called "Inauguration: Over There."

JOSH: The story is by David Gerken and Gene Sperling, to whom we'll speak a little bit later. And the teleplay is by Aaron Sorkin. This episode was directed by Lesli Linka Glatter.

HRISHI: And this episode is really a continuation of the last episode. The president is about to give his inaugural address, but first we go back in time, whereas in part one, we started six days earlier. We're now closer to the inauguration itself, and the battle over the foreign policy section is still being hammered out. Danny Concannon is digging further on his stories, although his reporting now involves getting Donna in trouble, and Charlie is still working on trying to get a Bible. That makes it sound like it's a less exciting episode than it actually was. I think this episode is great.

JOSH: It's a very good episode. These two together are wonderful.

HRISHI: As Josh mentioned, we're going to be joined later by Gene Sperling, who has half of the "Story By" credit in this episode, but he was also the director of the National Economic Council for both President Clinton and President Obama. This episode starts with Will asking Toby...

[West Wing episode 4.15 excerpt]

WILL: You don't ever worry about the window breaking?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Hm.

HRISHI: Thus ensuring that before the end of act 3, the window will break.

[Sound – breaking glass]

JOSH: Indeed. Chekov's window.

HRISHI: Exactly.

JOSH: Yes, good episode for Toby's balls. [HRISHI laughs] Which leads me to, shout-out to our listener and now friend, Colin, Colin and Sarah, Colin having donated to the Radiotopia campaign and bought lunch with us.

HRISHI: We had lunch this past Sunday.

JOSH: That was a good fun, and proving that he was a better guest than we were hosts, he brought us each a gift. He brought us each a signed Richard Schiff -- and I think that money went to the U-, I almost said UCLA, the ACLU -- he gave us each one of those Spaldeens, signed by Richard, in a lovely commemorative plastic trophy container.

HRISHI: Yeah, I really was not expecting to get gifts at that lunch.

JOSH: Yeah, neither was I. But I'm excited! So we each have one of those. I've got the left and you've got the right, I like to think. [HRISHI laughs]

HRISHI: We have those smooth pink balls.

JOSH: Yes, very exciting. So yeah, in that Spaldeen scene, the first one, yeah, Richard as Toby talks about...

[West Wing episode 4.15 excerpt]

TOBY: It's always held up, that window, that window's a game-day player.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And I thought, [cross talk] that is like the highest compliment that Aaron Sorkin can pay, I guess a person or an [cross talk] inanimate object, yes.

HRISHI: [cross talk] MMm-hmm.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Or an inanimate object. [laughs]

JOSH: A game-day player.

HRISHI: There's a detail I really like in this teaser, which is that at one point, Will reads Toby the language that he has written for this foreign policy section, and he says...

[West Wing episode 4.15 excerpt]

WILL: America stands today as the one truly indispensable nation, the strongest force and the proudest voice for peace, pluralism, and prosperity that the world has ever known.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I felt like they had some nice continuity for Will's tendency towards alliteration.

JOSH: Yes, very good!

HRISHI: As established by “Arctic Radar.”

[West Wing episode 4.10 excerpt]

TOBY: You're alliteration happy: guardians of gridlock, protectors of privilege, I needed an avalanche of Advil.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It's just a little callback.

JOSH: MMm-hmm.

HRISHI: There's actually several callbacks.

JOSH: Callback, go ahead.

HRISHI: There's several callback in this episode to previously on *The West Wing*.

JOSH: President callback, yes.

HRISHI: [laughs] That's one. And then, also in this teaser, Will brings up a scene from season 1, episode 12, “He Shall, From Time to Time.” He tells Toby, “I've heard about this story where you convinced the president not to use the phrase ‘the era of big government is over,’” and we witnessed that. We witnessed when that happened back in season 1.

JOSH: Will mentions it and Toby says...

[West Wing episode 4.15 excerpt]

TOBY: There were maybe four people in the room when I had that conversation.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And I wanted Will to say, “Yeah, but it was highlighted on an episode of *The West Wing*.”

HRISHI: [laughs] There were only three people in that room, in fact. He says, “There were *maybe* four people in the room when I had that conversation,” but in fact there were only three. It was Toby, Josh, and the president. And so I wonder who spilled the beans.

JOSH: Hm.

HRISHI: Probably Josh.

JOSH: I guess so.

HRISHI: Who does the president talk to? He just talks to Leo. And Abbey.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: But I do like that Will says...

[West Wing episode 4.15 excerpt]

WILL: Well, if I had been one of them, I'd have repeated it to everyone I met.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: "I would have told many, many people," he basically says. [laughs]

JOSH: [laughs] That's exactly right. This is the scene during which Toby is chastising Will for having gotten into the president's head.

[West Wing episode 4.15 excerpt]

WILL: He came here! He was standing in the doorway.

TOBY: The Dow plummets because of casual conversations with this man, but that's not the point.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And I watched this on the day of the single [laughs] biggest [laughs] point decline in the Dow, in the stock market, just a couple of days ago.

HRISHI: Mmm-hmm. I was thinking it's too bad that the State of the Union address isn't a weekly thing, so we could get a new [laughs] and improved updated version.

JOSH: Sure. A Tweet of the Union. We could do the Tweet of the Union.

HRISHI: Yeah! There was this fake tweet that was going around that somebody had doctored about Trump.

JOSH: I perpetuated it. Even though I knew it wasn't real. I just thought it was funny.

HRISHI: Yeah. [laughs]

JOSH: But some people were mad at me!

HRISHI: [laughs] My favorite part was that Dow Jones was misspelled in it.

JOSH: [cross talk] J-O-A-N-S. [laughs]

HRISHI: [cross talk] It really made it art.

JOSH: It was funny. Here's one thing I liked about my own performance -- in this scene and elsewhere. I can see myself following one of my acting tenets, which is not to ever attempt to be likeable. [HRISHI chuckles] And Will is kind of sullen and maybe annoying, and he's not fun at all. Even Josh asks him out, he wants none of it, he rolls his eyes at Josh, he's not too impressed with -- he's not impressed at all with the idea that the president is haunted by it. Y'know, if there's not going to be any action, I don't care that you guys find it haunting or you're really moved by it, because we're not doing anything. I can see why -- I mean, other things will happen, story-wise, but some people are annoyed by Will. And that doesn't bother me. That's not a negative. And a lot of times in TV the *worst* thing is to be unlikeable unless you are a villain, in which of course that is your job and even so, you're supposed to be a villain in a way that is *very* charismatic so that people really still do kind of like you, and, uh, *The West Wing* isn't that kind of a show but also that's not kind of the thing that *ever* flipped through my mind.

HRISHI: Mm-hmm. It's almost as if this character were written for *you*.

JOSH: There you go! Oh yeah! It was.

HRISHI: Because those qualities feel like something I would expect from you as well. The feeling of not being impressed by their good intentions alone.

JOSH: Right. Well. That's where Jonathan Edwards and I really part ways.

HRISHI: [laughs] Exactly! There you go. [laughs] Call back.

JOSH: Call back!

HRISHI: Just to continue on that point, I want to jump way, way, way, way far ahead. I wouldn't have brought this up except that you've already now cracked open this egg.

JOSH: Bring it.

HRISHI: One of my favorite moments that I think is most indicative of Will's character is, ah, yeah, it's not very fun. The president, while trying to make a joke, says at the very end, in the deputy swearing-in ceremony,

[West Wing episode 4.15 excerpt]

WILL: I don't know what to say.

BARTLET: That's what you want to hear from your new communications [cross talk] deputy.

WILL: [cross talk] I accept.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: He's like doing his thing, he's doing his [cross talk] genial presidential thing...

JOSH: [cross talk] Right.

HRISHI: And Will cuts him off and says, "I accept," with no sense of humor [laughs], and it's almost like Will is, and I think it is, Will is reacting to the text of what the president has said as opposed to the spirit of it. I think there's two things. I don't think that Will doesn't have a sense of humor, though he's not certainly like a really jolly guy. I think another part of his character is that he has a bit of a chip on his shoulder.

JOSH: I think that's true.

HRISHI: I think we've seen it, you know, even like in "Arctic Radar," that's one of the things that I like so much in that "guardians of gridlock" scene in the way he doesn't just sort of take the criticism from Richard Schiff, I mean from Toby, and shrink away. He comes back, and he retorts with force, and I think that he feels like he has something to prove a little bit, and most of the time that comes out in admirable ways but I like that they carry that through, like you said, in ways that don't necessarily make him very likeable. And that one little outburst is an example of that.

JOSH: Yeah, I agree with you. It was fun to play, also, the weird mix of -- he finds himself daunted by certain situations, like meeting the president for the first time, or being deputized, he's got that same fog [cross talk] of not quite being able to figure out what's going on or being a beat behind. But it's also combined with sometimes even though he's out of his depth or dealing with people whose situations are way above him, he still can be aggressive to the point that somehow it's sometimes jerkiness. [chuckles] It's a weird mix.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

HRISHI: Yeah. [chuckles] It is. But it's a mix of things that I think ends up making sense really only because it's being, you know, melted together in the crucible of Joshua Malina.

JOSH: Aw, or Aaron Sorkin really. But you're nice to say.

HRISHI: He's the chef [cross talk], throwing the ingredients in.

JOSH: [cross talk] [chuckles] Ok.

JOSH: It seems to me there's an atypical slow burn into the credits and into the sweep of the opening theme, when Toby exits Will's office, and there isn't that usual kind of, forward momentum in either it's a funny line or it's an inspiring thing or there's a question. He just kind of walks out, Richard kind of gives almost a look over his shoulder back to Will because it wasn't the most satisfying interaction, and then he kind of just walks toward his office. And it seems like that opening chord, or note, is longer than usual.

[extended opening note of the episode plays in background]

HRISHI: It's similar to what we heard in the episode where Josh was walking out of the Republican cloakroom.

JOSH: And there's that weird, almost extra beat.

HRISHI: Yeah, but we were actually waiting for him to leave the room, and there's sort of no action beyond that. Here, we get like a nice sort of visual moment of these two offices together. It's like really beautifully framed, and of course we know that that's the scene. But yeah, that little [cross talk] isolation of the two characters.

JOSH: [cross talk] It works well.

HRISHI: They're not on the same page, and I felt like they're using the composition of the frame metaphorically there. So I think that we've heard that kind of long, long lead-up to the opening credits. It just felt a little different [cross talk] here because we're just looking at the scene.

JOSH: [cross talk] It did to me.

HRISHI: After we come back from the credits, C.J. is in the briefing room, and then Danny follows her back, and C.J. says, gives him a "good day, sir."

JOSH: Mm!

HRISHI: And he doesn't listen and she tries again.

[West Wing episode 4.15 excerpt]

C.J.: Good day to you, sir.

DANNY: C.J...

C.J.: I said, good day, sir.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Well, I believe that's a cinematic shout-out.

HRISHI: That's what I was wondering, if you thought that it was a shout-out. I feel like it has to be, right?

JOSH: Willy Wonka.

[*Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971) excerpt]

WILLY WONKA: Good day, sir!

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: Yeah. There's also a great "good day, sir" in *Tootsie*.

[*Tootsie* (1982) excerpt]

MICHAEL DORSEY/DOROTHY MICHAELS: I said good day, sir!

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Ok, and then, again, we're back to this question that I had earlier: is it Hutchinson or Hutchison? Danny says, "Hutchinson," C.J. says "Hutchison."

JOSH: Look, all of it balanced out by the fact that Martin says "cavalry" correctly at some point in this episode.

[West Wing episode 4.15 excerpt]

BARTLET: Then he gets the plagues, or my cavalry...

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Because before he said calvary?

JOSH: He did. Didn't we discuss that once?

HRISHI: I thought it was Leo who said calvary.

JOSH: Oh, maybe I'm wrong.

HRISHI: I feel like you needed an alley-oop on that, and I wasn't there for you.

JOSH: [laughs] That's ok. Sometimes I just get a blank response, and that's also ok, because even in life I don't care about being likable.

[HRISHI laughs]

JOSH: That's not entirely true.

HRISHI: Another acting moment of yours that I really enjoyed in this episode is seeing Will trying to put the cap on his pen one-handed.

JOSH: [chuckles] Yeah. I didn't do that very deftly. I thought really, [cross talk] why...

HRISHI: [cross talk] [laughs] It's just great.

JOSH: Well, it's funny because I fixated on that too.

HRISHI: You did?

JOSH: Yes, and I was trying to think, What was--what was so special about this take that we went with the one where I had such a hard time getting the cap onto the end? Or was it that [cross talk] just because it's so real.

HRISHI: [laughs] Right!

JOSH: Because of course, you know, most of the time we're not necessarily so adept at these things -- of course I am, so I was off. [HRISHI chuckles] That's funny. It totally caught my eye too. Like, oh my god, for the love of God, just put that cap back on the end.

HRISHI: This is the scene where Josh and Toby and Will are going over the changes, the requests, you know, "can we change tens of billions to billions and billions," and Toby says no. And then as they're wrapping up, Will uncaps the pen but is doing it one-handed because you were holding a folder or something, and then, uh, trying to, like, scoop the cap back on... It's a move that any ball-point pen user, really, any pen user, has probably attempted at some point so...

JOSH: It was apparently--though, for me, it was a par three.

HRISHI: [laughs] That's true. You had to dig for it.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: I really liked that part. [JOSH chuckles] And then Josh wants to go to Iota, a club in Arlington, which is a real place.

JOSH: Ohh!

HRISHI: It closed in September 2017.

JOSH: No kidding!

HRISHI: It is no longer there.

JOSH: I wonder why on earth they would use an actual place.

HRISHI: I don't know. Credibility?

JOSH: I guess but, I don't know, it just...it's funny. It's so strangely random when they decide to use -- I mean you get Equatorial Kundu, but the club they go to is a real place. [HRISHI laughs] I don't know. It's just kind of funny.

HRISHI: Yeah, they go to that club and, um, Jill Sobule is a real singer [cross talk]

JOSH: [cross talk] That's right.

HRISHI: who's in the club singing a real song of hers. It's a song called "Heroes." And it's too bad that Will isn't there, because it really feels like she's singing to him. The lyrics to the song are: "Why are all our heroes so imperfect?/Why do they always bring me down?/Why are all our heroes so imperfect?/The statue in the park has lost his crown."

JOSH: And then isn't there a recurring theme of people being drunk and depressed, these heroes?

HRISHI: [chuckles] Yeah, that's right.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: It's a good song for contemporary times as well. [coughs] Louis C.K. [JOSH chuckles] Jill Sobule is also the singer of "I Kissed a Girl."

JOSH: Mm-hmm.

HRISHI: And she had that song "Supermodel" that was on the *Clueless* soundtrack.

JOSH: Oh, I didn't know that.

HRISHI: Mm-hmm. When we're back inside the White House, I like this little exchange between the president and Leo.

[West Wing episode 4.15 excerpt]

BARTLET: Well, then it was a dodged bullet.

LEO: No, sir, we didn't dodge nothing. They hit what they aimed at.

BARTLET: Leo, come on...

LEO: It was a shot across the bow, it was.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I liked how they carried the bullet metaphor throughout those different ideas. "It was a dodged bullet," "no, they hit what they aimed at," "it was a shot across the bow."

JOSH: Mm-hmm.

HRISHI: Somehow they were able to move the imagery around without mixing metaphors.

JOSH: I noticed in that C.J./Danny scene that Claudia Jean is as big a fan of musical theatre as you. In fact, maybe less of a fan. Because you certainly would know who the Sharks and the Jets were.

HRISHI: Well, I think, she's not saying she doesn't get the reference; I think she's saying she doesn't know necessarily who all the larger players are [cross talk] in it.

JOSH: [cross talk] In the... Ok, so I just wanted to say "musical theatre."

HRISHI: [laughs] Well, because we know, in fact, earlier she sings, [HRISHI sings and snaps] "Boy, boy, [cross talk] crazy boy..."

JOSH: [cross talk] Oh, is that another episode?

HRISHI: That's in another episode. Remember, she says that to Sam.

JOSH: Oh. Well, never mind, I guess! Fair enough.

HRISHI: Not only does she know the Jets and the Sharks, she knows their lyrics.

JOSH: Being remade, by the way, by Spielberg.

HRISHI: Oh, yeah, I saw about something like that.

JOSH: Wow, the excitement in your voice is electric. [HRISHI laughs] And contagious.

HRISHI: Yeah. Well. Hey, he's proven he's good with dinosaurs.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: Did you hear the Lin-Manuel Miranda episode of Song Exploder?

JOSH: About *his* "Maria."

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: No, I don't know how I haven't listened to it because I've listened to a lot of Song Exploder but I haven't yet. I'm embarrassed to admit.

HRISHI: Yeah, in his song "Almost Like Praying," *West Side Story* is part of the hook. It's really interesting how he references it and then flips it around.

JOSH: All right. The listeners and I should go listen to that episode.

HRISHI: Mm-hmm. So I'm just saying, I've been in contact with *West Side Story* enough.

JOSH: Fair enough. How do you feel about Laurel and Hardy?

HRISHI: Um, I've seen that movie. I remember watching that movie on WSBK, channel 56, in Massachusetts. Yeah, shout-out to WSBK.

JOSH: Is that right? Which movie is it?

HRISHI: *Babes in Toyland*.

JOSH: *Babes in Toyland*, gotcha. [cross talk] That makes sense.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Mm-hmm.

HRISHI: How do *you* feel about Laurel and Hardy being in there?

JOSH: I actually liked it. It's the kind of scene I could [laughs] see myself -- I had to check myself, "Am I liking this?" I actually really liked it. I could see how one could object to the, y'know, sort of found nature of this juxtaposition that the president takes in, but I liked it, I thought it really worked. First of all, I like Laurel and Hardy. I like that era. I like that kind of comedy, and I like the idea that an image from, oh whatever, '20s or '30s comedy could somehow not be the inciting incident, as he even explicitly says to Abbey, it's not *why* he did anything but that a chance clip of an old movie could be part of the stew in the president's mind that helps nudge him in a certain direction. I liked it.

HRISHI: Mm-hmm. One thing I didn't understand about this scene is what Abbey says right beforehand. She says...

[West Wing episode 4.15 excerpt]

ABBEY: Tony's grandkids are in there watching a video.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Who's Tony?!

JOSH: Uh, no idea. [laughs] I guess, from *West Side Story*.

HRISHI: [laughs] Is that Maria's love interest?

JOSH: Indeed, yes.

HRISHI: Yeah, ok.

JOSH: He died, but the grandkids I guess were adopted by a kindly [cross talk] family in New Hampshire.

HRISHI: [cross talk] and live in the White House?

JOSH: Well, yeah. [HRISHI chuckles] Oof. It'll all be explained in the Spielberg *West Side Story*, I'm sure.

HRISHI: Ok. The Laurel and Hardy [laughs] scene, I kept on being, like, "But who's Tony?"

JOSH: [chuckles] Oh. See, I actually just kept bumping on, like, the grandkids are watching *Babes in Toyland*? It would have been more like *Toy Story 3* or something should have been playing. [HRISHI laughs] And the president should have sat down and said, "This has *no* effect on *anything* I'm thinking about!" But what are the odds that that's what they're watching?

HRISHI: *Toy Story 3* was not out yet.

JOSH: Ok, well then, it should have been *Monster's Inc* or whatever the hell was out then. [HRISHI laughs] You know! You get my point.

HRISHI: You see, but I watched *Babes in Toyland*.

JOSH: Oh, I had one other thought about that scene, though. I think the other reason why that scene resonated for me was that President Bartlet struck me almost like a lovesick person. He's haunted, and his heart is breaking about this whole situation, trying to decide [cross talk] whether he's going to act or not. It's almost like when you've been broken up with and you're heartbroken, and everything you hear on the radio, every song, seems to be a song that...

HRISHI: [cross talk] Mm-hmm.

HRISHI: Yup.

JOSH: ...is germane somehow to your situation. It kind of felt that way to me. He sits down...

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: ...what's playing, *Babes in Toyland* and these wind-up soldiers, and I liked that aspect of it.

HRISHI: Yeah. One thing we didn't talk about in the last episode is a line I really enjoyed, which is Charlie's line

[West Wing episode 4.14 excerpt]

CHARLIE: Well, I've got my own Beach Boys song going.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: That scene is slightly inflected with “Trump-ai-yi-yi” though because just bringing up the idea of the president watching something on TV, and then having it spark a reaction that then changes U.S. policy is... [cross talk] you know, something we have to live with.

JOSH: [laughs] That didn’t cross my mind. I didn’t think about the dark underbelly of that scene.

HRISHI: Someone had done the work of actually -- I’ve seen tweets where people have shown side-by-side something that Trump had tweeted, next to a headline [cross talk] or read something on the runner, yeah, from *Fox and Friends*.

JOSH: [cross talk] Like a chyron.

JOSH: And the elapsed time between when he likely saw it and then tweeted about it.

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: Using the same wording, yes. It’s astonishing. And not in a good way.

HRISHI: Yeah. So as much as it pains everyone to hear this, as it does for me to say this, it’s a little Trump-esque here.

JOSH: Never would’ve crossed my mind, but... [HRISHI chuckles] fair enough.

HRISHI: Then our band of heroes has their outing broken up because C.J. finds out about this article, y’know, Danny’s article has come out, and they’ve gotten screwed by it. They all have to rush back. They wake up Will, which is a great moment.

JOSH: I enjoyed shooting that scene very much.

HRISHI: Oh yeah? You remember that day?

JOSH: It’s fun, y’know, the same thing would happen with *Scandal* on occasion. Anytime you didn’t wear a suit on *The West Wing*, it’s like, ooh, something special is up. I’m in bed, or I’m in underwear and a t-shirt, and it’s just fun to do also in a Sorkin project, to do a scene that is very light on dialogue and that involves some physicality. So this is one of those things where [cross talk] I remember, I think, instead of blocking it too specifically, Lesli decided to shoot it in a way where they could get whatever I did, we’d see the whole frame, and that they would just then actually do what was being done to Will: they would buzz him, they’d call him, they’d call his personal phone, and his buzzer and the hotel phone, and just let it kind of unfold the way it would and try to answer each thing as it happened. So it was just [cross talk] great fun...

HRISHI: [cross talk] Mm-hmm.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Oh, that’s great.

JOSH: ...to do it spontaneously.

HRISHI: Right. That's great. [chuckles] It's not like the sounds were added in post.

JOSH: Maybe they were sweetened or something like that, but it was all [cross talk] really happening.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

HRISHI: That's great. And then C.J. confronts Danny as they all come walking into the West Wing again, and I thought it was interesting that Danny admits that his paper did something unethical.

[West Wing episode 4.15 excerpt]

DANNY: Sometimes people say something to a researcher because they think they're not on the record.

C.J.: They're not on the record!

DANNY: No.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, he's got no defense for it.

HRISHI: Yeah. This is a moment that we haven't had too often in the West Wing too, where there's just, y'know, someone has done something unethical that is not necessarily politically motivated or anything like that. *The Washington Post*, which is -- Danny's writing is upheld as this like important endeavor all the time, but here they've screwed up and as a result, they've screwed over the administration.

JOSH: Yes. This is one of those cinematic situations that always frustrates me, though we don't have a long time of realizing that it's Donna and that she's brought it on herself, but when people are falsely accused, [cross talk] it really bugs me. It's hard -- I find it --

HRISHI: Yes

HRISHI: Mistaken identity is my least favorite trope in storytelling.

JOSH: Oh really? See, I'm not even criticizing it as a -- to me it; very effective because it makes me crazy. I get very frustrated watching things where someone's taking blame for someone else, even if she has brought it on herself willingly, the way Donna has. I just don't know why; there's something in me that -- it's, like, my mom can't watch mess. [JOSH chuckles] She doesn't like to watch things where a house is incredibly messy. I don't like mistaken identity. Now, you don't like it as a device itself, as a dramatic device.

HRISHI: Yeah, and I don't think that's what's happening here. Like, this is not something that bothers me. What I don't like is mistaken identity when it results in somebody -- yeah, I don't like

when someone gets blamed for something else, and there's no way for them to remedy the injustice of it. I just get really bothered by cartoons [chuckles] where there was a sweet and cuddly character who would, like, make a mess and then turn back into a sweet character and everyone would think that it was, y'know [JOSH chuckles], the protagonist's fault [cross talk] and only the protagonist knew

JOSH: [cross talk] Oh, I see. So this is the same thing. We have a very similar response.

HRISHI: Yeah. It's the same reason why I can't watch *Meet the Parents*.

JOSH: Ah.

HRISHI: It's just, it's too painful to me.

JOSH: [cross talk] I get it.

HRISHI: [cross talk] I don't get any comedy from it.

JOSH: I feel you. Although I do think that movie's funny. What of Jack Reese? Very unceremoniously written off the show.

HRISHI: Yeah. Considering he had a ceremonial sabre and everything.

JOSH: Well said. Is there a story behind the story? Did Christian Slater want out? Did he get something else? Was he unavailable? I wonder.

HRISHI: Let me look up his IMDB here for a second. I mean, I can only speculate that if he really loved doing the show, then he probably would have made himself available for these episodes.

JOSH: I would think so. Yeah, I wonder. I mean, I guess what I'm saying is if this is, and indeed it is, the sum total of Jack Reese, why'd they bring him on? Y'know, he was fine, and he was good, I think, and there *is* something he brought to the show and it was a little breath of fresh air and from a different point of view and a different job being done. It was interesting to watch. And, then y'know, a little romantic *frisson* with Donna, and then...nothing.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: So I gotta believe the plan was for greater things.

HRISHI: Yeah. I mean, it's a big name to get.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: And it's not even like Ainsley, where we know there's another opportunity, and Ainsley was in several episodes; this was just three episodes, and then he's gone. My feeling is that he was really there, his sabre was there, to provide a foil to Josh and Donna's romance.

JOSH: So you could compare sabres.

HRISHI: Exactly.

JOSH: No, I think you're right...

HRISHI: Sort of an épée-ing contest.

JOSH: [laughs] Ooh, nice. Um, I think if you showed Christian Slater, "this is going to be your whole role," he would have never taken the role. So, I don't know if this is just the extent to which Aaron wanted to use this character, or something didn't work out, I wonder. I feel like there's more of a story there. That being said, thanks to Jack Reese, we get the snowball throwing scene, which was also great fun to shoot.

HRISHI: That's a really great scene.

JOSH: Oh, I was going to ask whether it's fun to watch. I like that scene just because it was so much fun to do.

HRISHI: I think it was probably more fun to make than it was to watch, but it's a nice scene in general. Y'know, I mean, the fun really comes more from the dialogue more than the snowball action, but the idea of the guys all throwing snowballs at Donna's windows is fun enough.

JOSH: Yeah. It's always good fun, I can't speak to the first three seasons, but by the time I joined, we went to D.C., I think in seasons 4, 5, and 6 anyway, twice maybe during a season, and we'd shoot various things. This would be where Aaron, to the extent that he ever did, would have to get ahead of himself a little bit, he and his writers, and figure out some exterior scenes to shoot that could be sprinkled throughout the season.

HRISHI: Oh, that's a real exterior scene in D.C.

JOSH: Maybe I'm making it up. That's my memory.

HRISHI: It looks like such a set to me.

JOSH: Oh it does?! That's funny. Oh, maybe I'm completely wrong. Now I have to ask Eli or somebody. Because my memory is that that was on a D.C./Maryland trip.

HRISHI: Huh. I just assumed it was a set.

JOSH: That's funny.

HRISHI: I had thought that, now to respond to something you raised 30 minutes ago, maybe the reason why Iota got name-checked in the episode is because on one of the D.C. trips, maybe Aaron or people from the crew actually went to Iota.

JOSH: Maybe.

HRISHI: After shooting, or something like that.

JOSH: And it's possible that I said, "Y'know, I'm gonna go to sleep." [chuckles] Also, an entirely credible storyline. [HRISHI chuckles] Actually, that's not really true.

HRISHI: Yeah, you like to, you stay out late!

JOSH: Yeah. Josh and Donna, at this point, as much as I hate the phrase, "Get a room!" I mean, it's just, they're completely, there's no cat, there's no bag. They're [HRISHI laughs] in love with each other, blatantly. I mean, this couldn't be a more romantic scene. They're essentially playing out Romeo and Juliet. I mean, c'mon, guys!

HRISHI: Well, that's why Jack Reese is there. To put some time in there. And I think he also gives some fuel to Josh's motivation. Y'know, Josh is now, really he's a mess, he's all over the place. He's actually acting irresponsibly because of his jealousy. He's taking it out on Donna. So, I think, dramatically at least, having this other character, giving them another kind of love triangle to work off of, helps delay something that they were hurtling towards a little too quickly.

JOSH: I guess, delayed for a couple of episodes. [HRISHI laughs] But it's...

HRISHI: It's supposed to be a "will they, won't they."

JOSH: Right. But...

HRISHI: And we all know it's...

JOSH: It's more of a "when they."

HRISHI: Right. "Why won't they."

JOSH: YeaH. And at this point, the hurtle has happened. Jack Reese is now out of the picture, and he's just staring at her and telling her how pretty she is, and...

HRISHI: And then she's gonna sit on his lap in the car.

JOSH: Oh, there's also that too, yes indeed.

HRISHI: And then somehow, the grossest [laughs] part of it is Josh says she has to call him "Wild Thing."

JOSH: Oi vey ismir. [HRISHI laughs] That. I did a big ol' -- my eyes almost rolled out of my head. And that's of course the kind of thing I'm sure the people who love Josh Lyman and love Brad Whitford *love* that little bit, but it's horrendous. [laughs] It's vomitous.

HRISHI: The thing I like most about the “Wild Thing” comment is I was wondering if it was an inter-Sheen reference.

JOSH: Wow, wait, what? Ohhhhh. The baseball movie.

HRISHI: Maybe Josh Lyman is a fan of *Major League*. And he saw Charlie Sheen playing the character of Wild Thing.

JOSH: Look at you [cross talk] and your long ball.

HRISHI: [cross talk] and that’s why he wants her to call him Wild Thing.

JOSH: Perhaps so.

HRISHI: Could you imagine Charlie Sheen playing the character of Josh Lyman? For a second there, I could.

JOSH: Uhhhhh, it would be certainly a different spin on it, it would have been. I guess...ish.

HRISHI: I don’t know. Going backwards, I like that the president calls anyone in America who hails from below the New Hampshire southern border “southerners,” [cross talk] including people from Massachusetts. It reminded me of *Game of Thrones* and how the Free Folk call, y’know, the people of the North “southerners.”

JOSH: [cross talk] Yes.

JOSH: Right. Oh yeah.

HRISHI: And I thought, New Hampshire and the Free Folk both have the motto “live free or die.” I mean, the Free Folk of *Game of Thrones* really are as close to the “live free or die” kind of people as there is.

JOSH: Very good. I like that.

HRISHI: Also, I wanted to give a shout-out to our listener Michael who sent us an email. He wrote, “I noticed a mistake around the 28 minute mark. C.J. says...”

[West Wing episode 4.15 excerpt]

C.J.: That’s the U.S. Marine Corp band right there. Commandant’s own.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And Michael points out that the Marine Band is known as the *president’s own*. The commandant’s own is actually the Marine Drum and Bugle Corp, and the two are completely separate from one another. Because that’s not confusing.

JOSH: [laughs] No. Good eye, Michael.

HRISHI: One thing you want in the military is as much ambiguity as possible.

JOSH: Yes, that usually works well. Bartlet has a rough line when he talks about the likely response...

HRISHI: President rough line.

JOSH: President rough line. [chuckles] The likely response to his now altered speech.

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: And I can't remember the build-up, but the capper is...

[West Wing episode 4.15 excerpt]

BARTLET: And the Arab world will just go indiscriminately crazy.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Dude! You're on the eve -- or about to, he's going to give the speech, and it's a new doctrine for foreign policy, and then [laughs] with this giant broad brush, he just comes out with that about the Arab world. How, as one, they will react indiscriminately crazy. It's a rough one. Dude, like, maybe temper your speech and your thought.

HRISHI: It's a bad look to go, in this context in particular.

JOSH: Right!

HRISHI: It is cute, though, that before he finishes addressing them, they all just start making their plan.

JOSH: Mm-hmm. I do like that.

HRISHI: It's a nice "Let Bartlet be Bartlet" moment.

JOSH: Mm-hmm.

HRISHI: After that, we're now caught up with the timeline in terms of the very beginning of "Inauguration: Part One," the first scene where Ed and Larry are talking to the president about the order of the balls. The inaugural balls, not the snowballs or the Spaldeen balls.

JOSH: Very good. Nice ball work.

HRISHI: And this is a neat thing, and I want to know the answer to this. So the two parts of this episode were directed by two different people.

JOSH: Oh! I had the same thought! I know what you are going to posit, or question. Yeah.

HRISHI: Part one was directed by Christopher Misiano, and as you mentioned earlier in this episode, this one was directed by Lesli Linka Glatter. But in both episodes, there this a shot of -- there is a scene, rather, of the president walking down the hall and having this discussion with Ed, Larry, and C.J. In part one, we stay with them, it continues and they keep talking about this, and here we go to that scene again, but it's been shot a second time, and it's not just the footage from part one [cross talk] replayed.

JOSH: [cross talk] New angles.

HRISHI: Yeah. They've reshot it, and the camera now lets them pass by and then follows Toby. And so they have to shoot that scene a second time. And so I wonder: did they shoot that scene with two different directors, and do it twice? Did they do them back to back for the sake of continuity? I'm just curious how that worked.

JOSH: My assumption in watching it was that Christopher Misiano had directed and shot extra footage that was used in Lesli Linka Glatter's episode. Maybe I have to go back and look if you're suggesting that it was more significant than I realize. I pondered the same thing, and I assumed it was, looking ahead, to the second part and thinking, "We'll want extra [cross talk] and different coverage that we'll use."

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

HRISHI: Yeah. I guess that makes sense, especially since Chris Misiano is also one of the producers; he can sort of think ahead in that way and say Ok I'm doing this for my episode but I'm also covering this for the next director's episode.

JOSH: I mean, the expense of going back to reshoot a scene you've already done, and it doesn't seem likely to me that that's what they did, but yeah.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: But it calls for the kind of planning that we've learned doesn't happen often in *The West Wing*, so I think this is a situation where they had to plot out and have a little more foresight than perhaps generally they had the luxury of doing.

HRISHI: Yeah. But I really like that this scene, basically the two versions of the scene, are practically different. They're very similar but they actually shot it twice and then said, "And this time we're going to have this camera -- it's going to trail off and the camera is going to go here." There's still no cut. They stuck to *The West Wing's* commitment of these long shots and long takes. But it would have been very easy to do the same thing and just reuse the footage and then just cut to another place, but this is a really clever and subtle way, because, frankly, by the time you get to this part of the episode, you're so far, especially if you're watching it the way

we're watching it and the way it originally aired, there's a week in between the two episodes. And then --

JOSH: They could have gotten away with a shortcut.

HRISHI: Yeah, absolutely. It would be fun to recut this episode. It would take away a lot of the art of it, but it would be really fun to see a cut of these two episodes told in chronological order.

JOSH: Ah. Like they did with *Godfather*, Parts One and Two.

HRISHI: Exactly. [cross talk] Just like that.

JOSH: [cross talk] The inauguration day saga.

HRISHI: Yeah, exactly. I would like to watch that.

JOSH: Interesting.

HRISHI: And then that would allow for the possibility of seeing these two scenes back to back. I tried to do something similar, but even just switching from one episode to the other on Netflix, it was hard to retain, they were so close that it was hard to retain the specific details.

JOSH: That would be fascinating actually. That's a great idea. It would be interesting to do. Did I miss something, or is there a weird non sequitur to Charlie's suddenly invoking Zoe's name?

[West Wing episode 4.15 excerpt]

JOSH: Charlie, who are you?

CHARLIE: I love Zoe, and I must have her back.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: What is he talking about? How does Zoe figure into the end where he keeps talking about getting back his lost love, and it seems to come out of nowhere, or am I forgetting something?

HRISHI: Well, he's been, he's got his own Beach Boys song going on.

JOSH: Right, I know it's obviously on his mind.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Why's he talking about it in the snowball scene? [chuckles]

HRISHI: [chuckles] I think there is a little bit of a jump that we aren't witness to where he goes from mild jealousy to, like, zealous fervor. He goes from jealous to zealous.

JOSH: Nice. In this – there’s a whole romantic adventure he’s part of, is it like everybody’s acknowledgement that Josh and Donna are in love and [chuckles] this is like a romantic romp they’re part of? They’re just romantic wingmen? West Wingmen?

HRISHI: I think that – I mean, Charlie knows exactly what’s going on, because the Beach Boys line is in response to Josh mentioning Jack Reese. Josh says Jack Reese got transferred and Charlie says, “I’ve got my own Beach Boys song going on.”

JOSH: Right. So he knows what’s what.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I think they all do!

HRISHI: He’s just drafting on Josh and Donna’s romance. Trying to build up some momentum to take on John Paul.

JOSH: Fair enough.

[West Wing episode 4.15 excerpt]

CHARLIE: Because he may be good-looking and rich and well-schooled and French royalty, you know, and live basically in a castle but ... oh, God.

TOBY: This is what I’ve been telling you. Get in the car.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I like that, we haven’t witnessed it, but that Toby’s whole part in this thing has been to tell Charlie this guy is better than you in all ways, so give it up. [JOSH laughs][cross talk] Thanks, Toby! It’s a good antidote to the scene earlier, where Toby tells Leo so sweetly how much he appreciates Will and wants to promote him. Y’know, just so you don’t think things have gone crazy.

JOSH: [cross talk] Right.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: He comes back and tells Charlie, “This is what I’ve been telling you.”

[JOSH laughs]

HRISHI: Actually, my favorite part about this scene between Leo and Toby when Toby says he wants to promote Will, is Leo’s reaction to it. Leo’s face, even after the conversation ends and Toby walks away, Leo is like beaming! He’s so proud of Toby for having warm feelings towards

another human being and then expressing them and wanting to do something tangible about them.

JOSH: That is sweet.

HRISHI: Yeah. Oh, I had one other thought about Donnie's motel Bible.

JOSH: Oh, ok.

HRISHI: It reminded me a little bit of "Guns Not Butter." Like, I liked the idea that, despite how in the past things have been, you know, inaugurations have been done with this gravitas and, y'know, ceremonial importance of which Bible to use and all that stuff, going with Donnie's, the Bible from the motel, reminded me of Donna's line, the story that she tells Josh.

[West Wing episode 4.12 excerpt]

DONNA: The Lord give me health and strength. We'll steal the rest.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Somebody stole that Bible from a motel! [JOSH laughs] And put it in the Library of Congress.

JOSH: Oh, very good!

HRISHI: And when they needed it, they called on it.

JOSH: I like that.

HRISHI: The fact that that quote starts with "*Oh Lord, give me health and strength and we'll steal the rest,*" it just feels...

JOSH: Good tie-in. Very good. Of a piece.

HRISHI: Here's a question: how does Danny know that Josh got a Fulbright scholarship and that he taped it to his forehead? Did you catch that line?

JOSH: Yes, I just took that as an implied intimacy that we had not, heretofore, known. If that's English.

HRISHI: [laughs] To me, it made it sound like they were saying that these guys knew each other in college.

JOSH: Perhaps, yeah. They certainly seem to go way back. It doesn't make sense? It doesn't track?

HRISHI: That doesn't fly! Because Josh went to Harvard, and Danny Concannon went to, do you remember?

JOSH: God, no.

HRISHI: He went to Notre Dame.

JOSH: Oh!

HRISHI: So, I don't know how he knows what Josh did when he was a Fulbright Scholar.

JOSH: I just took it to mean they are better friends than we realized, but I don't know.

HRISHI: Yeah, I do like the bond that the two of them share. But maybe Amy Gardner told Danny about it.

JOSH: Ok. Who's Amy Gardner? Just kidding.

HRISHI: [laughs] Ok, let's take a quick break, and when we come back, we'll speak to Gene Sperling.

[interlude music]

HRISHI: Joining us now to talk about this episode is Gene Sperling. Mr. Sperling, thank you so much for speaking with us.

GENE: Well, thanks for having me. *The West Wing* played a pretty big role in my life. It's where I met my wife, Allison Abner, so it's special to me in many ways.

HRISHI: I definitely wanted to ask you about that part of it.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: But first maybe let's talk about the story here in the two-part inauguration episode, and how you contributed to what the plot is.

GENE: I'd say, of my four years, this was the most meaningful, because of the seriousness of the subject matter. But it happened when I was talking with a writer on the show named David Gerken, who I'd known from Washington D.C., and on a particular day as we were batting around -- I believe he had started to read Samantha Power's book on genocide, and I had just been reading about a recent evacuation of missionary children from some violence in Africa, and it led to the following story idea, which was that Bill Clinton always and still does feel his greatest regret in public service was that the United States government and the other Western governments did not move fast enough in Rwanda. And so we started asking, what would it be like to do a story the other way, where the United States had in fact intervened in a country where there was no real security interest, it was almost purely humanitarian: what would that discussion be like? What would the ramifications of people dying be? And so that was really the

idea. And I will say that it's not often when you come up with story ideas that Aaron Sorkin would ever take anything precisely as you did it, but the one exception was we came up with the idea that, which was in the previous episode, that the president would be sitting with who we imagined to be Bishop Tutu.

[West Wing episode 4.14 excerpt]

BARTLET: Your Excellency. I got a very sketchy intelligence report on the violence in the capital about an hour ago.

ARCHBISHOP ZAKE KINTA: The violence isn't limited to Bitanga, sir. It's spread to the countryside.

BARTLET: I didn't know that.

ARCHBISHOP ZAKE KINTA: May I ask you something, sir, with all due respect, please?

BARTLET: Yes.

ARCHBISHOP ZAKE KINTA: If mass genocide had broken out in a small European country, would your intelligence briefing this morning have been quite so sketchy?

BARTLET: No.

[end excerpt]

GENE: So I think I will always hold onto that as the one thing that Aaron Sorkin ever used rather precisely.

JOSH: Straight from you, yeah.

GENE: But that really was the concept, which was to take on this very serious issue, you know, have the White House staffers debate the moral issues, and then imagine the fallout the other way, if they did what I think most of us, including President Clinton, wished the United States had done.

HRISHI: Let's go back for a second, step away from the episode, and go back to 1994 when the Rwandan genocide was actually taking place and your role in the Clinton administration. Do you remember that moment in your tenure when you were deputy director of the National Economic Council at that time, I think?

GENE: No, I don't. The fact was if you were on the domestic policy team, you really didn't have great insight. And, look, the reality is that it all happened in about 90 days. And y'know, I think that the administration has done a good job of not pointing fingers at each other, but I think it's safe to say that President Clinton never quite felt that he had been brought up to speed with the degree of urgency that he would have wanted. This was not a case where, twenty years later, somebody regrets what they've done. This is a case of something that happened at horrifying

speed and when it was clear what had happened and the depth of the terror, there was almost instantaneous deep regret, at least from the president. And as you know, only a few years later, March 25, 1998, he goes to Rwanda...

JOSH: Mm-hmm.

GENE: And apologizes, and that's actually when they also start the early detection for genocides. I think that the fact that so much horror could happen at such blinding speed was a wakeup call to the global community that this is not something that could go through some of the normal slower processes of foreign policy decision-making.

JOSH: I was just going to ask whether there was a sense also that the Clinton administration was hesitant after what had happened in Somalia a few years earlier, in the battle of Mogadishu, in terms of acting.

GENE: I think in his heart of hearts, President Clinton probably thinks that there was a certain number of people who felt they were protecting him, that this was -- that the so-called Black Hawk Down had been an example of what it looked like when you, y'know, went into these very difficult situations that had been very difficult -- this was just a year later, so I think that in some ways, that that likely contributed throughout the levels, but again I don't want to play a foreign policy expert. Particularly at that time, I was the deputy just for domestic policy, but it had a deep scarring effect on President Clinton. I think it's probably safe to say that his aggressiveness almost -- the United States' solo aggressiveness in Bosnia later --

JOSH: Mm-hmm.

GENE: Was no doubt motivated by him not wanting to be part of letting something like this happen a second time.

HRISHI: There's one moment in the episode where C.J. is in the briefing room.

[West Wing episode 4.15 excerpt]

C.J.: The problem is the convention distinguishes between acts of genocide and genocide.

KATIE: It distinguishes between acts of genocide and genocide?

C.J.: It does. Mark?

MARK: How many acts of genocide constitute a genocide?

C.J.: I don't know.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I think this is also taken directly from an experience within the Clinton Administration that in June of 1994, that spokespeople from the administration were also told to represent it as “acts of genocide” as opposed to genocide.

GENE: No, that was definitely one of the things that I contributed in, and I was very lucky to help develop that story, but I was often in a consultant role, and so a lot of times what you were doing was feeding kind of interesting notes that you knew would have dramatic effect, and I think I described -- it was a rather infamous state department briefing, which again happened years later under the Bush administration almost exactly, where the spokesperson is going to, whether it's “acts of genocide” or “genocide.” It's interesting that when Clinton goes to Rwanda in 1998, he specifically refers to that. He says we did not act quickly enough once the killing began, we should have not allowed the refugee camps to become safe havens for the killers, and we did not immediately call these crimes by their rightful name: genocide. So that was actually part of his apology in 1998, and so that was definitely a case where C.J. is very much living out something that at least the state department's spokesperson had done in June of 1994. In President Clinton's view, he almost immediately, upon realizing the depth of the terror, regretted it and in fact really tried to figure out if the Western countries had acted quicker, if the United States had supporting the peacekeeping mission, how much of the killing could have been prevented. And his belief is a third, which is not a small amount. That could have been as many as 300,000 people, so this was very serious.

HRISHI: There is another little mention in this episode too, an echo from the Clinton administration.

[West Wing episode 4.15 excerpt]

WILL: I don't know if this is true. I heard once that you convinced the president to let you rewrite a section of the State of the Union with less than 24 hours to go. It was the second year, and everybody was a Republican, whether they were or not. And the people at the DNC had convinced him to include the line “the era of big government is over.” And you couldn't live with it.

[end excerpt]

GENE: Yes. I think that I probably, for better or for worse, was responsible for giving them a bit of insight into that. No, there was -- President Clinton had, as I think Michael Waldman and others, who was one of the president's chief speechwriters, has chronicled, the initial line was “the era of big government is over, but so shall be the era of every man for himself.” And in one of those regrettable notions, there was an objection to saying “every man for himself.”

JOSH: Hmm.

GENE: And actually, in the TV show, they mention “mankind.”

[West Wing episode 4.15 excerpt]

JOSH: C.J. says there are three references to “mankind.” Can we make it “humankind”?

TOBY: Yeah.

[end excerpt]

GENE: And I think there were people who regretted that we didn't fix that problem that way, and that instead the line famously became...

[Clinton's State of the Union Address (1996) excerpt]

PRESIDENT CLINTON: The era of big government is over.

[end excerpt]

GENE: And obviously President Clinton believed very deeply in the role of government, but he was responding to the fact that the country had turned against him in the '94 election, but [chuckles] it did seem to spark Aaron putting in a moment where when they're doing a fact check, somebody says, "Can we change mankind to humankind?", and maybe that was Aaron's way, after hearing the story, of saying, "Why didn't they just keep the line in and say 'every human for themselves'?"

JOSH: Isn't there still in the actual State of the Union, in Clinton's '96 State of the Union, isn't there a second line says something about not going back to every citizen having defense, or citizens having to fend for themselves? I feel like there is a second strangely less famous line that does temper what he had to say.

GENE: You know, listen, I obviously think that people are, y'know, a little rough on the president on that one line. There's no question overall the State of the Union even then was a defense of government, and you know, he ends up essentially saving his presidency by saving the social safety net and what for many of those of us who worked with him thought was his finest moment because really what happened at the end was that it started to look like there could be a deal worked out where we would win on Medicare, but we would allow Medicaid to be block grants and cut deeply.

JOSH: Mm-hmm.

GENE: And he famously says, in that final meeting, where I was in the Cabinet room as it happens, he calls Dick Armey, "if you want to have your Medicaid policy," he points to Bob Dole, "you better put somebody else in my chair, I don't care if it all comes down around me, I don't care if I go to 5% in the polls, I'm not taking your Medicaid budget." So, you know, it was a tough year. The country had gone very conservative. We had lost both the House and the Senate. You know, that line would have been better cushioned by a more memorable line that, as you say, might have been in there, but just wasn't done tightly and strongly enough that it was remembered as cushioning "the era of big government is over" line.

HRISHI: Right. It doesn't sit with it as part of the soundbite.

GENE: No, but I think Josh is right that he did very clearly make clear there that there's still a very strong belief in an activist government, and says so strongly within that speech. But, y'know, you live and die by your soundbites.

JOSH: Right.

GENE: And that soundbite stuck alone.

JOSH: It also goes to one of Aaron's great themes, language matters. That's such a *West Wing* focus in his writing.

GENE: No, and there's no question -- both him and President Obama spent so much time on their States of the Union, and worked very hard. And that was one of the things that Aaron really wanted me to brief all of the writers about. Just the whole process, how long it took, the pizza boxes, and the all-nighters, and the back and forth, and the type of debate that went on. And I think you do get a glimpse of that in this episode. You know, it comes down around Kundu and foreign policy, but the reality is that these speeches are an action-forcing event. And they do force presidents to figure out what their priorities are. Later, in 1998, President Clinton used a single line that worked greatly to his advantage. A surplus was building up, which should have been good news, except with an all-Republican Congress, there was growing momentum that they were going to take the surplus and give it all in the tax cuts to very well-off Americans, and President Clinton kind of went out there, and he said, "We have a big Social Security problem, and so we should save Social Security first." And I was part of writing that first line, and, believe me, I was not as eloquent as Bill Clinton or Aaron Sorkin. And President Clinton shortened it down to just "save Social Security first," and Gingrich didn't know what to do, so he stood up and then they all stood up. And that was a moment where a State of the Union made policy. Suddenly, the Republicans seemed to have agreed that we shouldn't use the surplus for tax cuts until Social Security was fixed. Now, they tried to back out of it later, but that was the moment where capturing that one sentence just right had kind of a big impact on policy in those last couple of years of the Clinton White House.

HRISHI: Hmm. Were you there at the Joint Session when he said that? Did you get to witness that in person?

GENE: Oh yes. I was at all eight of the States of the Union.

HRISHI: Stepping away from the episode a little bit, can you tell us about how you met Allison Abner through the show?

GENE: So the story starts that of course we all, all of us *West Wing* actual people, were smitten with the show *The West Wing*. I had actually talked with Tom Schlamme and a few of the other people when they toured the West Wing on a Sunday before the show had been on the air. I didn't think much of it at the time. But we were absolutely fascinated with the show that was basically seen to be trying to emulate our lives. Though, as I always said, we didn't walk as fast, we weren't as funny, and we weren't as good-looking, but other than that, it was not too far [cross talk], too far off.

JOSH: [cross talk] Except when I joined the cast. I helped close the gap. [laughs]

GENE: [laughs] No, no. Bill Clinton invited some of the actors, I think the whole cast, to the State of the Union party for his final State of the Union, and that day I met Brad Whitford and Dulé Hill and Richard Schiff and John Spencer, many others. Dulé and Brad probably stayed in the most contact with me, and Brad is so into politics and policy that he would constantly be sending me policy ideas. [JOSH laughs] Which made me think that if Brad were sending me policy ideas, this opened up the possibility that I could send him an idea for a show.

JOSH: [cross talk] Fair enough.

GENE: [cross talk] And so sure enough, I worked very hard on a story that was one of the main stories that they took and actually was one of the main stories in the episode “Arctic Radar.” It was about whether there was hypocrisy in us allowing a top woman military person to be discharged for having an affair with a male subordinate when obviously that had happened so many times in reverse without such consequences. In any case, when I pitched that idea to Brad, he showed it to Tom Schlamme, and they invited me to interview to be a consultant. So the day that I arrived for my interview, I got a call just as I was coming in saying that Aaron Sorkin could not meet with me. Which I found a little disappointing as I had flown from Washington D.C. to Los Angeles, but they quickly informed me that it wasn’t his fault. They said, “Don’t worry. We have arranged a good day for you still, and you’re going to meet the writers in the commissary at Warner Bros.” And I walked in there, it was very exciting, I kept seeing actors from the TV show *E.R.*, and, [JOSH laughs] sure enough, there was a table with a group of people around it. And I sat down there and Brad was on my right, and I introduced myself to the writer on the left, and that was Allison Abner. And that was the first time I laid eyes on my wife.

JOSH: And how soon after did you start working for the show?

GENE: I was signed up fairly quickly. They were energized to make it work, both because they liked the story I put forward. Also, Lawrence O’Donnell was now leaving to do his show *Mister Sterling*, and so I think they were looking to get a little stronger on the Washington side. So I joined right away. Y’know, I was very enthused about it, and they worked out a contract with me where I’d be a consultant, but where I would have a chance to be a contributing writer as well, and so I spent a lot of time. Allison and I had to decide when to let people know about our situation. At our wedding, Kevin Falls, who ran the writers room, gave a toast at one point claiming that he was the first to know when [JOSH laughs] Allison had insisted that she had to talk to me on a very intricate foreign policy story for the show, and Kevin kept saying to her, “Well, you know, Allison, Gene’s a really good guy, but I’m pretty sure he knows *nothing* about that area of foreign policy.” And he said when Allison kept arguing that she thought it would be very important for us to talk together, he felt like that was his first clue.

[JOSH laughs]

GENE: So yeah, the last time I saw Aaron Sorkin, he asked me about Allison. He said there’s two really great lasting things about our show: he said residuals and your marriage.

[ALL laugh]

HRISHI: That's fantastic.

JOSH: That's wonderful.

HRISHI: Is there more about this episode that we haven't asked you about that we ought to be asking you about?

GENE: What I appreciate so much about *The West Wing* and I think why it has such a positive impact on people was not that it showed staffers or a president who were flawless, who didn't make mistakes, or who were never political, but I think you saw the heaviness that weighed on people, the sense of responsibility. And so what I appreciated so much about this episode is that you see -- you know, whether it's in Josh's character Will coming in, or Toby, John Spencer -- you see the heaviness weighing, this big moral issue weighing, the fact that American young men and women will die, if you do that. I feel that -- I can't speak for this White House [chuckles], [JOSH chuckles] but I think in previous White Houses, people I've known, Democrat or Republican, at least before this one, all went in with that sense of seriousness and responsibility. And you see it in Josh's Will Bailey character, and it's one I have felt quite often, which is when your conscience is telling you you must speak out and you already have once or twice, but there's still a third or fourth time. And when does that speaking out on your individual conscience start to impede the ability of a core group of people to work together, if you're constantly raising the issues. And there's no real right answer.

JOSH: Mm-hmm.

GENE: If everybody fights for their cause to the very end and never accepts where the president's going, then you can't function. On the other hand, it can be hard to live with yourself if you feel like you had one more shot to maybe turn a decision the right way and you didn't take it. And I think you see that in Will Bailey's character. He's fighting for his conscience, but he's on the verge of being so uncooperative that he's not going to get asked back. And part of the nice part about this is that in the end of the day, Bartlet recognizes that that's a virtue about him, that he wants people who are going to speak their heart and speak their mind.

JOSH: Well, well-said.

HRISHI: Thank you so much.

JOSH: Thank you for your contributions to the podcast and for your contributions to *The West Wing* in general and to these two really inspiring episodes in particular.

HRISHI: Yeah, and not bad on the Economic Council work as well -- that was pretty good, too. [JOSH chuckles]

GENE: Thanks, and I do want to make sure that my co-writer David Gerken gets the full shout-out, because we did pitch this story together and we both share the story credit and we were partners through and through on the Kundu story.

HRISHI: For sure. Thanks you so much.

JOSH: Thanks, Gene, so much. This was great.

GENE: All right. Take care.

JOSH: And that's our show. Another one in the can, Hrishi.

HRISHI: True. Marching ever closer to the grave.

JOSH: Wow! Bring me down. Buzzkill. [HRISHI laughs] But! You can follow us. As we've told you before. And why don't you? I don't see our numbers exploding. Follow us! Do it this time! Follow me on Twitter. Follow Hrishi on Twitter. Follow the show on Twitter.

HRISHI: I get a little sad about the fact that The West Wing Weekly has more followers than I do.

JOSH: That doesn't seem right!

HRISHI: You follow The West Wing Weekly, but you don't like the show enough to follow both of its hosts.

JOSH: Come on! Three clicks, people!

[BOTH chuckle]

JOSH: Three clicks. Do it. We're also on Instagram and Facebook. Between now and the release of next episode, you can listen to Hrishi's other award-winning podcast, *Song Exploder*. You can catch me on *Scandal*, ABC 9:00/8:00 central. And what else can you do? You can follow Gene Sperling.

HRISHI: Gene Sperling is on Twitter at @genebsperling. It's true. Gene always be Sperling.

JOSH: So true. The West Wing Weekly is a proud member of Radiotopia, a curated collection of extraordinary cutting-edge podcasts. You can check out all the great offerings at Radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: And if you're in a following mood, because of Josh chiding you to, you can follow Radiotopia at @radiotopia.

JOSH: Yeah, that would be a total five clicks if you want to include Gene and Radiotopia. But do the first three anyway. [chuckles]

HRISHI: Thanks to Margaret. Thanks to Zach.

JOSH: Of course!

HRISHI: And thanks to you, Josh.

JOSH: Thank you too, Hrishi. Is this a new thing? [chuckles]

HRISHI: I don't know. Do you like it?

JOSH: Nope.

[BOTH laugh]

HRISHI: Then yes it is.

JOSH: Ok.

HRISHI: Ok.

GENE: What's next?

[Outro Music]