

The West Wing Weekly
6.02: "The Birnam Wood"
Guest: Fmr. Ambassador Jacob Walles

[Intro Music]

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

JOSH: And I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: And today we're talking about "The Birnam Wood". It's the second episode of season 6.

JOSH: It was written by John Wells, it was directed by Alex Graves. I think, as was the first episode. Same team.

HRISHI: Exactly.

JOSH: Wells and Graves. And it first aired on October 27th, 2004.

HRISHI: Coming up later we're going to be joined by Jacob Walles, who's the former ambassador to Tunisia. Although more relevant to this episode, he worked extensively on the Middle East peace process and Arab-Israeli issues for almost 20 years. And he was at the Camp David summit in 2000, which this whole storyline is really based around. Josh, I was wondering, what did you think of the title for this episode, "The Birnam Wood"?

JOSH: Mmm! We're going to start with that! I don't... know.

[laughter]

JOSH: Well, I mean, I'm not sure I know the relevance. Clearly it gets, well, I mean... if we were to zip ahead to the end, we see Leo fall in the woods.

HRISHI: Mm-hm.

JOSH: Birnam Wood being a reference to The Scottish Play.

HRISHI: Is that what you call it?

JOSH: Have we discussed the superstition? Didn't we, way back when?

HRISHI: I don't know.

JOSH: I feel like there's a *West Wing* reference to it. I don't know. There's a classic theatre taboo against uttering the name of that play. I think I've just figured a good workaround though. There's a character in it called Macbeth. [laughter] I can say that, it's ok, I'm just saying the character's name.

HRISHI: I think the superstition is that you can't say it while you're in the theatre.

JOSH: Perhaps. But I consider my office not only the place where my cats [expletive deleted], but I also consider it a theatre.

HRISHI: Right. For you, all the world's a stage.

JOSH: That's right! So, anyway... there's a reference. I guess the witches warn Macbeth that he will finally be defeated when Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane. And then ultimately, of course - the classic finish, classic finale - the soldiers that are coming for Macbeth are camouflaging themselves with branches. And Birnam Wood in fact does come to Dunsinane, and Macbeth is vanquished.

HRISHI: Right, he thinks that he's safe and secure, because there's no way a forest is going to come up the hill. So really I think by naming this episode "The Birnam Wood", what I thought before I started watching it was that this was going to be an episode about prophecy.

JOSH: Mmm. I thought there was going to be some sort of... yeah, something clever. [laughter] But I kept waiting for it.

HRISHI: But by the end of the episode, I'm not sure why this episode was titled "The Birnam Wood".

JOSH: I think because it had woods in it... and we see a lot of woods.

HRISHI: I'll throw this out to our listeners, if you have a theory as to why this episode was called "The Birnam Wood". Or perhaps listener, you worked on *The West Wing* as a writer and you could let us know what your thought process was, feel free to leave a comment on our website or better yet, tweet it at us so I'll actually see it because I still don't read the comments on the website because they're usually too mean.

JOSH: Boom. Now if I think I'm finding the actual quote - "Fear not 'til Birnam Wood do come to Dunsinane". Oh, you know, Zach answered a question I had from the last episode. I wondered, what with the addition - what with Mary McCormick do come to the main title sequence - whether I had lost time. And Zach, being the precision guy that he is, he measured it for me. And my personal screen time in the opening credits plummeted from 3.19 seconds to 2.84 seconds. So I lost just over a third of a second of screen time, thanks to Mary. Thanks, Mary.

HRISHI: We grieve for you all.

JOSH: And I suspect the other actors lost a little time too.

HRISHI: And Josh, I have bad news for you.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: I have watched ahead, and I can tell you that your screen time during the opening titles is going to be reduced even further.

JOSH: Is that true?

HRISHI: Yeah. They end up squeezing so many people into the opening credits. I've now, since we last spoke, I have watched a dozen more episodes.

JOSH: Have you?

HRISHI: I have.

JOSH: Why?

HRISHI: I can't put it down.

JOSH: See, I won't watch unless I have to.

HRISHI: I really am loving season six.

JOSH: You're hooked! Oh, that's awesome. That's great, that's good to know.

HRISHI: Plus I spent 11½ hours on planes in the last...since the last time I saw you.

JOSH: Ohh. You know what the funny part is, that should bring you up to my level. We should be at par now all knowing the same things but instead you know all the [expletive deleted] that I have no memory of. [laughter] I have no idea what's coming. Little things here and there that I remember, but...you're once again the expert on the show. Congratulations.

HRISHI: I'm excited. I'm really excited. For anyone who has any kind of vested interest in my own watching progress, I can tell you - I'm really, really excited about season six.

JOSH: That *is* exciting.

HRISHI: But back to the episode at hand. Let's start off by talking more about Leo.

JOSH: Sure. This was a...I mean, this was one of those situations where knowing the reality of what happened and that John Spencer would pass away some, I think, 14 months after this episode from a heart attack made it particularly painful for me to watch.

HRISHI: Yeah. That is part of why I wanted to ask you about the Birnam Wood as it pertains to prophecy because there was something that is obviously not part of the intent when creating this episode that this episode has taken on because of that. You know, there *is* this sense of oh my gosh, they've given John Spencer this scene that has now retrospectively given people this very painful set of images to correspond with his actual death.

JOSH: Yes. By the way, I forgot, I *did* have a thin theory on the Birnam Wood title. It's this prophecy of something that couldn't possibly happen - like Mid-East peace - it's never going to happen, and then it sort of sneaks up on you somehow.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And maybe that was why they went with it.

HRISHI: It is a strange choice though, right? Because Birnam Wood really is this symbol of defeat, symbol of destruction.

JOSH: Absolutely.

HRISHI: And you would think that Mid-East peace would be represented by something the opposite of it.

JOSH: No, it's not a great fit, it's not a great analogy, but...I think maybe it's something in there. But back to John. That scene - well, we're going all out of order - but the scene where he sort of tacitly resigns is painful. First of all, just physically, John - he looks haggard, he looks drained, he looks bad. There's a quick mention, I think at one point Josh says to him:

[West Wing Episode 6.02 excerpt]

LEO: Find out what the president needs you to-

JOSH [interrupting]: You sure you're ok?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And physically, John really inhabits the role. There is something, you know, it's hard for us to tell if there's a physical element or it's just emotional, or it's a cross between the two, it's a combo. And then there's some very cleverly placed sort of sweat on the right side of his face during this scene that augurs bad things to come. It's all very well done and uncomfortable to watch.

HRISHI: Yeah. Maybe *that's* what the Birnam Wood is, really...I mean, what I love about this episode is that while, on one hand, there's this historic summit and all these parties are brought together to try and broker some kind of peace accord, at the heart of what this show is about - which are these few individuals who kind of are trying to hold the government together - there's this fracturing at its most vital core.

JOSH: Mm-hm.

HRISHI: And that's something that we *never* would've seen coming, right? I mean, if you watched, say, the first four seasons only of *The West Wing*, you would never really figure out how they could ever get to a place where Leo and the president would be at odds. To the level where Leo would offer his resignation and the president would accept it.

JOSH: That's true. You know, I had that thought during this episode that whatever you think of season five and the direction of the show, we've been through a lot with these characters. You know, I think the standard wisdom for success in television is: "If they like it, give them more of it." Don't experiment, don't develop too much. Let the characters be the characters that people love, let the relationships be the relationships that people love. And I give John and company credit for where they've really taken the show a long way from where we began. So for some that's a positive, and for some that's a negative. But we're really in it, and we're in the thick of it in a difficult way in the middle of this episode.

HRISHI: Well that's the thing. The ratings were down, and that was really a mandate for them to change things up. They weren't going to keep giving people the thing that they were used to, because the people didn't seem to be as interested in it.

JOSH: Well that's a chicken-and-egg thing. I don't know if... I couldn't tell you exactly what correlated to what when. I don't know if the ratings started to fall while the show was still where it started... you know what I mean?

HRISHI: Well, they did start to fall in season four a little bit. I mean that's... that was part of what ended up precipitating Aaron Sorkin's departure too. Or at least it started the conversations you know, these difficult conversations that he ended up having with the powers that be. He had lost some of the freedom to do whatever he wanted in the glory days of seasons one and two.

JOSH: I guess. I guess I always forget whether it was money or ratings, I guess it was a combo of both.

HRISHI: Right. The ratings weren't there to sustain how much money was being spent.

JOSH: Well, I laughed at the - I touched on this last episode too - the "Previously on..." in this episode played like an action movie trailer satire from *The Simpsons*. It's just like... it's really loud and the car is blowing up and it's twirling over, and it just... like, what show is *this* previously for?

HRISHI: Leo says to the president:

[West Wing Episode 6.02 excerpt]

LEO: My counsel is no longer of use to you. Perhaps it's time-

PRESIDENT BARTLET [interrupting]: So if I disagree with your advice, you have to threaten me.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: It was a salty thing to say.

HRISHI: Right. But Leo's the one who brings it up, Leo's the one who's saying "Ok, well maybe it's time for me to go." But then his reaction to the president finally, actually accepting his offer is one of shock. But *he's* the one who suggested it.

JOSH: Yes. That reminds me of John Wells' version of how Aaron and - I guess Aaron and Tommy - ended up leaving the show, which we can link to that video if we haven't before. In which he has a moment with Aaron where Aaron says to him "What just happened in there?", and he says "Well, I think you just quit the show." And it's a little bit what that Bartlet-Leo McGarry moment is like. He does have that look kind of, sort of bemused look on his face - it's like Leo, you just resigned. Dude. That's it.

HRISHI: And Josh comes in again to say, "Are you sure you're ok?". Leo is definitely not ok. But he's also frustrated. I guess his advice just keeps getting rebuffed and rebuffed, but starting with the last few episodes of season five, we saw that Leo's attitude towards the president seemed to be changing. I don't think the president has fundamentally changed his views on Leo. I think Leo has just been getting sick of it, and then the president has benched him as a result. But I don't think the president wants to fire him or anything like this, I think he's more acquiescing to what Leo seems to want.

JOSH: Yeah. I read it the same way. This feels like such a fundamental mistake from Leo's point of view that it's not just an issue of "he won't take my advice on this thing," as if he would dig in on anything else. It's just this is legacy, this is decades - as he sees it - of US military involvement in what something he considers a folly. It's just on a different level from anything that has come before and you can kind of see why or how Leo couldn't countenance it.

HRISHI: I don't actually. I don't see why-

JOSH [interrupting]: No?

HRISHI: Yeah, why Leo is so against it. It's not that I can't see why *someone* would be against it. But I can't see why Leo would be against it so vehemently. You know, Leo got behind the new doctrine for the use of force, right? The president said "We're for freedom of religion everywhere. We're for freedom from persecution for-" you know, all these things. And they were going to set out a plan - an ambitious plan, the biggest change since the Marshall Plan for how America was going to use force. So here they are really acting on that plan, right? I mean, it's not like they're going to liberate a people from tyrants from the point of view of the Israelis, but you know from the Palestinians, they might... the Palestinians might feel that way. In any case, the idea of the 20,000 troops being committed to act as peacekeepers once Kate's plan is suggested, it doesn't seem like it's out of realm with the Bartlet Doctrine for the use of force overseas. And Leo is a huge part of that architecture.

JOSH: I guess so. I guess so, he just seems to anticipate a Vietnam-like quagmire of never-ending military promises I guess.

HRISHI: I guess what I mean is, Leo says:

[West Wing Episode 6.02 excerpt]

LEO: This isn't a romp in the desert. You're committing American lives to something that may go on for decades.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Wouldn't he have had the same kind of objection to intervening in Kundu? Like Leo says, "We don't always know how it ends." I can't believe that he would disagree with the president to such an extent that he would quit over it when there have been other - you know, he's always pushing the president to be ambitious and dream big. I don't know, it seems...

JOSH: Well maybe that's why the moment plays out as it does and it was more a bluff that got called, I mean that... it was just how it felt a little bit to me, as we just discussed. It's kind of like, I think he was trying to leverage, as much as he could, the power that he has in their relationship by being as adamant as he could. But I don't think he expects it to end the way he does.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I think - you know, I guess we've seen for a while he just can't believe that he can't force the president's hand on this.

HRISHI: Yeah. I think you're right. What do you think about the scene following the confrontation? Leo walks off into the woods and he has the heart attack. What did you think of how that was shot and edited?

JOSH: Well, I think it's shot beautifully. I would love to hear, maybe we can get - one of these days, we've got to get Alex, we have about 92 questions for him. I'd love to talk about how they articulated what John would go through physically. Because there's even a smile in there after... somewhere in the middle after he has had what seems like maybe the initial phase of some sort of cardiac event. He seems to kind of recover from it as he's kind of stumbling through the woods, and he even smiles. There's something really weird about the moment, almost as if like "Ok, I *am* actually going to be ok." And then he has this, you know, incredibly huge spasm of a heart attack and goes down. It's very compelling and upsetting to watch.

HRISHI: I found the whole thing a little bit hard to track a little bit. Like those changes... you know, it's 2½ minutes long, that scene. And I think there are changes and moments and things that are happening with Leo that are internal to the point of being abstruse. And I like that, both in terms of his emotions, and in terms of his health. I don't know, it's a long time to watch someone have a heart attack.

JOSH: That's true. And it is painful. I thought it was interesting and affecting, because I agree, there's stuff about what's going on in his mind, and it starts to seem to take physicality in his body, then he seems to sort of... hits that kind of an oasis of something, either emotionally and physically, having gotten through something, and then it just takes him down. I also think there's almost like a military element to it, the way that it happens in

the forest and the woods. We've seen Leo shot down over Vietnam, so his story has had echoes of that. And then when they ultimately leave, and they leave on Marine One - well, the president leaves on Marine One, the rest are going to have to get a ride - but there's this sort of military element to the president's leaving Camp David and they've left a man down and they don't even know about it. The whole thing a little bit played out in my mind, and maybe because they made such a big deal out of it, as it's almost like - it feels like a little bit of [cross talk] a war, a military thing.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Like a soldier, yeah. That's interesting.

HRISHI: But my overall emotional reaction to this scene, I have to say, was a little bit marred by the length. You know, I was completely enraptured by the scene between Leo and the president. And then Leo goes off and then he starts sweating, and I was like, "oh my God, he's going to have a heart attack". Of course, I had not... the first time I had seen this episode recently, I didn't know exactly what was going to be coming in this one, or when or how it was going to play out. And then it goes on, and then it just kept going on and on, and by the end I was like "alright, enough already".

JOSH: It was operatic. I bought it. But I can understand your reaction.

HRISHI: Yeah, it was a little overcooked. They had me, and then they lost me a little bit. Just a little bit. I still really like this episode. Although the reasons why I like the episode actually are largely apart from this story altogether.

JOSH: What does that mean?

HRISHI: It's not a criticism of this stuff so much as I really love the way that the Israel-Palestine peace summit stuff was handled. There's actually very little dramatization in this episode in general. In a lot of ways, it really is taking that idea of "Oh, here's an intro course to Israel and Palestine", and then giving you the next lesson. I really appreciated how they dove into the specific topics that would have actually been discussed in a setting like this.

[West Wing Episode 6.02 excerpt]

FARAD: We want the right of return.

GALIT: We can't allow 3 million refugees the right to freely re-enter.

FARAD: Of course not! Since the 19th century, Zionist leaders have advocated a transfer of Arabs out of Palestine.

GALIT: We cannot accept an unlimited right of immigration.

KATE: Perhaps we should take a break.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And it isn't just a lecture. It isn't just "Isaac and Ishmael". It is dramatized enough that they are real characters whose motivations and performances you really believe, giving voice to these ideas. But it was to me like the heart of what I love about *The West Wing*, which is when it becomes an educational tool as well as an entertaining thing to watch.

JOSH: Yeah I was impressed watching it over again too for the first time in many, many years that they touched on right of return, as you say, and the refugee situation, and security for Israel, and borders and West Bank settlements, and Jerusalem... all the, I think, really major elements that really would have to be resolved for there to be Mid-East peace.

HRISHI: I think this would be a great time to introduce our guest, Ambassador Jacob Walles. Jacob Walles was stationed in the embassy in Tel Aviv from 1988 to 1991, and then stationed in Jerusalem from '96 to '98, and he was the head of the Israel desk from '98 to 2001. He was the US Consul General in Jerusalem and US Representative to the Palestinian Authority from 2005 to 2009, and he worked directly with Arafat, Barak, Abbas, Netanyahu, and Sharon during those years. And he was part of the peace negotiations at the Camp David summit in 2000.

JOSH: I think this makes him maybe slightly overqualified to join us on our podcast.

HRISHI [laughing]: Possibly. But we're so thrilled to have him. Ambassador Walles, thanks so much for joining us. Did you get a chance to watch this episode?

WALLES: I did. One of the fun things about doing this podcast is that I got to go back and watch a number of episodes that I haven't seen for many, many years. So yes, I did watch it.

JOSH: So you watched the show, you were a fan originally?

WALLES: I was a fan back in the day. I used to watch it regularly. I haven't watched any of the episodes in many years. So as I said, it was fun to go back and see this one again.

JOSH: What was your general take on this episode and its credibility? It's a tall order I think, even taking on this subject over the course of two episodes but I'm curious to know how you think they did.

WALLES: I thought they did pretty well. What impressed me about this episode in particular was it was able to take a very complex and sensitive issue like Middle East peace and condense it into a TV format but to do that without dumbing it down. A lot of the discussion about the issues that were being negotiated - where they were talking about Jerusalem or refugees, or security issues - a lot of the terminology was similar to what we were using.

HRISHI: Could you tell us a little bit about your experience at the 2000 Camp David summit?

WALLES: Sure. In 2000, I was the director of Israel and Palestinian affairs at the State Department. The negotiations were a lot bigger than the way they were depicted in the show. The reality was you had the President and the Prime Minister and Chairman Arafat and very small delegations together at Camp David, which could only handle a small number of people. But the American staff, which I was in charge of, and the Palestinian staff and the

Israeli staff, were located at a different location about 5 miles away in a place called Emmitsburg, Maryland. So there was a lot going on there behind the scenes that was not just what was going on among the leaders at Camp David.

HRISHI: In this episode, before the summit even happens, there's a lot of doubt expressed across all sides that President Bartlet would even be able to get these people in the same place at the same time before the Camp David summit. Were you surprised that these people all came together?

WALLES: Well at the time, the negotiations had been going on since 1993 when the original Oslo agreement was signed and it was the point in the negotiations where they had to address the issues of Jerusalem and so on to see whether there was going to be a deal or not. The difficulty in 2000 was that the Israelis were in a hurry for internal political reasons to have the summit to find out whether they could actually do a deal with Arafat or not, and they wanted to resolve that question once and for all. The Palestinians were much more reluctant - they were not in a hurry. They were talking about having a series of meetings rather than one big summit where it was all sort of take it or leave it. President Clinton was in a situation where his term in office was coming to an end in a few months and he really wanted to do this deal if he could. There was also a lot of concern that the two sides, the Israelis and the Palestinians, were not ready for a summit - they were not ready to do a deal. But political strengths were forced, and as it turned out it was a very high-stakes gamble. In the end, in real life, there was no agreement. I think President Bartlet on the TV episode had a much better outcome.

JOSH: Well, one of the things that's depicted in this episode - it seems like the principals aren't even convinced that they're ready to dig in substantively.

[West Wing Episode 6.02 excerpt]

FARAD: We were being terrorised by Zionist troops who were threatening to torch every Arab village in the Galilee.

GALIT: You accepted the Partition Plan in '47. Not a single Palestinian would become a refugee.

KATE: I'm sorry, if I might interrupt...

FARAD: Palestinians were being massacred. Even Israeli historians admit this.

GALIT: It was war.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Does that kind of basic haggling happen in a negotiation setting?

WALLES: It didn't happen that much in Camp David primarily because the leaders didn't really meet with each other. The reality was, there was much more of President Clinton going back and forth between one side or another - taking a proposal to one side and seeing

what he could get, taking it to the other, and then going back and forth. But I have seen those kind of arguments in other meetings. I remember in particular a meeting - this was several years earlier, it was in the mid '90s - with the Israeli Foreign Minister, who at the time was Shimon Peres, and the Egyptian Foreign Minister, who at the time was Amr Moussa, with Warren Christopher, who was the Secretary of State. And I remember very clearly Peres and Moussa getting into an argument about who started the war in '67, who started the war in '56, who started the war in '48... and it was basically going over almost the way it was depicted in the TV episode.

HRISHI: Since you were working on these issues since '91, I'm just wondering what your personal feelings were at the start of Camp David.

WALLES: I think I was - overall I was optimistic about the chances for peace. Although I would have to say that in the summer of 2000 before the Camp David summit, I was on the side of we were moving too quickly and that we weren't fully prepared to bring the leaders together the way we did. But in general, I thought it was possible in those days to reach peace and that I was obviously committed to continue working on it as I did for more than 10 years afterwards. In retrospect, I think it's better that we tried than if we had not tried and we would probably to this day regret not having tried.

HRISHI: Do you feel like you see your own experience reflected at all in the episode that you watched? Is there a character that you saw and could relate to, or could you find your own experience of Camp David in some kind of version of what they told on screen?

WALLES: Not so much, and that was one of the gripes I had about the episode was that it basically left out the State Department. In the real Camp David, Josh and Toby and Will really had no direct role in what was going on. That said, a lot of the comments that came from people like Josh or Toby or the National Security Advisor or Will, they did sound real to me in terms of the way they talked about the issues. Also in the way they expressed - I mean, the different characters, but they expressed empathy for both the Israeli and Palestinian positions and... you know, the sense of victimhood, both sides would feel. So a lot of the commentary I think I could identify with, although I couldn't really identify directly with any of the characters because it didn't match up that well to the reality that we went through.

JOSH: Just a blatant attempt to try to keep our heroes on the show. When you reflect back on the post-Camp David years on why it went wrong, I know there's a - I guess a US and Israeli attempt to really paint Arafat as having walked away from heretofore never-seen concessions on the part of Ehud Barak. How do you view why the talks did not ultimately succeed?

WALLES: I think the reality is more complicated than that. Certainly you know, Arafat had some responsibility for the failure. But I think there was a lot of blame to be shared also on the Israeli side, but also with the American side. Barak was in a hurry, he wanted basically to put Arafat to a pass-fail test - either he would say yes or he would say no, and Israel would know once and for all is he a partner or not. Arafat was more interested in postponing a tough decision and continuing the negotiations. President Clinton had his own political timeline - as I said, his time in office was about to run out, so he was in a hurry as well to try

to give this one last chance. And finally, I had the sense that the preparations for the summit were rushed. There wasn't much of a plan for how to conduct these negotiations beyond sort of the initial steps of meeting with the two sides, bringing them together, dealing with the issues one by one, and dealing with Jerusalem last because it was the most difficult issue. That's one thing that was depicted quite well I thought in the episode.

[West Wing Episode 6.02 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: We punt on Jerusalem this morning, tackle it later - agreed?

[end excerpt]

WALLES: That was sort of exactly what our planning was going into Camp David, but it wasn't enough planning.

JOSH: So given the centrality of Jerusalem, I'm curious what you make of Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and what that would mean for any future potential peace negotiations.

WALLES: The key thing about what President Trump did was he recognized Jerusalem without there being a deal between Israel and the Palestinians. He basically circumvented the whole idea of a deal and just went ahead and recognized Jerusalem as being the capital of Israel and moving our embassy there. I think in doing it that way, he made it much more difficult now to reach an agreement than it would have been before. And in fact, he basically took this issue - and he said he did this - he took the issue of Jerusalem off the table, basically sided with Israel on this difficult issue. How could the Palestinians possibly go along with that kind of process? I mean, as we've seen over the past year, the Palestinians have reacted very negatively. So I think it was a very short-sighted decision. It would have made sense if it was part of a deal, but not in the way he did it which was in advance of even any negotiations for a deal.

JOSH: I'm of a similar mind, and that's why it always frustrates me when this kind of move is then cited as being evidence of his pro-Israel approach, because I think anything that hinders the potential for peace can't really be defined as pro-Israel. It's pro-neither side.

WALLES: I find it all very depressing because this is an issue obviously I've worked on for a long time you know, and I think prospects for peace now are much diminished and it's very sad for someone like me to see that happen.

HRISHI: I think even in the episode the conflict between short-term and long-term solutions are at play. I think what Kate Harper suggests and what the president ultimately goes along with is kind of a long-term plan that is going to require a lot of patience and endurance from everyone involved. I was wondering, Ambassador, what you thought of Kate's plan?

[West Wing Episode 6.02 excerpt]

KATE: They give the Muslim holy sites the status of diplomatic missions. The Israelis can keep all the sovereignty they want, they still can't enter without permission from the

Palestinians.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: So the Palestinians would have a sovereign-like state that was inviolable - like a foreign embassy.

KATE: The Palestinians'll love it because it gives - [fade out]

[end excerpt]

WALLES: That particular formulation that she talked about really jumped out at me, because it was actually something that was discussed at the time in Camp David. It was one of the ideas about how to resolve it. That was one of the things I liked most about this episode, was that they pulled actual, you know, real substance out of the real negotiations. As the negotiations evolved at Camp David, the ideas that they were talking about evolved into slightly different directions. That was not where they ended up, but that was part of the discussion.

HRISHI: What is the argument against that approach - giving the holy Muslim sites the status of diplomatic missions?

WALLES: Well the argument from both the Israelis and the Palestinians feel that they need to have sovereignty over their holy sites. And the problem with the holy sites in Jerusalem is that they basically overlap each other. What the Israelis call the Temple Mount, which is where the ancient temples stood, is what the Muslims refer to as the Haram al-Sharif which is the Holy Sanctuary where there are now existing mosques. The idea of diplomatic missions was one idea about how to finesse it but ultimately it sort of ran up against the idea that both sides were insisting on sovereignty. That's sort of the crux of the argument and that's sort of why it makes that issue in particular so difficult to resolve.

HRISHI: Because sovereignty is mutually exclusive.

WALLES: Pretty much. I mean there was also discussion about whether they could both have sovereignty, but no one quite could sort of articulate that clearly, what that meant in the real world. There was also discussion about neither side having sovereignty. And there was even a discussion about sovereignty belong to God in that particular spot of the world, and that was discussed but it's such an abstract concept that it was difficult to figure out how that would actually work in the real world and what that meant in terms of how people moved and prayed and that sort of thing.

JOSH: Yeah. Well, I guess the Dome of the Rock is built over the rock that is considered by the Jews, the rock where Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac, and by the Muslims as the place where Mohammed ascended to heaven. And I thought one of the things that was nicely - and painfully - depicted in the episode is the overlap in the common areas. There's that nice montage when there's a *shabbat* service going on and they're lighting the candles and making the saying of Hamotzi. And then the *salah* is going on and the Muslims are praying. I thought they did a beautiful sort of wordless job of kind of showing the similarities and the overlap and the inability of the two sides yet to see the commonality.

WALLES: I liked that too as well for the same reasons. It handled the issue, but also the interplay of the two religions, in a very sensitive way which I thought was very important and very good.

JOSH: Although, according to this episode, crab cakes were served at lunch. Big mistake.

WALLES: I've heard that too.

[laughter]

JOSH: That's a big faux pas.

HRISHI: I'm blown away by the idea that the sovereignty of the locations could belong to God. That is so beautiful and poetic even to me, as a non-believer of anything. That would really be such a beautiful solution if that could be agreed upon.

WALLES: Well, you know it's an unresolved issue - I mean, all of these ideas that were discussed in the past are still available for the parties if they want to talk about it. Unfortunately, not only do we have a leadership in Washington that handles this issue in a very different way, the leadership on both the Israeli side and the Palestinian side are not really interested in reaching a deal right now. Although they both say they are, I don't think they really are interested. So it's hard at this point to see how we get back to those talks, but someday in the future, we're going to have to do that and all of these ideas that were discussed at Camp David and since then are still available, and hopefully they'll find a way to work it out.

HRISHI: It does feel a little bit like waiting for a solar eclipse where all the bodies have to be perfectly aligned. Did you feel like in 2000, was that the closest those different entities were aligned?

WALLES: The alignment is actually the crux of the issue as well I think. There was a subsequent negotiation in 2008 - at that time, Ehud Olmert was the Prime Minister of Israel, Mahmoud Abbas was the President of Palestine, George W. Bush was the President of the U.S. And Abbas and Olmert had a series of conversations where they actually got pretty close as well and they might have reached a deal, except that Olmert was under investigation for corruption and he was about to be indicted and his government was about to fall. And Abbas saw that and he realized that he might be able to do a deal with Olmert but it might not be implemented if Olmert was indicted, which eventually he was. Those two episodes, the Abbas-Olmert conversations and the earlier Camp David in 2000, were probably the two times where we came closest. And since then, I think we've gone farther and farther, and the alignment is even more and more off.

HRISHI: There are some issues that come up in *The West Wing* where we can look back at them and at the moment they seem like progressive issues but then, you know - over the years that progress has actually occurred and now they're sort of relics of the past and we can say "Ok, the times have changed." Do you have any sense that there's a generational shift that might be happening, and it might be more conceivable that we'll get there because it's just a matter of progress?

WALLES: It's a good question, it's hard to know really. I mean, one thing about Israelis and Palestinians is that in the past, they tended to interact more with each other than they do now. This was before Israel built the wall, it used to be much easier for Palestinians to come into Israel, a lot of them worked in Israel. That happens a lot less now. So that to me suggests that in future generations, it may actually be harder. In terms of the U.S., there's a generational change going on I think in terms of attitudes of the American-Jewish community towards Israel. In the past it used to be sort of wall-to-wall support in the Jewish community for Israel. Now over time, with the continuing occupation by Israel of the West Bank, the lack of progress towards peace, I think younger American Jews are becoming less interested in Israel. Less supportive of Israel. And Israeli policies.

JOSH: We're seeing a real rift in the American-Jewish community for the first time on these issues.

WALLES: Yes. That's one thing that's different now. The other thing is that support for Israel in the United States is becoming much more politicized, where you have much stronger support among Republicans for Israel than you do among Democrats for Israel. And that's something that Israel has tried in the past very hard to avoid, and it has tried to keep support bipartisan.

HRISHI: I even get surprised sometimes just how the attitudes on either side are characterized. You know, Josh and I will talk about this sometimes and he'll describe his attitude in comparison to someone else and talk about, you know, people being to the right of him on Israel or to the left of him. In the early days of your career working on these issues, was it also characterized that way? That people who were pro-Palestine were considered on the left and people who were pro-Israel were on the right?

WALLES: No, not so much. The idea of Middle East peace was something that was bipartisan, as incidentally was support for Israel. Now, it's more likely if you're supporting Israel, you're supporting the occupation. On the left, if you're supporting peace, you're really opposed to what Israeli policies. So that has changed over the years, I think.

JOSH: Is there anything the average civilian can do, and anybody who hopes for a peaceful two-state solution - what is the right way to show that support?

WALLES: That's hard. I mean, I think anything that promotes contacts between Israelis and Palestinians is a good thing. Also, ties between the United States and Israel are quite strong, both at the government level but also at the people-to-people level. There are lots of Americans who go to visit Israel - whether they're Jews or not, they've had that experience. Not as many Americans have had contacts with Palestinians or been able to visit the West Bank, and I think promoting those kinds of relationships between Americans and Palestinians is also a way that people can improve the chances for peace in the future.

JOSH: Wow, that's great. I love what you said. I went for my most recent trip to Israel was the summer before last, and for the first time I went to the Palestinian Territories and I met Palestinians and Palestinian families. And I agree that exposure is that sort of fundamental key ingredient that has to increase rather than decrease. I was concerned when you said -

what you're saying *is* correct, that the situation with Israel is such that now there *is* less interaction and that's a problem just for setting the stage for potential negotiations for peace.

WALLES: I mean another aspect of it is promoting contacts between American Jews and Palestinians. It's hard to get Palestinians and Israelis to interact in a positive way, but American Jews can play sort of a bridging role - they're able to develop and maintain contacts with Palestinians. There was a lot more of that in the early days of the peace process - it's rarer now, so I think it's important when people like you or others from the United States do actually visit the West Bank and get to know Palestinians and understand their side. I mean there are two sides to this conflict. There are two sides to every conflict and you need to understand the two sides before you can hope to resolve them.

HRISHI: I'm just curious - are you religious?

WALLES: Not really. I mean, I'm Jewish and I consider myself Jewish. But I'm not observant.

HRISHI: Was that something that ever hurt or helped you when it came time to sit down in these meetings? Did anyone from the Palestinian side view you with distrust or think that you were somehow aligned with Zionist policies just because of that?

WALLES: That's a really good question. One of the many roles I've had in these 20 years was I was the Consul General in Jerusalem, which means I was the Representative of the United States to the Palestinians - in fact, I was the Ambassador to the Palestinians. They're not a country, so technically I wasn't the ambassador, but that was the role I played. And in all that time, the four years I was there, I think most of the Palestinian leadership that I dealt with knew that I was Jewish. They never brought it up - I never talked about it that much, but they generally didn't bring it up. And I think I had a very good relationship with most of the leadership. Even though, as we've talked about, sovereignty in Jerusalem and the holy sites is a critical issue, ultimately this conflict is not about religion. It's not a religious war between Jews and Muslims. It's really a conflict between two groups of people who claim the same small piece of land as their homeland. And they both feel, I'd say, equally attached to that land and the challenge is to find a way so that the two sides can share this land. And that's what has been elusive over the years, but it's not a religious conflict and I never viewed it that way. I think most - certainly, most of the Palestinians that I dealt with didn't feel that either.

JOSH: I'm curious about the personal nature of these kinds of negotiations - the two sides are depicted in this episode as so intractable. Does that bleed into personal enmity or do you get along well in this environment? Is there friendliness, are there laughs, or is it all just this sort of head-to-head grind?

WALLES: I'd say among the negotiators, the, sort of the working people who do this for a living, we all pretty much got along and we in many cases got to be friends. And that's true of the Americans and the Israelis and the Palestinians. At the leadership level, it was very different. And certainly at Camp David in 2000, Barak and Arafat barely interacted with each other. They may have seen each other once at a dinner that we organized, but for the most part they kept their distance and they didn't interact at all. And that was true about other leaders as well, including Netanyahu and even with Abbas as well. But at the level of the

people who did this for a living, we generally got along pretty well and were able to joke with each other - you know, we've all been to dinner at each other's houses and met our families and that sort of thing. So there is that sort of camaraderie. We've also seen each other over and over again you know, it's not just one big summit - there were countless meetings and visits, trips back and forth, so we got to know each other pretty well and I'm still in touch with some of them.

JOSH: I would think that personal continuity of relationship might be one of the important ingredients, and things having ground to a halt, it seems like a terrible shame.

WALLES: Well there's less contact now. There's no active negotiation going on, there hasn't been for a number of years now. So those contacts are not going to be available in the future when, at some point, the leaderships will want to re-engage. Unfortunately, they won't have a lot of people who have done it the way we did it for 20 years in the past.

HRISHI: Ambassador, thank you so much for talking to us. This has been absolutely fascinating.

WALLES: Well, it's my pleasure. It was really great talking to you about this, about...again, to sort of re-connect with *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: Let's take a quick break. And now that we're done with the serious conversation, we can get back to our usual nonsense.

[intermission music]

Ad break

[intermission music]

JOSH: How about that basketball scene?

HRISHI: I wanted to ask you about that basketball scene. Josh, do you play basketball?

JOSH: Not well.

HRISHI: I noticed that your dribble was a little high.

JOSH: I'm not a great basketball player. That would be very low on my... I think I'm a decent athlete, basketball was never really one of those, one of my greatest sports. I think I sent a nice pick early on in the basketball scene. I was pleased with that. You notice, by the way, you don't really see any of us actually-

HRISHI [interrupting]: I did!

JOSH: -taking a shot and the results in the basket or anything. I was like "Wow, they couldn't get a single shot of anybody sinking one?".

HRISHI: Toby has a good layup and he has a good behind-the-back pass. I thought Richard either got some good editing in his favor or he can really play.

JOSH: My memory is that nobody could really play.

HRISHI [laughing]: I also thought that they were especially generous or forgiving in their editing towards Bradley Whitford.

JOSH: I thought the same thing too. I'm glad you thought the same.

HRISHI: You really barely see him touch the ball.

JOSH: Yeah. I remember we had a lot of fun shooting that scene, but the Harlem Globetrotters we weren't. We were definitely more the Washington Generals.

[laughter]

HRISHI: That makes sense, you worked in Washington.

JOSH: There you go. The other thing I kept thinking during that scene is like - I wanted one of us to just go [panting] "Hey guys, should we take a break and talk about this?". Because I think the actual conversation that went on was so ludicrous for a group of people actually playing basketball that hard. I'm like, "Are we really having this conversation now? Why don't we take five?"

HRISHI: By the way, I'd like to welcome everyone to this first episode of our new basketball podcast. It's called *Courts Martial*.

JOSH: Boom.

HRISHI: The other weird thing in that scene is that while having this discussion, the First Lady who's watching says:

[West Wing Episode 6.02 excerpt]

ABBEY: Well, look at the bright side - nobody shot anybody else the first day.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And then we cut back to the basketball game, and then Will says:

[West Wing Episode 6.02 excerpt]

WILL: Shot.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That's weird.

HRISHI: It's just a little bit weird.

JOSH: While we're on it, the skeet shooting scene is a little odd.

HRISHI: It's a little bit odd just because we've already seen this scene when it was C.J. and Simon Donovan.

JOSH: Right. So exactly - we have the exact same gag already, the recoil on a gun. But also, the Israeli guy is like "What's skeet shooting?" And then he obviously knows. He's kind of asking Toby and Toby's pretending he knows, but he clearly knows how to shoot and the Israeli guy of course destroys the first clay pitch. [laughing] I don't know, the whole thing was just odd.

HRISHI: It was a little odd. But really, my whole reaction to the scene was overwhelmed by my feeling of like, we've seen this joke [cross talk]

JOSH [cross talk]: Did this already.

HRISHI: What is this? That seemed like a strange decision. Where like, do you think that we're watching season 6 without having also watched season 3?

JOSH: Odd.

HRISHI: Let's talk about the guest cast in this episode.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: The actor who plays Chairman Farad, Makram Khoury - I hope I'm saying his name correctly, probably not.

JOSH: It's okay, you're owed.

HRISHI: If you look on IMDB, it says he was the youngest artist and first Arab to win the Israel Prize, the highest artistic honour in the country. He's one of Israel's most respected actors.

JOSH: How about that?

HRISHI: Yeah. He has also been in *Homeland* and he was in *Munich*, which by the way - *Munich* I thought was great, but my favorite thing about *Munich* was in *Knocked Up* when Seth Rogen and his buddies were out drinking and they toast to *Munich*:

[*Knocked Up* excerpt]

BEN: You know what movie I just saw again the other day, which is [expletive deleted], like, mind-blowing, and I haven't seen it since it came out is Munich.

JAY: *Ohhh, Munich!*

JONAH: *Oh, Munich [expletive deleted] rules.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And the Israeli ambassador returns, Natalija Nogulich.

JOSH: Natalija Nogulich, sure. I mentioned when we talked to the ambassador about that montage the Muslim prayer, the Jewish prayer, I liked that a lot. I thought even just taking the phrase “Allahu akbar” and seeing it on TV in a context that isn’t somebody about to, you know, blow themselves up or cause some huge terrorist act was kind of a surprising and positive thing to do.

HRISHI: I thought it was really interesting and - I know it shouldn’t be - but I thought even a little bit daring to cross-cut Jewish imagery with Islamic prayer and vice versa.

JOSH: I agree. But I thought it worked very well. I thought it worked so well and so beautifully made its point where, you know, it landed with just images and some sound and some praying. It was a shame to have Kate then say:

[West Wing Episode 6.02 excerpt]

KATE: The tragedy is that the Palestinians and the Jews are so much alike.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah, yes.

JOSH: It’s kind of like... it’s just - mmm, if we could have just gone out knowing that the moments landed the way you meant them to. You didn’t have to have a character say it.

HRISHI: Yeah. One thing I loved in this episode and have been loving, is how quickly and deeply Kate has gotten integrated within our group of characters.

JOSH: She is the star of the whole shebang now.

HRISHI: Yeah. She’s got great ideas and people are listening to her even when they disagree with her. She’s commanding the room, and she’s - you know, she’s really one of them. There is a little bit of “new person”-ism I think, you know, with the reactions from Toby and Josh, who frankly sided with Leo on the whole thing. But she’s in there and I really like it. And I just think that she’s great.

JOSH: One brief rainy conversation with Chairman Farad and she gets him to cave on the right of return.

HRISHI: Yeah. She’s like the Spiderman of diplomacy.

JOSH: She does it all.

[West Wing Episode 6.02 excerpt]

JOSH: You got Farad to go along on right of return?

KATE: I think it's doable.

WILL: I'm taking her with me next time I buy a car.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: We talked about this already a little bit but just- I was impressed, I loved that Josh could read the signs in Leo so early on. I loved that as a detail of their relationship.

JOSH: Josh and C.J. share a very sweet and long hug early in this episode when he returns from Germany. I liked that moment.

HRISHI: I did too. And I also liked that conversation afterwards.

[West Wing Episode 6.02 excerpt]

C.J.: How's Donna?

JOSH: She threw me out. Her mother's driving her crazy and her IRA boyfriend is plotting sedition. Or maybe it was seduction, probably both.

C.J.: The dashing photojournalist?

JOSH: Yeah. I think the professional term is "wanker".

C.J.: Listen to you...

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: How much of the history that comes up in this episode, Josh, were you already aware of? For me, I was watching this stuff and feeling like "Oh ok, now they're taking it past the entry-level layperson's understanding and going one level deeper." And for me, I thought that was really rich. But I can understand for people who know more than that, maybe they found this frustrating or-

JOSH: Yeah, I would like it to have gone a little bit deeper. I think again, it touched on a lot of things that would be the key elements and the key issues that would need to be resolved for peace, but I didn't... I think I knew 100% of the basic information that was being relayed.

HRISHI: Yeah. So you didn't learn anything from it.

JOSH: No. But I liked seeing the depiction. I can't imagine being in a room like that, and that's why it was also fun to talk to the ambassador to hear what that's like. But no, I didn't feel like it really enlightened me particularly on any of the issues. I remember also, without getting into it, because I don't want to put words into anyone's mouth... but Mary, Richard, and I had a beer or two and got into it a little bit talking about Israel and the Palestinians and then finally agreed to disagree. [laughing] It got a little bit hot. We reached that point.

HRISHI: There's a moment during the basketball game:

[West Wing Episode 6.02 excerpt]

KATE: Farad wants the right of return to apply to all Palestinians. The Israelis are understandably concerned about 3 million Palestinians moving back in.

JOSH: Gallup did some polling in the West Bank, found that while refugees wanted the right to come back, most wouldn't.

WILL: That's great. Then they won't be disappointed.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: That whole facet to right of return was really interesting so I tried to look a little further into it. Just the term "right of return" is really not viewed by Israel as an actual right that has to be discussed, but really it's just a bargaining chip that's part of the overall process. It's part of the discussion but there's no sense on Israel's part that anybody has any kind of right. And in fact, there's no real international law that gives precedent to the idea that Palestinians *would* have the right of return after a war, you know, to their original homes.

[West Wing Episode 6.02 excerpt]

ZHAVY: It's not "right" of return, it's a "claim" of return.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Right. Well it's also - I mean, it's a specifically interesting refugee situation even in the greater world of refugees and refugees' rights. And the UN has granted specific status to Palestinian refugees that is also passed down patrilineally. So the refugee situation in terms of numbers has gotten worse and worse, it hasn't diminished.

HRISHI: Right, right.

JOSH: It could have gotten interesting to dig in a little deeper in the idea that were the Palestinians granted the right to return, it then compromises the Jewish nature of Israel. I mean, it gets very complicated and then there's the... you know, is there the possibility of making reparations in lieu of a full right of return?

HRISHI: Actually, reparations is exactly what the right of return made me think of because I don't think that there are mainstream legislators who believe reparations will ever happen for slavery for African-Americans, but it *is* still part of the-

JOSH [*interrupting*]: Conversation.

HRISHI: Conversation, yeah. The fabric of the conversation.

JOSH: Right. I think that's a very good analogy, as with right of return and that 9% number I think that's quoted in the episode, and the idea that most in fact would not. It's still the concept of...it's a principle, I think, to the Palestinians. And it's that acknowledgement that you just mentioned that Israel won't make that they want.

HRISHI: Right. The idea that "Hey, something was taken from us forcibly and we are owed something because of it." Anyway, so for all of this stuff, this might just be exposing me for the dilettante that I am, but I really did appreciate this episode for giving me an excuse to go one step further.

JOSH: Well that's *The West Wing* at its best altogether. As I said, there were limits to the conversation I could have with two of my co-workers slash friends on these issues, they're that sensitive and triggering. So the idea for a network television show that wants the widest possible audience to even begin to discuss these kinds of issues is wildly daring.

HRISHI: It really is. It reminded me of "Mr. Willis of Ohio," in the conceit that "oh actually, the census could be really interesting."

JOSH: Mm-hm.

HRISHI: And I thought it's the same thing here, the kind of stuff that would be droned on about in C-SPAN and wouldn't interest anyone. Here it is, it's just people talking.

JOSH: Well, yeah. I mean, here you run the double risk of either it boring people or [cross talk] offending the people who are interested.

HRISH [cross talk]: Incensing... yeah, yeah.

JOSH: And they kind of threw caution to the wind there on both counts.

HRISHI: I kept pausing the episode to try and see if there was a shot where "Untied [sic] States of America" was still on the helicopter.

[laughter]

JOSH: I was hoping too as I saw the Marine One fly through at the end, I was like "could it be? Could it possibly be?" [cross talk] I think they forgot.

HRISHI [cross talk]: I think they fixed it. I think they fixed it everywhere.

JOSH: Sadly.

[laughter]

HRISHI: So that's it for this episode. Thank you so much for joining us. Josh and I are "untied" in our appreciation for your listening. We are also appreciative of Radiotopia, the network to which we belong. It's part of PRX and it is a collection of extraordinary podcasts. You can learn about all of the shows at radiotopia.fm.

JOSH: We also love our Zach McNees, our Nick Song, our Margaret Miller. You can learn all about them by re-listening to the mini-sode that's all about them.

HRISHI: That's right. Thanks so much to our guest Ambassador Jacob Walles, former ambassador to Tunisia. And thanks so much to Beth Parker who helped make this interview possible. She is also Ambassador Walles' niece, which just goes to show once again that nepotism is always useful.

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: You can follow Ambassador Walles on Twitter @jakewalles.

JOSH: Walles being W-A-L-L-E-S.

HRISHI: He was part of the Mid East peace process over the course of four administrations - both Bushes, Clinton, and Obama, and he worked for six Secretaries of State. You can follow my co-host Joshua Malina on Twitter @joshmalina. You can follow me @hrishihirway.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

WALLES: What's next?

[Outro Music]