

The West Wing Weekly
6.15: "Freedonia"
Guest: Eli Attie

[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 "Freedonia". It's episode 15 from season 6.

JOSH: It was written by pod favorite Eli Attie. It was directed by Christopher Misiano. And it first aired on February 16th, 2005.

HRISHI: In this episode we're in a vice presidential royal rumble just days before the New Hampshire primary vote. And it's imperative that Congressman Santos gets into the debate if he's gonna have any kind of chance for continuing his campaign into the future. Amy Gardner comes back to try and help the Santos campaign. Although what her intentions are in the larger scale of things is a little bit up in the air. And to talk about this episode we're joined by our very special friend, Eli Attie.

JOSH: Horray!

ELI: A pleasure, as always.

JOSH: You came straight from brunch.

ELI: This is true, this is a post-brunch podcast.

JOSH: It might be a little logy.

ELI: Exactly, you know all the carbohydrates have slowed my circulation.

JOSH: Yes, but to counter that Hrishi and I have been fasting for three days [Eli laughs].

ELI: With brunch to follow.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Eli I want to start things off by asking you about the title. This jumps into the middle of the episode...

[West Wing Episode 6.15 excerpt]

SANTOS: Say did you manage to catch the New Jersey Senate debate last week?

NED: No sir.

SANTOS: Someone asked about the situation in Freedonia, and Barbaros said that he was studying it. Freedonia's fake. It's from a Marx Brothers movie.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It's a great line and it's sort of the prompt for Santos, and why he's so hung up on the debate rules of wanting to have a situation that doesn't just feel like people giving their stump speeches back and forth and these sort of prefabricated sound bites but I was curious, what about that reference felt like the right thing to name this episode after?

ELI: Yeah you know it's interesting whenever you are writing a script of any kind, you go on a little bit of a journey where you start with a basket of ideas and you sort of winnow them down and you drop some of them out and you amp some of them up and you find out in the process of doing it what the episode is really about. Just in preparation for this I was looking back at some of my notes that I have on this episode and early drafts of the script. I didn't read them but I was flipping through some papers and for a while this episode was actually entitled "The Silver Bullet". Which is a reference to, you know, the ad that Josh is trying to make that he hopes will leverage a lot of free media because they can't afford to buy time on TV stations. But Freedonia seemed to me I think as I went through the process to be more what it was about. It's actually a bit of a stolen reference in the sense that, I don't know if you guys remember, there was a wonderful magazine in the 90's called *Spy* magazine.

JOSH: Oh, how I loved it, I was a subscriber.

ELI: It was I great, I didn't subscribe but I read it is often as I could and they always did really fun things. I remember one time they sent some billionaires, people like Bill Gates, checks for a penny in the mail to see if they would deposit them and then if they didn't they would send them checks for two pennies and they would try to figure out the number at which these billionaires, or their accountants, would deposit the checks. They did a thing once when they called congressional offices and they asked on behalf of, probably *Spy* magazine, "What is the congressman's position on the situation in Freedonia?" [Josh laughs] And almost none of the people they called really got the reference, and you know some said, "I'll have to call you back" or, "I'll have to talk to a policy person". But a lot of them said things like, "Obviously the congressman is very concerned and he's studying that issue right now". [Josh laughs] And it always stuck my mind as an example of the reflexive sort of nonsense of politics. People who were so disconnected from substance that they would just say anything.

HRISHI: That's a fantastic answer, and one of those situations where I didn't know what you were gonna say but that's better than I could have hoped for and I love this episode.

JOSH: Me too.

ELI: Thank you for that. It's a funny thing because you know when you guys were texting me about "Opposition Research", and I think I may have mentioned to you guys personally that, and I don't know if you want me to tell this story, with those two scripts written together. I sat down at once and wrote "Opposition Research" and "Freedonia" at John Wells' request, and I always remembered in my mind the script for "Opposition Research" had turned out better, and the episode for "Freedonia" turned out better. But of course because I'm a slightly self-loathing New York Jew, I watched the episode of "Freedonia" and was disappointed by it, but that's just maybe my own issue.

HRISHI: Huh. I really liked the episode I think that the script is fantastic, but I also really love some specific moments of performance in the episode too.

JOSH: Before we jump off the title I do want to suggest that if people haven't seen it that they rent the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup*.

ELI: Oh for sure. I seem to remember that around this time, I know that we used *March of the Wooden Soldiers* on *The West Wing* in season 4, and I think that actually got me buying a lot of DVD box sets of old classic comedies, things like Laurel and Hardy and the Marx Brothers. And that may have been another reason it was on my mind, I mean they're geniuses, and the influence behind so much modern comedy that probably most people alive don't even know. But I second that.

JOSH: It's also worth noting that in "Freedonia", "no one's allowed to smoke, or tell a dirty joke, and whistling is forbidden. [Hrishi laughs] If chewing gum is chewed, the chewer is pursued, and in the hoosegow hidden".

[Duck Soup "The Laws of my Administration" excerpt]

FIREFLY: [sung] The last man nearly ruined this place, he didn't know what to do with it. If you think this country's bad off now, just wait till I get through with it.

[end excerpt]

ELI: [laughs] I mean that sounds like a pretty good system, to me.

HRISHI: In this episode Eli, you're writing for not just Santos but also for Vice President Russell and also former Vice President Hoynes. You've got a lot of candidates that you're juggling.

ELI: That's right.

JOSH: Much like Amy.

HRISHI: Much like Amy yeah. [laughs] [cross talk]

ELI: [cross talk] Yes indeed.

HRISHI: You've gotta find ways to make them all sound distinct, and I was wondering how much of Vice President Gore, your former boss, is there in Bob Russell?

ELI: You know Bob Russell, I feel like he was developed sometimes as a bit of a punchline. You know he was meant to be this kind of also ran guy from the very beginning. I never saw Gore that way, I think maybe some other people have seen Gore that way, but I actually think that I ended up channeling much more of Al Gore into Santos in this episode than into either Hoynes or Russell, who had pretty much developed their own distinctive voices and existences by this point in the series. And you know as we talked about in a separate interview, there's a lot of Barack Obama in Matt Santos in this episode but what is true of Al Gore is that he was someone who often did also bristle at the strictures of modern politics, and also had a real reluctance to be handled. Sometimes he would surrender to it, but he really didn't like it when the smart advisors, quote unquote, would kind of tell him what he

had to do even if it was against his instincts. And he very often would in the end go along with it, grouching a bit, sometimes to his regret, but Gore was very substantial and had a lot of depth on policy, and very shrewd, and would have been the first person to say he wasn't a very good public performer if he was sort of lacking in a kind of political charisma, though at times he had that too.

HRISHI: I hope it doesn't sound like I was in some kind of transitive way insulting Al Gore by asking that question. It's more like I actually find Russell a compelling and complicated character, even though at times, like you said he is kind of played off as this joke. I think one of the things you'd said to us at one point was the Al Gore sort of knew all of the jokes that were gonna be made at his expense, he could tell them himself, like he [cross talk] knew them already.

ELI: [cross talk] Yes. That's right.

HRISHI: And I get that sense from Russell too, where he's working with the pieces that he has but there's no lack of awareness on his part, in terms of like who's gonna make what move.

ELI: That's true actually and that's a very fair way of putting it. And I should add that the joke about the vice presidential seal...

[West Wing Episode 6.15 excerpt]

RUSSELL: And I will tell you what I like best about that seal. If you close your left eye and squint really hard and tilt your head just so it reads a lot like President of the United States.

[crowd laughs]

[end excerpt]

ELI: That was something Al Gore used to say. And that was a complete lift from Vice President Gore, and it always got a great reaction.

[laughter]

HRISHI: That's what I was hoping for.

ELI: Yes that's absolutely right, [Josh laughs] and Gore also had a great sort of dry sense of self awareness. And something he liked to do a lot, and still, is say something that was right on the edge of something odd that he might actually say, to test the room, of usually close advisors and friends and see if people got that he was joking, or not. And sometimes he was really into some weird policy issues that he loved to talk about, you know that were not really politically beneficial issues let's say. Like chaos theory and massive parallel computing, and things that were just very wonky and stuff that he loved to read about, and you know he'd be the sort of person to say, "Um, in this speech I should talk about massive parallel computing". And there would be an uncomfortable pause in the room because people weren't sure if they had to now start trying to talk him out of it, and then he'd burst into hysterical laughter. And then sometimes he'd mean it. [laughs] So he always kept you on your toes. But he was completely aware that he was doing that. He was hilarious and a lot of fun actually in that way. But you know when I watched "Freedonia" the other night I was

thinking to myself like, “Wow there's a pretty brittle relationship here between Santos and Josh at times, they really are kicking each other's tires.” It's a continuation of what started in “Opposition Research” and I realized that that did come from my observation of some failed staff – vice president relationships and people in Gore's life who had tried to push him around and get him to do things he didn't want to do because they thought they knew better, only learn that it just wasn't who he was. And um Josh to his credit of course, learns.

HRISHI: Well so at the beginning with this episode we start with Santos talking to a crowd but then we go to Russell at this politics and eggs forum, which is a real thing that happens in New Hampshire.

[West Wing Episode 6.15 excerpt]

RUSSELL: You ever tried signing a wooden egg?

[end excerpt]

ELI: Yes not only a real thing, they really give out these little wooden eggs, I think I have a couple in a drawer somewhere. And people really sign the eggs, and it's just one of these events that's a kind of New Hampshire institution.

HRISHI: It's funny because it only started in 1996 I think so at the time when you were working on presidential campaign it still must have been a relatively new phenomenon.

ELI: Well, that's news to me which shows how established it must have been by the year 2000 that when Gore went I just completely took it for granted that this thing had been happening since the days of you know Daniel Webster. And I think that's the trick with a lot of these early states; Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina is that you know, you wanna kind of start your breakfast series for candidates and have people think it's something you can't miss. So, there's probably a lot of that going on.

JOSH: It's such a boffo name, like “politics and eggs”, I don't know how you can miss.

ELI: [laughs] Yeah.

JOSH: The name makes me laugh, like it's crying out for some sort of, well you know “folks and yolks”, just nothing, “politics and eggs”. [Hrishi laughs]

ELI: Well you know I have a memory of sitting in my old apartment actually, the apartment I lived in when I first moved to LA, and sitting at a little dining table writing that scene with Will and Donna and Bob Russell talking about signing the eggs and the little wooden pieces of toast and you know, it was one of the things that I always found when I was working for Aaron, in the Aaron era of *The West Wing* was sometimes he would come into the writers' room and he would just want a weird line that was gonna be in a press release, that people were gonna comment on. Or he would want just one item that Donna found in a box of files. And if you came up with something weird enough and pleasing enough, Aaron would go off and write a whole great scene just around that. You know, and he'd come back into the writers' room and say how great the one line you gave him was. And “politics and eggs” I think is a little bit that.

JOSH: Right.

ELI: It's just such a kind of a juicy, odd little concept in and of itself, that it pretty much gave me that whole scene.

JOSH: Here's a perhaps vain thing that I noticed, as Will and Donna are watching Russell at the politics and eggs event. Is that *The West Wing*, apparently for me, was pre-Invisalign [Eli laughs] and I have a very prominent snaggletooth that I've not noticed prior to this, that I would eventually correct. I'll put a picture up [Eli and Hrishikesh laugh] because man oh man I got one tooth that's just dying to go perpendicular. I also wanna thank Eli for earlier finally acknowledging that the character of Russell was devised as something of a punchline, and therefore it can be acknowledged that Will Bailey was assigned to run the campaign of a punchline [laughs]. It's not my fault people!

ELI: Well no, but here's the thing, because as you guys know, an episode that I wrote, that to some degree we conceptualized as a group, you know under John Wells' direction; the episode "Constituency of One" where Josh is actually kind of seduced to go work for Bob Russell. I think you learn in that episode that Russell's got a few things going on that most people don't see, and that he is very self-aware. That's a scene in which he tells the jokes that people tell about him, and he gives Will a very compelling reason to sort of switch sides as it were. I think he may have been devised as a bit of a punchline and discovered as something more. And by Will too!

JOSH: I've always defended Will for seeing a greater intellect in Bingo Bob than most others have seen. But then a few episodes ago we have Will coming into Leo's office and saying, "Uh, why did you guys pick Russell?" [laughter] [cross talk] and they don't come up with much.

ELI: [cross talk] Yes. Right, I mean you know there's also the simple reality, which is not inconsiderable, that it gives Will a bigger role in politics. You know, he gets to advocate issues and play a big role in this game, and that's part of what a career's about too.

JOSH: Absolutely, it's sort of revealed Will Bailey to be more of a pragmatist, than a classic Sorkin idealist.

ELI: Yeah, and there's so much of that in politics because, there aren't always Kennedy-esque romantic idealist candidates. Or sometimes they are and they get crushed like a grape by the guy who's virtually the incumbent. There are people, I think it's unfair, but there are people who would have looked at Gore that way, as a guy who was just sort of next in line as the sitting vice president. I think I talked about this on another podcast, you know I had worked for Dick Gephardt on Capitol Hill, and I had relationships with a number of other people who were looking at running in the year 2000. Some might've looked at some of them as maybe more inspiring one way or another. And I liked Gore a lot, and I always had, but I mean it was clear to me Gore was gonna be the nominee, and that if I went to work for anybody else I was just gonna be engaged in the exercise of taking down the eventual nominee. As opposed to you know, helping him and trying to make him be as good as he could be. And I think that's what Will chose to do, and I think he was right to do it. He couldn't have foreseen the Obama-like rise out of nowhere of this unknown Matt Santos, and nobody could have foreseen that.

JOSH: So you're saying Will Bailey, being the character perhaps most closely associated with you, probably falls somewhere in the pragmatist idealist spectrum where you fall.

ELI: I think that's right I mean look you're always in politics, I believe, wanting to be an idealist, you're always wanting to fall in love, in a sense, with the people you work for and be part of something greater than yourself. But if you're wanting to work steadily and be relevant and not just kinda tilt at windmills, sometimes you just have to calculate, who's gonna be standing at the end of a rough contest, and you know, you're often wrong about that. I think it was Harold Ickes who was one of Clinton's deputy chiefs of staff, who said that politics kind of required equal parts cynicism and idealism. You know, you sort of had to have this capacity to believe but you also needed to understand brass tacks. And I don't think there's any successful operative who doesn't have a bit of both, in the real world.

JOSH: Well said.

HRISHI: There's definitely a mix of cynicism and idealism that's at work with Josh here in his drive to figure out what they're gonna do for the ad. We find out that between Hoynes and Russell they're both involved in a huge media blitz in the New Hampshire market. They're each spending 1800 points, not that I know what that means, but it sounds like a lot.

ELI: Yeah.

HRISHI: And the Santos campaign can't compete at all, and so Josh has the idea that they need to just have one Hail Mary pass and bet it all on that.

ELI: Yeah I mean, it's funny it's been so long, I don't even remember what 1800 points means but it's some kind of measure of how many times the average viewer would see an ad, in the window in which it's broadcast. It wouldn't be 1800 times, but this is a concept that's existed for a long time. It was definitely on my mind, you know when I was working on this script, which a lot of people have done in politics either accidentally or on purpose. When Paul Wellstone, the late Paul Wellstone, a senator from Minnesota, first ran for the Senate from Minnesota he didn't have a lot of money. He was a professor at Carleton College, and kind of an unlikely politician, and he was I guess trying to debate his opponent, who was the incumbent senator. And couldn't even get in a room with him. And he did an ad in the style of the old Michael Moore movie *Roger and Me*, where he was wandering around Minneapolis or something searching for his opponent.

[Looking for Rudy advertisement excerpt]

WELLSTONE: First I tried his campaign headquarters.

[Indistinct speaking]

WELLSTONE: Then let me give you my home phone number, okay?

BOSCHWITZ STAFFER: Sure.

[end excerpt]

It was a funny, disarming ad, that was just so surprising. I mean I saw it a bunch of times living in Washington DC, you know, it was just one of these things that was everywhere and he could've put \$1,000,000 behind it and not gotten that much attention. So it's hard to calculate that, it's hard to plan that. Would the ad that Josh showed in the end have gotten

that kind of free media, probably not. But it's a hard thing to contrive, they work best when they happen organically, which I think is one of the other lessons of the episode.

HRISHI: That's what I love about that mix of cynicism and idealism, this idea there's something very idealistic about the possibility that you could craft a message that's so compelling that people are gonna want to play it for free. But there's also something kind of really calculating about the idea of, we're gonna figure out what that one thing is and cash in our chips on that.

ELI: Absolutely and you could say that this is Santos and Josh coming together in the end, because Santos is trying to find his voice, trying to identify who he is to himself, and you know what he ultimately comes up with for that, sort of live on the spot, silver bullet ad is also an attempt to get lots of press. As much as it's a statement of his beliefs.

JOSH: Do we believe that anyone stayed up all night in an edit bay intercutting the shots of chickens with shots of the other candidates?

[all laugh]

ELI: I certainly didn't. No, I was looking at that ad when I watched the show and thinking, "Uh you know, we could've done better than that, probably." I mean I'm sure it was my idea.

JOSH: Not trying to take a shot here, I'm just saying.

ELI: No, no [cross talk] but I think it's for the...

JOSH: [cross talk] Maybe Josh Lyman, maybe that's not his forte.

ELI: Yes, editing, not his forte.

HRISHI: My favorite part though is before we ever see the ad, where Josh just has the idea. Josh, you and I have talked about this before, one of my favorite things from South Park, the gnomes underwear stealing scheme.

JOSH: [laughs] Right, yes.

HRISHI: Step one is steal underwear. Step two is ????. And step three is profit. [Eli and Josh laugh] I feel like that's what we have here, when he presents this idea to Santos. Step one, one minute that is so gutsy, so edgy, so different, that it'll be replayed for free on every newscast in the country. Step two, what's the actual ad ????. Step three, become president. [Josh laughs]

ELI: Yeah, right. Well you know, I know it sounds bizarre, and it was obviously played for a little bit of humor and absurdity in the episode, so you know. But you'd be surprised how realistic that is. People are so hyperaware in politics: candidates, staff, of what the history is of successful campaigns. And well here was this silver bullet ad, or here was this gutsy moment where you stood up to a foreign leader, or here's a moment in a debate where you walk out from behind the podium. And then for the next twenty years people are engaged in ham-handed attempts to replicate those moments. And the thing is, something Ronald Klain, frequent guest of the podcast, always said to me is that people always think that every presidential year is going to be like a previous presidential year.

JOSH: The discussion of crafting a political ad that would go viral put me in mind of MJ Hegar. She was the Air Force veteran who ran in the midterms for a seat in Congress in Texas. I think ended up losing by very small margin, but she created almost a short film that detailed her military background and her childhood.

[MJ Hegar – Doors excerpt]

HEGAR: Two army helicopters rescued us from the wreckage. I strapped myself to the skids and returned fire on the Taliban while we flew to safety. That got me a Purple Heart and I became the second woman ever awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross with Valor. But after that the door closed. Injured and unable to fly, I was barred from my next career choice because I was a woman.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: It's an incredible little piece, and it became viral. People started tweeting it and sharing it and it's sort of exactly what these guys were after in this episode.

HRISHI: Yeah it has three million views on YouTube right now.

ELI: Right, I mean this episode preceded the whole concept of viral videos, because of course it was probably about a year after YouTube was created.

JOSH: Right.

ELI: But I think we're still in the same place now, where actually, believe it or not, TV ads broadcast on TV are still very important in campaigns, because a lot of people, particularly the more reliable older voters, they watch a lot of TV and it's still the best way to reach people. But if you can get something, not even covered in the media anymore, but just shared on Facebook and on Twitter, and get something to go viral it's just always gonna be an amount of attention that you could never afford on your own.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: This is why you can get somebody like Pete Buttigieg to come on and talk to Hrishi on our podcast. [Eli laughs] You never know, [cross talk] no truly though I mean it.

ELI: [cross talk] This is true.

JOSH: There are new free ways to reach eyes and ears.

HRISHI: In the current campaign cycle, he is the person who I think has benefited from that most, in terms of a gap in resources, but then making up for it with these moments like when Anand Giridharadas shared that story about introducing Pete Buttigieg to a Norwegian reporter and then [cross talk]

ELI: [cross talk] Yes.

JOSH: [cross talk] Right.

HRISHI: Pete Buttigieg just started speaking in Norwegian. And then that story, you know just that tweet, just went crazy and then it generated its own news cycle on its own. You

know this story about Pete Buttigieg speaking Norwegian, and he didn't have to pay for anything for that.

ELI: We're definitely sort of reaching, you could almost say that social media is its own early state primary now.

HRISHI: Ha.

ELI: Because you know Iowa used to serve that function back in 70s and 80s. You know, where it would be a small town where spontaneous things could happen and hopefully get picked up by the national media. Or your showing in a state like that could propel you into the national conversation. And now that can happen on Instagram, it can happen on Facebook.

JOSH: I feel like Twitter should get one electoral vote. [laughter]

ELI: Yeah they have one but it belongs to Russia. [laughter]

HRISHI: I just want to mention this one moment, as we're working our way through the episode. In the next scene when they're at the Santos headquarters, and Josh and Santos are talking about whether or not he ought to sue his way into the debate. As they're talking, Santos is throwing darts at a dart board and I remember what Tommy Schlamme had told us ages ago. That his job was to try and figure out a way to do something with the characters while they're talking. You know that part of the reason for the walk and talk and all these moves is because you couldn't just have the characters talking, they had to be doing something. And I love that moment because it felt so real, it felt like yeah, this is how he's working out his thought processes as he's in conversation. But as I was watching, I couldn't help but feel the Tommy Schlamme DNA in that scene.

ELI: Yeah for sure, look even if Tommy had simply directed the pilot and then walked away from the show, I think you know, and this was something that I believe Tommy took from *ER* to some degree, which he worked on a lot as an episodic director, you know, the show that John Wells really created, which is how do you show dynamism and movement in a world of static meetings with people in suits. And it's why *The West Wing* set itself had glass walls unlike the real West Wing, and a lot of what they call throw, meaning how far back could you see from the action, which is also unlike the real West Wing. And I think that just became the template, people walking around, people crumpling up pieces of paper or throwing a Spalding ball against wall. All of that is a way to kind of get out of people's mouths and heads, and I think we were always looking for that. Sometimes written in stage direction, sometimes found on the day, but you're 100% right.

HRISHI: As far as Russell being a joke, I do like the idea that he thinks that there must have been a head dwarf.

[West Wing Episode 6.15 excerpt]

RUSSELL: What about his nutty debate rules? Do we want the seven dwarves to be able to take direct shots at me?

WILL: You realize you're one of the dwarves. There are only seven candidates.

RUSSELL: Well there must've been a head dwarf.

DONNA: That'd be Snow White.

[end excerpt]

[laughter]

ELI: Yeah. And this was a little thing I guess I tried to have fun with in the episode, that I believe was a reference to maybe the 1988 campaign cycle. I think that was a year where the Democratic field at one point was referred to as the seven dwarves, you know, just the belief that nobody really had risen up to have any great stature. And I like the idea that this was really stuck in Josh's craw in particular, and then you learn later that it's something that Amy Gardner had said.

HRISHI: I love that. Yeah, we hear it being said by both people on the Santos side and on the Russell side that's really like a phrase that's out there and people are using it. And then we discover that she's the one who coined it.

ELI: And it's so belittling, that you figure if you're the incumbent vice president, and you're being told that you're a dwarf, I mean I think that scene was really just; how do you react to being called not just a dwarf, but one of the throng of dwarves, I mean can you think of anything more demeaning.

JOSH: By the way, the proper plural form of dwarf is dwarfs. It was J.R.R Tolkien who popularized dwarves.

ELI: Interesting, interesting.

JOSH: Or maybe it isn't, but I felt I had to share. [Hrishi and Eli laugh]

ELI: We were very un-Tolkien-esque on this one.

HRISHI: That's true for elves also.

ELI: Really?

JOSH: Huh.

HRISHI: A lot of outrage in the elf community over Tolkien's popularization of the term elves.

JOSH: I know Tolkien [laughs] also popularised Milves.

HRISHI: Oh yeah, yeah. [Eli laughs] Lot of outrage in the MILF community. So Eli, can you tell us about the decision to bring Amy Gardner back for this episode?

ELI: Yeah you know, I think she's an incredible actor and an extraordinary person, and was sort of a big fan of hers on *The West Wing*. And in between "Constituency of One" and "Freedonia" she had had a baby, and she lived in New York, and she wasn't somebody who was available to be on the show all the time. But I definitely pitched the idea of bringing her back as a kind of a surprise advisor to Santos. Just because I thought she was so great and wanted to see her on the show. And I think I had so much reverence for the character of Amy Gardner that Aaron created, and I just thought she was such a rock star character, that it was really fun to write that character for me.

JOSH: And you and she have become close friends, yes?

ELI: Yes indeed. Not only are we close friends, she actually officiated my little wedding ceremony.

JOSH: Indeed.

ELI: So she's played a very special role in my life, but we're pals. But at that time I wasn't a close friend of hers, I was just an admirer, and knew her a bit. I remember thinking a lot about, well how do we introduce her? She hasn't been on the show for over a year, you know of course she's in the opening credits, which when I was watching it the other night I thought, "You know if we had been clever we would have kept her out of the opening credits", to have it be more of a surprise. But I thought a lot about the moment when we first would meet her, and that's how it became this idea of its freezing cold outside and everybody's shivering, and then you walk inside and she's eating ice cream.

[West Wing Episode 6.15 excerpt]

AMY: I luxuriate in the cold.

JOSH: Can I ask you...

AMY: I fight cold with more cold.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I'll admit to being a little put off by that scene, because so closely on the heels of Will Bailey's unrequited [laughs] love for ice cream, to see Amy consummate [Hrishi and Eli laugh] was uh, upsetting. It was a little upsetting.

ELI: Yeah, well I will point out that this episode and "Opposition Research" were both written before "King Corn" was written.

JOSH: Ah okay fair enough.

ELI: Even though "King Corn" aired in the middle, John Wells had sort of sent me off to write these two episodes that would be largely about Santos. As "King Corn" was also, but would be shot together in Toronto, which "King Corn" was too. So I plead ignorance of Will's ice cream infatuation.

JOSH: Fair enough. I forget that in the post-Sorkin years, things might have been written outside of the order in which they were aired. You know in Aaron's days he was always just trying to get to the finish line of the next episode.

ELI: Yeah.

JOSH: And I guess there was a bit of a different approach.

HRISHI: I love the scene where you reintroduce Mary-Louise Parker as Amy Gardner because of her performance. It is such a fraught moment, because here they, it's a reunion of sorts between these two characters. And what I love is the moments in which she chooses to look at Brad. There aren't a lot.

ELI: Yeah.

HRISHI: In those first lines of dialogue, he sees her and he says hello, and for the most part she barely looks at him. She's looking either at the ice cream cone or she's looking at her phone.

JOSH: I noticed that too.

HRISHI: Ah it's so great. It's such an incredible assertion of the power dynamic, you know wordlessly while they're having their conversation.

ELI: You know as a writer, you sit down and you figure out what you think the words of the scene are, and what the scene is about. And you know, nine out of ten times you're on a set and that's what you're trying to get with the actors. And what is so fantastic about somebody like Mary-Louise is that she gives you something that honors what you've written, she's saying the words you've written. But she gives you something completely different; that works, that is deeper, that is surprising. So really when you watch the scene, that's whole scene, is basically her sort of indifference...

HRISHI: Right.

ELI: Or flirtation, or manipulation to Brad and it's all those things wrapped together. And it really doesn't matter what the words are. The scene is about this kind of space between them and that's not something that I wrote, and it's not something that I envisioned. And I remember, as if it were yesterday, being on that set in Canada when we filmed that scene and she was just so great and that's what she always did, she would do something you didn't imagine.

JOSH: Hat tip to Chris Misiano too.

ELI: Absolutely, he did a great job on this.

HRISHI: And Bradley Whitford too, because he's giving her the exact opposite, he's looking at her like there's a fox in the hen house. He's laser focused on her and taken aback.

[West Wing Episode 6.15 excerpt]

JOSH: What are you doing in New Hampshire?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Of course she knows that she's gonna be the one who's showing up, but he doesn't know. And the differential between the reaction to the other one is just really lovely.

ELI: Yeah he's great in this episode, and I think in this whole storyline, because you see him I think, trying to become somebody a bit different, you know than he was as simply Bartlet's kind of junior lieutenant if you will. One thing that I remember really vividly about this episode, I don't know that I as a writer before this had ever really been there for the filming of a scene with a lot of food in it. So Mary-Louise has rocky road ice cream which was written into the script, I think I asked her if she was ok with that flavor. You know because obviously she was gonna have to have some of it. But we started doing takes of the scene, and *The West Wing* as Josh knows well, you know we'd do a lot of takes, because the actors really wanted to get it right and would just go deeper into it. And it was not a rushed situation usually. And take one, take two, she's having half that ice cream cone [Hrishi laughs] and I was starting to get concerned because it was a few takes in and she'd had a fair amount of ice cream. And I remember walking up to her and saying, "Are you okay? Like you're having a lot of ice cream." And she said something to me like, "Yeah actually I feel like I'm a little bit sick." [laughs] And she didn't look it, and I said, "Well maybe you should take um smaller bites." And she said, "No, that's not what Amy would do." [Hrishi laughs] And then I went back, she was saying that right as they were about to roll on another take so I watched her

do this a couple more times, and then I went over trying to be so incredibly helpful to the actor and I said, "What if Amy just had a really big lunch, and she really just wanted a bite or two of ice cream." And she just gave me this look that was like "yeah nice try". [Josh and Hrishu laugh] And she ate a ton of ice cream.

JOSH: Yeah these are real things to be considered during food scenes. The usual approach is as you say, either to eat it just a modicum of what you're eating, but if the scene calls for some sort of hearty eating often as soon as cut is yelled you just spit into some sort of garbage bin. There's a lot of eating and spitting and getting rid of. I filmed a scene in *Bulworth* where Warren Beatty wanted us all to be ravenously consuming Chinese food [cross talk] I think late at night.

ELI: [cross talk] Oh my god.

JOSH: And I was really hungry, so I kept trying to actually swallow the food [laughs] and Warren himself kept running over with the paper bag [Hrishu laughs] and saying, "Spit it out! You gotta look hungry" [laughter]

ELI: And was that wise that he did that?

JOSH: Uh yeah it was, because I was gonna fill up in the first few takes and Warren Beatty liked to do like fifty takes so it was crazy.

ELI: Wow.

JOSH: Ok let's take a quick break for some ads and when we come back we'll talk more with Eli Attie.

[ad interlude music]

[ad break]

[ad interlude music]

HRISHU: Back to this ice cream scene, Eli I think you said that this is a favorite scene of Mary-Louise Parker's dad's?

ELI: Yeah, I just texted her earlier today and said I'm about to go on the *West Wing* podcast to talk about this episode, and do you have any memories of it, or of that ice cream scene. Cause she and I had talked about it a bunch over the years. And she texted me back, "It was my dad's favorite and he used to quote it." And then she also wrote, "After we shot it Brad and I went to have steak, because we both felt we needed something dripping with blood." [Josh and Hrishu laugh]

JOSH: That's very funny. By the way to the many listeners who have asked when we're going to have her on the show, we are in intense negotiations with her. [laughs] She seems to be both drawn to the idea and repelled by it.

ELI: No she wants to do it, she wants to it.

JOSH: I have a question about Amy's actions in this episode. First we discover that she is the pro that Santos has brought in to prepare him for the debates, and then we discover that she has fed information and some talking points to all the candidates. And subsequent to that we find out that Santos himself knew about this. So is that something that would be

common, or would that be considered dirty pool, or are there people who just tried to reach out the entire field and get their message across?

ELI: It is common in the sense that there are people who might be heads of labor unions, heads of prominent women's groups like Amy Gardner, who would issue almost a semi-public memo to all the campaigns saying, "We've done some polling, we've done some focus groups, and here's some ways to talk about a woman's right to choose. And here are some things we think should be part of the discussion." Very often those memos are released to the press, and then there are articles written about them and it's just a way of joining the conversation. But there definitely are, not just groups, but individuals, who are prominent in Democratic politics, as the character of Amy is, who talk to all the campaigns. And they'll be open about it, and they'll say, "I'm not choosing a side here, and I'm gonna give you advice, but if Hoynes picks up a phone and calls me I'm gonna give him the same advice." And there isn't anything unusual about it if you know it. And really I think in my mind, I don't know how much this landed, but I think part of the story here is that Josh is so suspicious of Amy and to some degree he's still a little bit suspicious of Santos, who doesn't seem to always be taking Josh's advice. That Josh doesn't realize that this is something Santos knew from the beginning.

[West Wing Episode 6.15 excerpt]

SANTOS: I knew she was advising everyone, that's why I didn't tell you. You think I care about your dating life?

[end excerpt]

ELI: And Josh made a little bit too much out of it, which is why in the end he kind of apologises, there's also obviously personal feeling between them, and he ends up saying to Santos, "You know, she can stick around, if she wants to." Which she doesn't.

HRISHI: Right.

ELI: But I think when you're in a campaign there's a lot of paranoia, there's a lot of suspicion.

[West Wing Episode 6.15 excerpt]

JOSH: Look Amy, it's really hard out there, we get people lobbing grenades at us from all sides, even our friends.

[end excerpt]

ELI: He's basically apologizing for being paranoid, and I think that's common. One thing I found looking through some notes of mine for this episode, that I still miraculously had on a hard drive, is that when I was trying to first just get my head around story ideas for this episode, I was playing around with the idea of there being a mole in the Santos campaign, from one of the other campaigns. And that idea fell out, and I have a feeling it fell out because John Wells, who was such a smart guide, and teacher, and boss, and head writer of the show, always. I don't remember this specifically but I'm quite sure that's something he would have said, you don't need a ham-handed plot device like that, you don't need it. Just tell the stories the way you want to tell them. And the much more grounded, subtle version of that is simply someone comes in from the outside to advise your candidate, and you don't know completely if you can trust them, or what they've said to who. And suddenly you get everything you wanted to get, it's just not an episode of *House of Cards*.

HRISHI: What I love about *The West Wing* is that these are your motivations and what you're trying to accomplish in terms of the narrative, but what it's wrapped in is also so interesting. You know, she's coming in and advising them specifically on their talking points around the sale of nuclear arms from Pakistan to Nigeria. And when I was researching stuff for this episode, I found in 2000 this security resolution that was passed by the UN. It was security resolution 1325, it's the resolution on women, peace and security. Hoynes says to Josh, the thing that Amy is advising them all on is security as the new women's issue.

ELI: Yeah.

HRISHI: And I thought that was such a smart, interesting idea and so that's what got me looking into this and I just wanted to read a little bit about that resolution. I'm reading this from the United States Institute of Peace. It says, "This resolution specifically addresses how women and girls are differentially impacted by conflict and war, and it recognizes the critical role that women can, and already do play in peace building efforts. UNSCR 1325 affirms that peace and security efforts are more sustainable when women are equal partners in the prevention of violent conflict, the delivery of relief and recovery efforts, and in the forging of lasting peace." Was that something that you were pulling from?

ELI: It was, and I had read a handful of things, just on my own in the preceding handful of years about security as a women's issue. And I just thought it was interesting, and we tend to think of women's groups as mostly dealing with the softer so called "mommy issues" you know; choice, and healthcare, and day-care and childcare. And in fact a lot of prominent women's rights advocates were just as enmeshed in foreign policy, and in keeping women free from their villages being bombed around the world.

HRISHI: We'll put up this link on the website, a link to the council on foreign relations that explains a little bit more about this 2017 piece of legislation, The Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017. There is actually a US law that's a bipartisan act that says it will strengthen efforts to prevent conflict and mitigate conflict by increasing women's participation in the negotiation and mediation processes. But so the security stuff is really just one part, there's this whole other component to what she's advising the Santos campaign on which is more like polish and delivery, what she calls the presidential voice.

ELI: Yes.

JOSH: Would you normally in fact have specialists? You know, you got people who do policy and people who do performance at debates?

ELI: There are both kinds of people, you know when I was working for Gore, who we would have in the room for debate prep sessions. There'd be people like me, I was his speech writer, more of a communications person. There would be policy experts; on foreign policy, on domestic policy. And then there would be people who were solely performance focussed. The concept of the presidential voice is actually something I encountered working in the White House. When you're working for a House member you're just trying to get quoted in *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*, or your hometown paper. And the way you get quoted out of the eighty people who make a comment on the exact same issue is having a punchy, sassy sound bite that may have a little pop culture reference in it, it may have a quip that borrows something from the last *Star Wars* movie. When I went to work in the White House I remember talking to Clinton's chief speechwriter, a guy named Michael Waldman and he was saying, "Yeah we don't do that any of that here." In fact I remember thinking that Clinton's speeches, when I was working in the White House seemed so plain and unadorned and unrhetoical. I remember thinking at first you know, they could kind of spice it up a bit, I think they should. And I remember him explaining to me that everything the president says is quoted. It will be quoted because he's the president, so you don't use a lot

of adjectives, you don't push it, you don't use pop culture references, he said there is almost a sonorousness to the presidential voice. It should almost sound like the Federal Register, almost like a boilerplate lease.

JOSH: That's interesting.

ELI: It has its own authority, and there's something great about that in that you don't have to try too hard, you don't have to try at all, you're the President, that's it. You just have that authority. you could say the whole episode, it could've easily been called the presidential voice. The whole episode is Matt Santos struggling to find his voice, his way to be himself, and not compromise who he is, while going through this crazy steeple chase of demands.

HRISHI: It's really fascinating that it was in fact the Clinton White House where you heard that because, I wanna switch gears for a second to talk about the chickens. Chicken Bob and Chicken John. [Eli laughs] Here's a little bit from a New York Times article in September of 1992, I'm just gonna read a little bit: "traditional field operations hold as their core duty the identification and motivation of specific voters and subgroups of voters. The Clinton state by state strategy is based on the theory that the key to victory is not this at all, but rather an aggressive effort to manipulate local television In this campaign we have a GOTV program but it doesn't mean get out the vote it means get on TV. It's a very very heavy media operation and in this way it mirrors the national drive." And they said, "In every state there are two or three staffers whose whole job is to get on TV. We don't evaluate our people on the ground by how many voter ID calls they make, we evaluate them by how they do in media placement each day: did you get on TV, did you make the front page, what was the tone of the coverage?" And that for getting on television, nothing beats Chicken George. They estimated that fifteen to twenty of these Chicken Georges have succeeded in getting into Bush rallies and on to local and even national television. It's the complete opposite strategy, right?

ELI: That's right.

HRISHI: This is before he was president, where they're just throwing these chickens... so let's talk about that, the chicken suit stuff in this episode is inspired by real life events.

ELI: Yes, entirely lifted from real life events, but before talking about that, what you're saying is so important. The exercise that Josh is engaged in in this episode, and Ned and Ronna under him, is exactly that: trying to get on TV. Just trying to throw points on the board, to be as extreme as possible, to use chickens, to use banjo music, anything, it doesn't matter if it's undignified; get on TV by all means possible. Clinton, when he was elected, I think had a tough pivot to the presidential voice, into a presidential bearing, because for his time he was the first baby boomer president, he was seen as very young and his first two years in the White House he would talk to any reporter non-stop, and give endless interviews, and be in staff meetings until midnight, and was kind of unavoidable for comment, and would give three press conferences a day. And it wasn't until probably sometime in his second year when David Gergen, who was a much more seasoned communications hand from actually the Reagan White House and he'd worked for Gerald Ford, came in as a sort of a centrist guy who probably had changed parties at that point. And basically said you have to slow down, you have to backup, you have to not push so hard. And Clinton coming to the realization on his own, and the people around him. So, not needing to put on a chicken outfit to get on the news was something that had to dawn on the Clinton team slowly, and it's why he had a much more successful second half of his first term. He stopped trying so hard, he stopped putting on, I remember in his first couple of years as president he used to sometimes wear like neckties with smiley faces on them that were like fun baby boomer neckties. That all went out the window when he realized, "I just don't seem presidential", and he started to just dress and act and speak much more like the Federal Register quite frankly.

But Chicken George is something that I've always loved, it was in both of the Democratic campaigns against Bushes, but really the basis of the story in "Freedonia" is something that really happened when George H.W. Bush was running against Bill Clinton. He was refusing to debate Clinton, and I guess Ross Perot also or maybe he was saying he would only debate Clinton if Perot wasn't in the debate, it was something like that. And they had people all over the place in these Chicken George outfits and one of them managed to get right into a Bush event. He was not kept out, which he should have been because he told the people at the door, the dumb Bush campaign staffers at the door, "I'm here from the state poultry growers association" [Josh and Hrishi laugh]. So they let him in, he got all the way to the front row, nobody seemed to bat an eye, and in the episode I have this guy just kind of walking by as Will and Donna are engaged in a conversation and not noticing. But this guy gets all the way up to the front and starts heckling George H.W. Bush in the middle of his speech. And, one of the greatest mistakes of his career, then President Bush started debating the chicken from the stage.

[West Wing Episode 6.15 excerpt]

C.J.: You don't engage a chicken. Didn't you teach that girl not to engage a chicken?

[end excerpt]

ELI: Because, nothing is as unpresidential as debating a chicken.

JOSH: I have a distinct memory of shooting that scene at the hockey rink because I think it just, for whatever reason, took a really long time. Maybe it was late at night, I remember being really, really tired. And whenever I felt sorry for myself I just reminded myself that one, I wasn't playing hockey for hours, [Eli laughs] and two I wasn't in the chicken suit [laughter].

HRISHI: One thing we skipped over was the scene earlier where Will asks Donna to dinner.

ELI: Yes.

[West Wing Episode 6.15 excerpt]

WILL: We need to work up some Q & A for the two-man debate. Want to grab dinner later?

DONNA: Are you asking me to dinner?

WILL: We've had dinner four nights in a row.

DONNA: But you never asked me, we just went. Who else am I gonna have dinner with? Everyone else in this campaign is fourteen years old and irons their blue jeans.

WILL: Fine. So... you want to grab dinner later?

DONNA: Sure.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah you didn't do me any favors there. If people didn't like me already...

ELI: Well, this is the interesting thing, which is, I realized watching the episode, having not thought about this in all the intervening years, this wasn't something that I really discussed with the writers' room. Big character moves we would always talk about as a group, and of course everyone on the staff would read everyone's drafts and weigh-in and give notes and

thoughts. I just stuck that in the script and I guess John Wells liked it, or didn't dislike it, and left it in the script. I was actually trying to begin a flirtation between them, and I thought maybe that was something that would kind of evolve from there potentially. They're working closely together, Donna – he's treating her like an adult, as Josh Lyman never did. And two things: one is, watching it, it didn't feel like you guys played the romance of it particularly, and then no one really picked up on it on the writing staff. So it was just I think two episodes later Josh Malina and Mary McCormack's character were flirting and that became more of a thing. So this was just me planting a seed that never blossomed.

JOSH: Yeah, I sense that that seed was there in the script, but I will say for my part, I can't speak for Janel, I don't remember ever discussing it explicitly with anyone but I definitely decided that Will just wanted to have dinner.

ELI: Oh interesting! [laughter]

JOSH: That was definitely my approach. I was like, "I'm not going there, I don't buy it."

ELI: Yeah, well it's one of those things, I must not have been there that day that it was filmed, and who knows, maybe I was and I just don't remember. Because I think I would've at least said, "Let's try a version where we see if there's anything there." But maybe it wouldn't have worked, and maybe it was fine as it is.

JOSH: I mean regardless, if you wanna search for message boards from fourteen years ago you will find people who are annoyed at Will about it. [laughter] "Oh no, I don't think so!"

ELI: You know, when you have talented actors, you kind of throw these little things in that can play any number of ways and sometimes there's a lot of value in letting the actors do what feels right and just leaving it at that.

JOSH: Also he's got a cute little snaggletooth. [Hrishi laughs]

ELI: He does. But also, I think Will was especially in these later seasons of the show, a conflict character, frankly. He's there, he's switched sides. He's kind of running against, so is Donna at this point, but he's running against our old team. He's maybe, you know if you believe those five little lines in this episode, maybe he's gonna try to get in between Josh Lyman and Donna Moss. And so, there's so much dramatic value in that, but of course it earns you some knocks on the message boards for sure.

JOSH: I am the fly in the ointment [Eli laughs], so be it.

HRISHI: I like this dynamic, and the way it plays out, from beginning to end of this episode, because I do think that it does resolve by the end. And in this moment, I think you're both right, I think that ultimately there is something flirty about it and also there isn't really. There isn't much heat on it. To me I read it as Will is trying to flirt with Donna, but in this way that is really just what else are you gonna do? You know, "We are kind of our only other option if we want to do anything at all that's not the campaign, that's at all social. And yeah we've had dinner every night and we're co-workers and friends, but maybe there's something here?" You know, just like hm-mm throw it out there.

ELI: Yes, for sure.

HRISHI: But without like a lot of English on it, and she's like, "[snorts] What?!" And she's not picking it up at all and he's like, "Alright" and that exchange is done with no feeling of flirtation I thought. And it really was just like, "Uh, me? No? Okay fine." [Josh laughs]

JOSH: He's preserving plausible deniability. [laughs]

ELI: Yeah for sure. And also it's funny I was just thinking to myself, having just watched the season premiere of *Veep*, this is the sort of thing where on *Veep* they would do that exact exchange, except it would basically be like, "Do you wanna have sex? Well you know, who else am I gonna have sex with?" [Josh laughs]

HRISHI: Yeah, yeah.

ELI: You know, this is the Capra-esque version of that.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Nah, Will's just thinking, "Is there an ice cream machine [Hrishi and Eli laugh] at my hotel?" [laughter]

ELI: "How do I get some of that?"

[laughter]

HRISHI: The only scene that I think had even more tension than that dinner scene between characters, is one of my favorite scenes in this whole episode, which is when Russell and Santos go in to the Dover Herald's office to talk about the possibility of the debate as being all seven candidates. And the performances of everyone in the scene, the performances are all so great. It's all sort of playing as planned, they go in together with very different reasons; Santos just wants to be in the debate and Russell wants as many people as possible so it's not just a one on one between him and Hoynes, in which he will look bad. But they're going in with this unified front, and everything's going well, and then Santos just cannot help himself. He's got the win, they're gonna allow it, Russell stands up and says, "No I want everybody in there." But he can't leave well enough alone.

[West Wing Episode 6.15 excerpt]

SANTOS: We should also take a minute to discuss format. These debates can be better not just bigger. We all saw what happened in the New Jersey Senate debates.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And just watching Bradley Whitford and Gary Cole reacting to his idea is so fantastic.

ELI: He doesn't wanna go by the script, he doesn't wanna go by the script in his campaign as a whole. And there's so many moments like this in politics where you going in to a room, and the whole thing is essentially scripted beforehand; you're gonna say this, he's gonna say that, we've all got our roles to play. And I think there's a moment even earlier in that scene where Russell makes some kind of a joke and Santos kinda takes the wind out of it. He feels he's not there to play along.

HRISHI: Yeah.

ELI: And I think that's who he was.

HRISHI: And then when he actually turns to him and addresses him directly and says...

[West Wing Episode 6.15 excerpt]

SANTOS: What do you say Mr Vice President? A real debate, with all of the candidates truly engaging on the issues.

RUSSELL: Good.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I don't know if you had written great or good. He makes a sound somewhere between great and good [laughs] to like accept the proposition and I love that, I love whatever that sound is that he makes.

ELI: He's great, he's great in everything. And he's a really good actor, but has incredible timing, almost has the rhythm of comic timing even when it's not comic, he's just fantastic.

HRISHI: I wanna jump back to the moment that I brought up earlier when Santos and Ned are talking about Freedonia and the scene right before that. Santos has decided he's not gonna run the chicken ad, and he and Josh walk out of the building and they have an argument about it, and Santos knows that it's not something he wants to do and they're frustrated, but it's not until Josh leaves and Ned comes in that Santos figures out what he's gonna do. I really loved this detail Eli, that in order to get his engine running and feel inspired to make the right move, there's like this external tension that Josh brings because like you said, they're kicking each other's tyres, they're at odds with each other on so many issues. It's only when he can get Ned in there instead, somebody who he has history with, somebody who he knows he can trust and they can have their own sort of little conversation about Freedonia and the idea of the presidential voice...

[West Wing Episode 6.15 excerpt]

SANTOS: You think there's such a thing as a presidential voice?

NED: Always seemed to me that the president makes the voice, not the other way around.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And it's once he has that conversation that he figures out what he's gonna do with the commercial. You know then there's incredible thrust from that point on until he records the ad. I love that you took Josh away for him to have that epiphany and brought Ned in instead.

ELI: I think in my mind, as I mentioned earlier I think Josh Lyman became sort of a stand in, for me, of all the very smart, sophisticated, experienced staffers, operatives who would be working for somebody like Al Gore and for other people too. And be trying to push them and hammer them sometimes on what they knew to be the politically right thing to do. Also understanding that the prerogative always belongs to the boss.

JOSH: Well this episode's where we finally get a little forward motion to Josh and Santos working as a team.

ELI: Yes.

HRISHI: We get those moments, I've been waiting for, there's been this build-up where you keep saying, "Why don't they have these basic discussions? They've got to hammer some stuff out, there's communication issues here, and they're at loggerheads and they should be past this." And it was awesome to get that moment, that sort of epiphany for Josh that he

hasn't been letting Santos run his own campaign or run the campaign that he wants to run. And that Josh can now shift into supporting what Santos wants to do.

ELI: I mean you'd be surprised how many times in real campaigns, and on real staffs in the White House and on Capitol Hill, people working closely together someone in their Chief of Staff, don't have very basic conversations that are almost sometimes too big picture and obvious to even feel like they need a conversation. You know, someone hires you to run their campaign, very quickly you have so many logistical things to hammer out, you don't go on that weekend retreat where you should really be talking about, "What are our basic principles here, how do we wanna do it?" You'd think those would be the first things that you talk about, but very often they aren't. I hope it doesn't come across as so brittle like they hate each other or something, they both want the same thing, but Josh kind of says at one point in the episode...

[West Wing Episode 6.15 excerpt]

JOSH: We're game players, not rule makers.

[end excerpt]

ELI: And what Santos is really saying is, "Watch me," you know, "I'm gonna make some rules." And it's funny in our separate conversation with David Axelrod, he was saying that this was a quality that Obama had. And these were frustrations that Obama had when they first started working together, he just hated the rules and the structure of everything. And sometimes you can fight it and sometimes you can't.

HRISHI: It feels a little bit strange maybe to me, that one of my favorite scenes in this episode is one in which none of our regular *West Wing* characters appears, that it's these two. But what I think I love about it is that feels very much like *The West Wing*. But somehow you have transposed this dynamic that we know really well between President Bartlet and his staff, with these two new faces.

ELI: You know when John Wells pulled me aside one day after a writers meeting this season of the show, he basically said exactly this he said, "What we're gonna do, and what you're gonna start to help me with, is we're gonna show Josh and Matt Santos having an argument by a dumpster behind a donut shop, with nobody there and nobody interested. And we're gonna carry one of these two campaigns all the way to the Oval Office." And it felt very exciting, because it felt like something the show hadn't done, but we could evolve into something different and into a part of politics that we hadn't really explored up to then.

HRISHI: Did you know whether it was gonna be Vinick or Santos?

ELI: My understanding is that when Jimmy Smits was approached and when he was cast in that role, that the expectation was that if the show were to continue he would succeed Martin Sheen as president on the show. And Alan Alda was cast a little bit later as Arnie Vinick. They were both fantastic in the roles, the campaign was very exciting to all of us as writers, and at the beginning of season 7 John Wells said to the writing staff, "What if we opened this thing up? And what if we don't presume that it's going to be one candidate or another, but we just see where the story takes us? And we'll be in as much suspense as everybody else." And that was really interesting because we didn't always know what was happening, I often sometimes felt in a collegial way that Lawrence O'Donnell would write an episode and Matt Santos would end up with egg on his face, [laughs] I would write an episode and Arnie Vinick would end up with egg on his face, and we were each pretty strong advocates for our candidates in the writers room. But what was reported and written in a couple of places, and I don't remember now if it was at the time during season 7, or if it was right afterwards, was

that there was a period in which Vinick was going to be the winner for sure. That's not the case in my memory.

HRISHI: Yeah.

ELI: In my memory, for a while it was definitely going to be Santos, then the decision was made to open that up, we were still debating and arguing until the very last second when the decision was made in a certain way. But you know, Alan Alda's a phenomenal actor, Jimmy Smits is a phenomenal actor, they're both such different presences. There are some great moments with the two of them together in season 7. And we were discovering a lot about the Jimmy Smits character also as we went along, and the Alan Alda character too, but I think in some of these early Santos episodes, you see him as a pure idealist in the Bartlet mold. I think we started to decide as a group in the writers room that he also had to be good at politicking, because that was part of his job, and if we just showed him being a naïve guy who refused to do things the way they're done, he might not seem like a competent politician. So as we went along, I think we gave him a few sharper elbows and he did some things that showed he could do what needed to be done when it needed to be done. So we were learning too, maybe in the way a candidate learns, what makes someone feel like a compelling politician. Because Bartlet was certainly able to make political compromises, and to do things for political reasons.

HRISHI: Yeah. Can we talk about the actual moment of Santos' ad, when he's live on TV?

[West Wing Episode 6.15 excerpt]

SANTOS: So how about this, I will never say anything about my opponents, or anything about anything, without saying it myself. Right into the camera. You might not get to hear much of me, but when you do, you'll know I stand by it. I'm Matt Santos and you better believe I approve this ad.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I feel like there's a continuum of these magical moments in fiction about things that happen live on TV. For me the points are *Network*, *Broadcast News*, *The West Wing*, a couple of different moments, and then the pilot of *Studio 60* too, and then maybe *Newsroom* as well. Did you feel like that?

ELI: No question, you're 100% right. There's a lot of energy, there's a lot of power and inherent drama in "the cameras are rolling and nobody can stop what's happening from happening". And there's no second take, there's no second chance. The greatest version in history has got to be *Network* which is so stunning and surprising and disarming, I know it's something Aaron Sorkin loves and referenced in his own way in the *Studio 60* opening. We always talked about *The West Wing* in the offices as the politics we would like to see, wish fulfilment. What is the thing you would wanna tweak about real life, and what's the fantasy version of it that we all yearn for? But what made it a live moment? Probably just the excitement and just to heighten the drama and just this feeling of you don't know what he's gonna do or when he's gonna do it and as I describe it it even sounds cheap and gimmicky but...

HRISHI: It doesn't play that way, I was wondering if those other famous moments in fiction of live broadcast stuff had been an influence at all on you?

ELI: Absolutely, certainly *Network*, I was obsessed with *Network* I still am, I think it's a staggering work of genius.

JOSH: Have you seen the stage play?

ELI: You know I haven't seen the stage play. Bryan Cranston is so incredibly talented, I hear he was amazing in it. Wait, is it still going on?

JOSH: I think so, I don't think he's done yet.

ELI: I should go I mean he's great.

JOSH: My pal Tony Goldwyn, [cross talk] also in it playing the William Holden role.

ELI: [cross talk] That's right, that's right.

ELI: Well we should all go, I wanna see it.

JOSH: Field trip!

ELI: Field trip! *West Wing* podcast field trip.

HRISHI: Oh, we can do our pilot of "Hrishi ruins a musical" [Eli laughs]

ELI: The movie is so special, and that moment is so special, partly also because it begins as a mundane moment and nobody's expecting anything to happen, so you can't do justice to it. But anyway yeah, *Network* is an absolute point of reference, and probably a couple of similar moments on *The West Wing* for me were points of reference.

HRISHI: I also wanted to talk about Donna's role in the Russell campaign. I love that she is maybe the lone voice of dissent in that crew...

[West Wing Episode 6.15 excerpt]

DONNA: I don't agree Mr. Vice President.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: The one person who is trying to do the thing that I think Will said that he wanted to do, to push the candidate to be the candidate that they want.

ELI: Yeah.

HRISHI: There's a moment where they're back in their headquarters and Russell is taking a shot at Santos and everybody laughs and she's the only one who doesn't. She says, "I think you're wrong" and she actually does push it, I don't know I love the stuff that you were giving Donna in this episode.

ELI: I think for me, having worked in politics in my twenties and starting out really as the kid in the room, I think I was really interested in just this character moment of somebody who is used to just taking phone calls and getting coffee realizing she that was in the room. And could say something and could voice an opinion. You know, those are scary moments and important moments and they're the things that turn you into Josh Lyman and Will Bailey. Having those first moments where you realize, "Wait a minute, I actually don't think what everybody else in this room thinks."

HRISHI: Here's one thing that I think that I noticed? Can you confirm, either of you? In the final scene when we do get all seven candidates, there is no Tim Matheson on that stage.

ELI: Do we see the candidates?

HRISHI: We do, I mean we don't see all of them very clearly; there's one shot from the wings and we see some of them but some people are blocked, and then there's a very wide shot where we see all seven of them and I am pretty certain that none of those people is Tim Matheson.

ELI: You know, hold on a second. I would have to look at it again but what I can look at while we're talking, is look at the script real fast. Because it's entirely possible that maybe we just had Tim for a particular day and he then wasn't available that other day.

HRISHI: Yeah which makes sense.

ELI: And that maybe they thought, "Ah you get a tall guy and you stick him there and no one's gonna know."

HRISHI: Yeah exactly! But I think the person who is supposed to be standing in for where you would put Hoynes is wearing glasses, I think [laughs]? Is it just supposed to be that they're like, "Well, and then here's a seventh guy" or if that person is actually supposed to be a look alike for Hoynes.

ELI: Here's the actual stage direction; it's Josh and Amy talking, the watch as Santos, Russell, Hoynes, and the rest of the Democratic field take the stage and the debate begins. And then the moderator starts speaking, just as Josh's attention drifts to the stage and Amy slips off. So yeah.

HRISHI: But I'm pretty sure if you go back and look, you will not see Hoynes actually on there.

ELI: Well, this is not to compare it in any way, but fans of *The Godfather* may know that there are some long shots of Robert Duvall walking with the movie producer he goes to visit early in the film, this guy Woltz, and it's the two of them walking around his fancy Beverly Hills estate together. And it's actually neither actor. [Hrishi laughs] It's some guy with a white wig playing the movie producer and it's a bald guy, or a balding guy standing in for Robert Duvall. Because they didn't have enough money and Coppola was out in LA doing B unit shots and he just stuck a couple of actors in and did it from a distance. And on the DVD commentary that I listened to, Coppola's saying, "I'm ashamed of this, I'm not proud of it, it looks horrible to me". So that's all my way of saying really this episode is as good as *The Godfather*. [Hrishi laughs]

JOSH: There you go, exactly.

ELI: Only in that [cross talk] way. Yes exactly.

JOSH: [cross talk] That's the ultimate point.

HRISHI: But this is, I think, the most egregious misuse of a stand in since *Game On* where we saw someone who was clearly not Rob Lowe walking away from Josh on the beach.

JOSH: I knew that was coming.

ELI: Well that's funny. I saw Judd Apatow do stand up a few months ago in LA. He performs at this club Largo fairly often and he was saying that he's so steeped now in movies and TV as a producer and a director, that he said he can't watch anything now and just enjoying it as

entertainment. Because everything, every movie and every TV shows he watches, he's just looking at how bad the extras are. [Hrishi and Josh laugh] That's all he watches anything for anymore. [laughter]

HRISHI: Ah, that's great.

JOSH: Thanks for another great interview [cross talk], it wasn't really an interview it was a hang out, a recap.

ELI: [cross talk] Oh it's a pleasure. Yes, it was definitely a hang out. It's always so fun for me because, this was such a special thing to work on this show and I love thinking about it and talking about it, I'm proud I was any kind of part of it at all.

JOSH: Next time though bring donuts instead of sending us pictures from your brunch.

ELI: I know the donuts were really good.

JOSH: They looked good.

HRISHI: And thanks to all of you dear listeners for listening to this episode. If you want to follow Eli and absorb more of his brilliance you can find him on Twitter @EliAttie, he's also on Instagram @eli.attie. And in addition to that of course you can find *The West Wing Weekly* online @westwingweekly on Twitter and on our Facebook page, or our website thewestwingweekly.com.

JOSH: Many thanks to Margaret Miller, Zach McNeese, and Nick Song for their help on the podcast.

HRISHI: And many thanks to Radiotopia, the podcast network of which we are a part. You can check out all of the shows on Radiotopia at radiotopia.fm. Next week we've got a special episode, Eli will be with us again and we're gonna be joined by President Obama's chief strategist David Axelrod. And the two of them are gonna tell us all about how Matthew Santos was influenced by the real life persona of then State Senator Barack Obama, in 2004. It's a fantastic conversation we've already recorded it, and I'm really excited for all of you to hear it.

JOSH: Ok.

HRISHI: Ok.

ELI: What's next?

[Outro Music]